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BALANCING BIAS IN THE MEDIA

Sharon Beder

THE NEWS IS PRESENTED TO GIVE THE impression it is factual, uncoloured by journalistic bias, so each side of a controversy is accurately reported. We in the audience are encouraged to believe we are free to make up our own minds about how to interpret the events that are occurring.

As someone who watches and attempts to analyse the media I am interested in the notion of journalistic objectivity. As it stands, this objectivity has two components. The first is 'depersonalisation' where journalists are expected to avoid overt expression of their own views, evaluations, or beliefs, unless their item is labeled 'comment' or 'opinion'. The second is 'balance' which involves presenting the views of representatives of both sides of an issue without favouring one side. In tandem with this, journalistic comment comes from 'specialists' who are quoted as experts by the reporter in the same way that a scientist might be. These approaches give journalists legitimacy as independent and credible sources of information.

While the poker-faced rhetoric of journalistic objectivity supplies a mask for the inevitable subjectivity that is involved in news reporting and reassures audiences who might otherwise be wary of the power of the media, it might be asked if it would be better for those who prepare the news to come clean and show us what they think. After all, news reporting involves judgements about what is a good story, who will be interviewed for it, what questions will be asked, which parts of those interviews will be printed or broadcast, what facts are relevant and how the story is written.

Academia also has a role here. Objectivity is

supposed to be at the heart of the scientific method, ensuring that all results are independent of the personal characteristics, politics and motivations of the scientist. This is how objectivity has come to be associated with truth-seeking and inquiry. Other academic disciplines wanting to take on the aura of science aim for objectivity too. This is often true in the social sciences where academics, like journalists tend to depersonalise their writing. As students they were told to avoid the first person in their essays, even though the heart of any good essay is an argument. In fact, in a nice ironic touch, the editor of this collection asked me to personalise this piece, because in draft form it read too much like an academic article.

So what personal aspects might a reader be interested in? Well, for a start I should own up to motivation. My interest in analysing the media derives from my engagement with environmental protection and a frustration with how poorly the media reports these issues. The first environmental campaign I became involved in was sewage pollution on Sydney beaches, also the topic of my doctoral thesis.

At the time, the Sydney Water Board was proposing to extend coastline sewage outfalls into deeper water and was advertising this as the solution to the problem of beach pollution with double page spreads in the *Sydney Morning Herald* weekend magazine. This advertising campaign bought the Board a measure of favourable media reporting. Meanwhile, those who were opposed to the extended ocean outfalls and wanted a more effective remedy to sewage pollution were not being reported, probably because the Water Board was the recognised authority on sewage issues.

As I have asserted already, news is shaped by the selection of people journalists interview for research, quotes and on-air appearances. There is a tendency for most journalists to use, as sources, people from the mainstream

establishment, whom they believe have more credibility with their audience, with highly placed government and corporate spokespeople the safest and easiest sources in terms of giving stories legitimacy.

In this case a bunch of surfers, fishers and a handful of unaffiliated environmentalists did not have much credibility with the media. Mainstream environmental groups had not taken up the issue seeing it as unwinnable due to the power and authority of the Water Board. The rules of objectivity only apply to a recognised sphere of controversy. If two sides are not recognised then there is no perceived need for balance.

I was able to help force the issue in two ways. Firstly, I was a recognised expert. I had a civil engineering degree and I had just completed a PhD on the issue (although it had not yet been examined). Secondly, I was able to provide government generated data to the media that had been previously covered up by the government. This data showed that not only was beach pollution far worse than had been officially admitted but also that the industrial waste in the sewage was contaminating marine fish with heavy metals and organochlorine chemicals.

The revelation of this data turned the story into a controversy which meant that opponents of the Water Board proposal were now quoted as part of the journalistic convention of balance. Thus began a wave of reporting that continued for some months and culminated in the government promising to spend some five billion dollars to remedy the pollution of Sydney's waterways. (An undertaking that was not kept once media attention subsided in the wake of the promise.)

As an academic my research involves in-depth investigations where I try to disclose what is happening in government and corporate affairs. I attempt to seek out the truth because I believe truth is on my side. I am fortunate in that usually I have no deadlines to meet and

I can spend the time that this takes.

A journalist, on the other hand, often has little time for such in-depth investigation and it is seldom required of them. For them objectivity has much less to do with seeking out the truth than accurately reporting or broadcasting selected quotations. Ironically, journalistic objectivity discourages a search for evidence; the balancing of opinions often replaces journalistic investigation altogether.

For journalists, balance means ensuring that statements by those challenging the establishment are countered with statements by those they are criticising, though not necessarily the other way round. In their attempts to be balanced on a science-based story, journalists may use any opposing view even when it has little credibility in the wider scientific community.

In the case of global warming, the fossil fuel industry has taken advantage of this convention by funding a handful of dissidents who attempt to undermine the generally established scientific view. Equal media coverage is then demanded despite their poor standing in the scientific community. This strategy of exaggerating the uncertainties and confusing the public has ensured that the Australian government, among others, has been able to avoid pressure to act to prevent global warming, despite the overwhelming evidence that the problem is real and serious.

The fossil-fuel industry has been particularly successful in presenting their own interests as synonymous with the national interest, and persuading the government that no action needs to be taken to prevent global warming. In 1988, when *The National Greenhouse '88 Conference* was held in Australia, there was unprecedented public interest in the issue. This was systematically eroded for more than a decade through a well-orchestrated international campaign to portray global warming as little more than a

theory that scientists couldn't agree on. This strategy was aimed at crippling the impetus for government action, action which might adversely affect corporate profits.

It is only recently, after many precious years have been lost, that the most intransigent governments have been forced to admit that action must be taken. It might be asked why this has not occurred earlier. Clearly part of the problem has been the ability of vested interests to manipulate the media by holding up the rod of balance and impartiality.

So we come back to my central point: journalists who accurately report what their sources say, can effectively remove responsibility for their stories onto the people they interview and quote. The ideal of objectivity therefore encourages uncritical reporting of official statements and those of authority figures. In this way the biases of individual journalists are avoided but institutional biases are reinforced. Why we should, as a society, seek to hide personal politics and emphasise the institutional is instructive.

If the conventions of objectivity, depersonalisation and balance, tend to transform the news into a series of quotes and comments from a remarkably small number of sources, why do we accept it? When experts and spokespersons from government and corporations are used as preferred sources it tends to give the powerful guaranteed access to the media whilst their critics have a real struggle to be recognised as worth reporting.

Not satisfied with their superior access to the media, many corporations have sought to expand that access by funding scientists, think tank 'experts' and front group spokespeople to amplify and support corporate opinions. Sometimes they even create a phoney opposition group to give journalists the balance they seek and at the same time keep the more radical opposition from the media spotlight. Other times they create front groups to promote

corporate preferred solutions to problems. Corporate sponsored groups such as *Keep Australia Beautiful* tend to shift all the blame for litter from excess packaging on the part of corporations, or a lack of recycling and packaging regulation which industry opposes, to irresponsible individuals.

The media often do not differentiate between corporate front groups and genuine citizens groups. Industry-funded scientists are treated as independent scientists and the media seldom reports the source of a scientist's funding or that of the institution they work for. Nor do the mainstream media generally cover the phenomenon of front groups and think tanks and artificially generated grassroots campaigns.

Here is one example still relevant as I write this essay. In 2006 the Royal Society, a prestigious British scientific society, accused Exxon Mobil of spreading 'inaccurate and misleading' information about global warming and of funding thirty-nine United States groups to aid in this. In Australia the mining company WMC (previously Western Mining Corporation) and its executives have played a similar role to Exxon Mobil for many years, fostering doubt about global warming by funding think tanks that question global warming and supporting Australia's main greenhouse-sceptic front group, the Lavoisier Group.

Hugh Morgan was for many years CEO of Western Mining Corporation, one of the world's largest mining companies. He played leadership roles in the mining industry, including formal roles in the Australian Mining Industry Council and the Western Australian Chamber of Mines, and was a major supporter of market-oriented think tanks. Following his retirement from WMC, Morgan headed the Business Council of Australia (2003-2005).

WMC provided establishment funding for the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) and ongoing

funding for other think tanks including the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), which also gets funding from Exxon Mobil. Ray Evans was Executive Officer of WMC when he helped Morgan to found the H.R. Nicholls Society in 1986 to attack union power and the arbitration system and advocate a deregulated labour market. Evans is president of the H.R. Nicholls Society.

In 2000 Evans and Morgan played a major part in the establishment of two other corporate front groups, the Lavoisier Group and the Bennelong Society. The Bennelong Society, the Lavoisier Group and the H.R. Nicholls Society all share the same post box number and phone number. The Bennelong Society was formed to promote mining-friendly Aboriginal policy and oppose land rights. Its president, Gary Johns was formerly a senior fellow at the IPA and its treasurer, Des Moore, is director of another think tank, the Institute for Private Enterprise. Evans is secretary.

The Lavoisier Group was similarly formed to promote mining-friendly environmental policy, that is, to cast doubt on global warming theory and oppose measures being taken to prevent global warming. Recently Evans wrote a paper for the Group entitled 'Nine Lies about Global Warming' and starting with '1. Carbon dioxide is a pollutant'.

Ray Evans was quoted by *The Age* three times in the last quarter of 2006 as secretary of the Lavoisier Group. For example, in a story on 28 November about new findings from the CSIRO that carbon emissions were being released into the atmosphere 'at an unprecedented rate', Evans was quoted as dismissing the whole link between carbon dioxide and global warming as 'just hysteria'. Neither Ray Evans's connections with WMC, nor the Lavoisier Group's were mentioned.

Such observations about news sources are seldom made in the media. Often expectations of objectivity lead

journalists to leave out interpretations and analysis, which might, once again, be construed as personal views, and to play it safe by reporting events without explaining their meaning and keeping stories light and superficial so as not to offend anyone.

Balance requires opinions from both sides (where the journalist recognises two sides) but not necessarily the full spectrum of opinion. More radical views are generally left out. Nor are opposing opinions always treated equally in terms of space, positioning and framing. Balance does not guarantee neutrality even when sources are treated fairly, since the choice of balancing sources can be distorted.

Some ideological assumptions are taken so much for granted by the mainstream media that they are not even recognised as ideological. Jeff Cohen, executive director of the American media watchdog group, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), points out that journalists recognise a propaganda of the left and a propaganda of the right but not a propaganda of the centre. 'Being in the center—being a centrist—is somehow not having an ideology at all. Somehow centrism is not an "ism" carrying with it values, opinions and beliefs.'

A story that supports the status quo is generally considered to be neutral and is not questioned in terms of its objectivity while one that challenges the status quo tends to be perceived as having a 'point of view' and therefore biased. Statements and assumptions that support the existing power structure are regarded as *facts* whilst those that are critical of it tend to be rejected as *opinions*. For example, one study of environmental stories found that: 'While the media were willing to dispute dire environmental predictions, they were more accepting of dire economic projections—citing enormous anticipated job losses while rarely asking how the figures were derived, or if plant closings and layoffs were the only options.'

Objectivity in the media not only stops short of the centre but also doesn't move too far away from the centre. Although the media in countries such as Australia are fairly impartial when it comes to the spectrum covered by the established political parties they are much less fair to views outside this establishment consensus.

Michael Parenti, author of *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media*, says:

> *Journalists (like social scientists and others) rarely doubt their own objectivity even as they faithfully echo the established political vocabularies and the prevailing politico-economic orthodoxy. Since they do not cross any forbidden lines, they are not reined in. So they are likely to have no awareness they are on an ideological leash.*

Unlike a journalist working for the mainstream media, I am on no such leash. I am able to express my belief that corporations have too much power and are too free to manipulate governments and communities, through their financial resources and use of public relations. The issue of corporate power is an issue that is generally kept out of the media, except for the occasional opinion piece. When current affairs programs do expose corporate misdeeds, accidents and the environmental and health problems resulting from unsafe products and production processes, they tend to do so in a manner that does not call into question the way corporations operate or are regulated.

This is particularly the case, when the media outlet is owned by, or has interests in, powerful corporations and when it seeks the patronage and advertising of other powerful corporations. For example, the protests against the G20 summit of world finance ministers and bankers in Melbourne in November 2006 were widely reported without reference to the anti-corporate, anti-globalisation

views of the protesters. Protest actions and events are described in the media as theatre spectacles rather than as a genuine democratic expression of dissent.

Similarly, the environmental movement is often characterised in the media as just one more lobby group rather than being a social movement with concerns beyond their own economic or group interests. When environmentalists are used as sources the media prefers leaders of moderate environmental groups. Those without power, prestige and position have difficulty establishing their credibility as a source of news and tend to be marginalised. The more radical environmental groups are sometimes treated as fringe loonies or ferals.

It can be argued that environmental problems are poorly reported in the media because of a perceived demand for entertainment over political discourse. Advertisers have to be attracted, even in news and current affairs programmes. This occasionally affects a specific item of news but more generally affects the sorts of stories that are covered and the way they are covered. News editors are reluctant to deal with controversial political and social issues that might alienate potential consumers or advertisers. Intellectual and political interest is replaced by 'human interest', conflict, novelty, emotion and drama or, as one feature writer put it, ' "currency, celebrity, proximity, impact and oddity"—the elements of newsworthiness'.

Television news producers, for example, prefer very short stories with good visuals and action stories that add excitement to the news. They are very good at providing drama and emotion but poor at giving in-depth information on complex issues. Such stories are presented very quickly, in rapid succession and with little explanation, and tend to focus on individual events. Stories from wars or union strikes are presented without historical or social context (such background which would take too much time or space). Reporting of environmental problems tends to

be superficial, narrowing the focus to specific events in isolation rather than looking at systemic problems that caused them—such as the international monetary system or the unregulated power of corporations—concentrating instead on the costs of environmental measures. Environmental problems become a series of events that emphasise individual action rather than social forces and issues.

In all these ways the influence of editors, owners, advertisers—as well as journalistic conventions—are clearly more important to the final result of journalism than the reporting skills of individual journalists. If it were otherwise there would be a greater difference between the way various media outlets report the news. The mass media is extremely homogenous in the news it delivers. The difference between network television stations is minimal. Even with token efforts to maintain media diversity the choices available to any audience are severely limited when it comes to mass media outlets.