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Q&A with John McManus, media 'bull detector'

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MSNBC is pro-Obama, *Fox News* is anti. ABC is 'neutral', CNN is less so. *Fox* supports the war in Iraq, MSNBC opposes it. The Obama Administration prefers MSNBC to Fox, just as Bush prefers Fox to the New York Times. Indeed, the media are as politically biased as their editorial contents do not align with one's politics. Hence, the liberals' preference for PBS, CBS and New York Times in the coverage of the Obama presidential campaign than Fox News. Or, in my case, *Malaysiakini, Malaysian Insider* and *Malaysia Today* for critical coverage of Malaysian affairs than the mainstream papers, such as *The Star* or the *New Straits Times Group.*

One's preference for particular media outlets depends on how they reinforce our political views and affirm our beliefs. Thus, slanted reports are 'facts' and 'substance' to some, but 'bull' and 'schlock' to others. Where stories written by armchair journalists are generated from public relations materials and government releases, "bull" and "real news" are becoming more similar by the day. 'Gonzo journalism' might even become 'respectable' and a popular elective in journalism schools with students, the 'digital natives', carving their niche through their blogs. How far will students, consumed by a culture of Googles and Tweets, stretch and test the principles of ethical and truthful journalism?

'Detecting Bull: How to Identify Bias and Junk Journalism in Print, Broadcast and on the Wild Web" (http://www.detectingbull.com/reviews.htm), which won the 2009 Society of Professional Journalists – Sigma Delta Chi (SPJ/SDX) award for research about journalism attempts to address this question. I interviewed the author, John McManus (left), on his experience in running a media watchdog in San Francisco Bay.

What led to your conceptualization of *Detecting Bull* in a multimedia format instead of the conventional print format?

Two things: First, I wanted to appeal to students used to multimedia presentations on the Web. A printed page seems pretty dull in comparison. Second, *Grade the News*, the Web-based consumer report on journalism in the San Francisco Bay Area that I had been working on since 2000 acquainted me with the power and flexibility of hypertext. I didn't want to surrender that advantage when I wrote this book.

What are the working assumptions in *Detecting Bull*?

There are three cardinal assumptions:

1. Citizens can no longer rely on traditional sources of news. We have entered what Brooke Gladstone of National Public Radio's *On the Media* calls a "buyer beware" environment for news. Traditional media like network newscasts and newspapers have amputated much of their reporting and editing staff and are more prone to cut corners than in the past. Advertising and public relations reports are masquerading as news in many short-handed newsrooms. Sensation is replacing substance, particularly investigative reporting. New providers of journalism are arising – citizens, corporations, online publications; some would include [talk show hosts] Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. Some of these newcomers are terrific, but many produce reports of questionable reliability. Hidden conflicts of interest abound. As a consequence, citizens now have access to more information purporting to be news, but less of it is trustworthy.

[I don't think of Stewart and Colbert as talk show hosts since they don't take calls; but they are comedians. In *Detecting Bull* I classify them as self-described fake newsmen. That having been said, college students love their shows and they do a great job of holding polls to account, though clearly from a liberal perspective].

2. Reliable news is a necessary, though insufficient, condition for democracy. The news media constitute a nation's central nervous system. They connect us with each other's pain and progress. They help us make sense of daily events, making informed collective decisions possible.

3. Citizens can – and must -- learn to distinguish reliable journalism from the pretenders and support it financially.

Perhaps, we need to move from a commercial to a non-profit journalism model to raise the quality of journalism? Which model of citizen-sponsored journalism can we look to currently?

This has been widely suggested and may offer some promise, but so far we've only seen a few viable examples outside of public broadcasting – ProPublica, Voice of San Diego, and a few others. I would like to see National Public Radio become National Public Media and develop strong local news programs, broadcast and on the Web. They have shown competence and already developed an audience and audience support.

Apart from its interactive contents, how is *Detecting Bull* significantly different in its thesis from your book *Market Driven Journalism* in 1994?

The books overlap very little. *Market-Driven Journalism* is a theoretical exploration of how markets – for consumers, advertisers, investors and sources – shape news produced by profit-seeking corporations. *Detecting Bull* is a practical guide designed to help citizens discover bias and discern between quality and junk journalism (news that's simple, emotional and compelling, but unimportant). The chapter in *Detecting Bull* about institutional (primarily corporate) barriers to describing reality as well as

humans can relies on the thinking in *Market-Driven Journalism*. Otherwise the books explore different subjects.

What are the common 'bull' you see in today's traditional media (that is, newspapers, TV and radio)?

We're seeing a cheapening of most American newspapers – more crime news, less investigation, less depth, less breadth, more advertiser influence; more reliance on PR, more sensation. But there is still some vestigial quality reporting. On the national cable scene we're also seeing the rise of niche marketing that violates core journalistic norms of impartiality. In *Detecting Bull* I describe how Fox has decided it can earn more dollars playing to the political right than competing with other networks for the middle. MSNBC with Olbermann and Maddow play to the left for similar reasons. Of course, they don't admit this. Fox even tried to trademark the phrase "fair and balanced." I can't imagine they really think they are fair and balanced, but for Fox, news is just a way to make a buck.

How has your professional and academic experience shaped the writing of *Detecting Bull*?

Detecting Bull draws most heavily on my experience directing *Grade the News*. For more than six years I spent every day evaluating the ethics and quality of Bay Area news media – print and broadcast. I developed seven yardsticks of journalism quality based on the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists. (You can see them at http://www.gradethenews.org/feat/recentgrades/2004.htm.)

Each of these measures had to be explained to our student content coders clearly enough that they could apply them to any kind of news story. That got me thinking very systematically about ethical standards and what constitutes socially responsible news.

Learning by doing is indeed a most effective way to teach students the fundamentals of 'socially responsible' journalism. However, in parts of Asia – such as in Malaysia (my home country), Singapore, Indonesia, Sri Lanka - where race and religion are defined by the state as sensitive topics – how does one reconcile between the government's definition of 'socially responsible reporting' and the journalist's responsibility to report 'without fear or favour'?

This is an important question that you are probably much better qualified to answer than me. Journalism has to be culturally sensitive; it can't be effective if no one pays attention. But at the same time, it's the job of the journalist to puncture popular myths and to remind the public of its "better angels." I think the only way to do this is to be sensitive to local cultural norms and to demonstrate that the paper has a bias for the common good – something I argue for at some length in the book. I think the public will listen to criticism if it believes it's well-intentioned -- that the news outlet is "on their side." News media also have to be ready to take severe criticism from entrenched powers.

Today's newsroom environment has indeed changed compared to just 10 years ago. What do you see are the changes that have improved the quality of journalism?

Most of the changes in the last decade have diminished the breadth and depth of journalism in the U.S. That's because staffs at newspapers, magazines, networks and local TV stations have been sharply reduced.

On the plus side, the Internet is the best medium for news we've ever seen. It supports multi-media presentations of text, voices, images and video – letting reporters tell stories more vividly. It allows a public conversation to take place; readers can respond to stories and those comments can be published adjacent to the original article. Stories can be interactive with databases that readers can manipulate. Information can be layered; those who want to go deeper can find links to additional information, including links to original sources and other Web sites.

The Internet allows everyone to be a journalist as well as a news consumer, reducing barriers to enter the market to near zero. Distribution costs are also near zero, unlike print on paper, which must be carried to doorsteps. Space on Web sites is nearly inexhaustible, in sharp contrast to space in newsprint and especially time in a broadcast.

Indeed, because the Internet 'allows everyone to be a journalist' thus providing more diversity of news and views, we're also seeing the proliferation of rhetoric, platitudes, goss and dross, negativities, controversies, conflict and self-serving agendas published on blogsites dressed up as 'independent' news sites. Evidently, the 'bull' runs as wild online as in the traditional media. We're back to square one. Is this a fair observation?

I think the Web has allowed for the possibility – gradually being realized – of far greater diversity – and bull-slinging -- than we've ever had in the public forum. That puts greater pressure on the public to be able to evaluate the quality and veracity of information. In fact, that's the reason I wrote *Detecting Bull* – to provide a systematic method for separating reliable news from the rest.

What do you see are the changes that have undermined the quality of journalism as we know it today?

Paradoxically, the Web has also allowed retailers to reach consumers more efficiently and at lower costs than before when they had to pay local newspapers and broadcast stations to get their message in front of consumers. Classified ads used to generate as much as a third of newspaper income; most of these personal ads have migrated to Web sites like Craigslist and Ebay. Newspapers in the U.S. have also chosen to offer everything they present on paper, and more, for free on the Web. With fewer subscribers and many fewer advertisers, newspaper revenues have fallen sharply.

You founded *GradeTheNews.org* in 2000 as a media watchdog in the Frisco Bay Area. The FAQs (http://www.gradethenews.org/nav/faq.htm) provides a comprehensive overview of its objectives. To what extent have journalists in the Bay Area engaged or responded to the criticisms of their work?

Cooperation has been quite good. Very rarely have news organizations refused to respond to our critiques. Most of our tips about unethical practices came from working journalists in those newsrooms. Editors have told us they pay close attention to the site, even when they disagree with a particular critique. Local journalists and

journalism educators have also contributed articles or written arguments in our ethical case studies, "*Make the call*" feature sited at http://www.gradethenews.org/feat/makethecall/juvenile.htm

Who watches the watchdog (in this case GradeTheNews.org) when it errs in its criticisms of the media?

Bay Area journalists have not been shy about pointing out errors on the site. Because journalism is such a public activity, journalists and news executives are very sensitive to criticism. If they think articles on Grade the News are unfair, they let us know in no uncertain terms. There's also a threaded comment section on the site that allows a public conversation on our critiques or other journalism topics. It's called the coffeehouse (http://www.gradethenews.org/feat/coffeehouse.htm).

***Detecting Bull* to an extent alludes to a commercialised media environment where journalists are losing touch with their public and a moral sense of purpose. What can journalists do to reclaim their function as a 'champion of the common man' (Joseph Pulitzer, 1879, St Louis Post-Dispatch)?**

Most codes of news ethics place the burden of doing the right thing on the individual journalist. But journalists are simply employees who do as they are told or risk their jobs. Journalists should organize to create a counter-balance to institutional demands to maximize return to owners or shareholders. If they are successful, their news organization probably will succeed as well. The task of socially responsible journalism is to help the community served understand and respond to current issues and events. News media that do that well will be in demand. Maximizing public understanding and maximizing return to owners/shareholders, however, are usually not compatible goals.

Today's journalism classroom environment has also changed compared to just 10 years ago. What do you see in today's journalism curriculum that need critical reforms?

I haven't studied j-school curricula enough to shed much light on this question. My personal feeling is that the emphasis in journalism education ought to be more on critical thinking and ethics and somewhat less on skills.

Indeed, 'good' journalism, as I often share with students, is more than the ability to string words into sentences and paragraphs in an inverted pyramid. A solid foundation in ethics, moral and spiritual values, fair-mindedness, a sense of right and wrong, common decency – these are attributes that students need to learn for themselves, and internalize for life. From your experience as a journalist and now as a teacher, how have you 'inspired' these attributes to your students who have no prior knowledge or experience with the constraints of professional journalism?

I agree with you completely. As a teacher, I try to stimulate and guide the discussion, but let students explore the logical outcomes under different scenarios of journalism. "It will soon be your world," I say. "What do you think will logically follow if various kinds of journalism were to proliferate – journalism as entertainment, as sensation, as biased toward any particular partisan side, as oriented more toward good news, or even

to be absent." If they do the reasoning and come up with the examples, the learning is deeper and lasts longer. Plus, I get to learn something from them.

If I may share my experience as a visiting lecturer at Auburn University Montgomery, Alabama from August to September 2009. My brief was to 'expose' the students to a more 'international perspective' of journalism practices and cultures. For a context to suss out the ethical issues in reporting, I asked the students to cite their main gripes about the American media. Unsurprisingly, they said the US media are blatantly biased (such as Fox Television), just as we know that Malaysian mainstream media and bloggers are invariably biased although they'd like to think otherwise. The students' other gripes are: Journalists don't follow the rules of honesty and integrity. Journalists are hypocrites. Journalists are overly negative, sensational. Journalists are obsessed with the 'rich and famous', trivia and gossips.

I then alluded the American students to what the third US president, Thomas Jefferson said in 1807 about newspapers that abused its freedom to report and publish: "The man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them: in as much as he who knows nothing is nearer to truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehood and errors." And, this from Malcolm X when he spoke at Audobon in Harlem in December 1964, two months before he was assassinated: "If you're not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing."

The American students' criticisms are not much different from my journalism students' at University of Wollongong in Australia. Interestingly, working journalists I teach online at the Konrad Adenauer Asian Center for Journalism, Ateneo University in Manila, and journalists at the workshop I conducted at the Malaysian Press Institute in January [2009], likewise cited similar gripes. Indeed, knowing what's wrong with journalism does not necessarily prompt professional journalists to consciously do something to fix it. You've alluded earlier to the organizational and economic constraints that undermine the standards of ethical journalism. Where do we go from here?

I think these students have seen through much of the news media – pretty much correctly. When I wrote *Market-Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware*? back in 1994, the response among most American academics was derision – ridiculous to use economics as a way of understanding news content! Journalism is a profession, not a business, they protested. Well, they've changed their tune and now it's not uncommon for people to say news is market-driven rather than a public service. In their defense, it has become more so since 1994.

But I fear that many students in the US look cynically at the news, at least partly, as a way of justifying their wish to ignore it. And, as I argue in *Detecting Bull*, that's a mistake that will lead them to disaster.

In the book, I argue for a civic revival. News literacy is just a part of that, but a necessary part. In the US money has corrupted the legislative and executive branches

of government. Candidates cannot even contemplate running for office until they have persuaded powerful special interests to pony up large sums for their candidacy. They are then beholden to their financiers. Special interest activism and public lassitude, especially among the young, have led to paralysis of government at the national and state levels.

We are in real peril, as evidenced by the Bush administration's misleading – but uncritically accepted -- case for the disastrous war in Iraq and the deregulation of Wall Street over the last decade, which led to a global recession (except on Wall Street). Teaching and motivating young people to see their self-interests in becoming politically informed and active is the way out. After all, what happens in the future will affect them more than the generations dying out. It's what teachers and textbooks are for!

Is it a case of the public deserves the media they get?

No, I think this blames the victim and lets the industry off the hook. (Industry bigwigs use this rationalization to defend themselves. We'd love to do quality journalism, they protest, but the public won't sit still for it. I address this myth directly in *Market-Driven Journalism*, ch. 9). The public deserves quality media. But to get it, they will have to be able to discern substance from schlock, and support it financially.