Balance and Bias in Journalism

Representation, Regulation and Democracy

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To my parents, Eveline, Frederick and Jean.

Preface

This book began as an investigation into the nature of balance and bias in the *Today* programme on BBC Radio 4 during the general election campaign in the United Kingdom (UK) in 1997. From the original, relatively narrow focus of 39 programmes broadcast over seven weeks has developed a much wider brief, addressing the main broadcast media and the press worldwide. The subject of inquiry is itself widely debated by journalists, politicians and other interested parties, as well as by viewers, listeners and readers, and is often in the media. This is because representation and democracy are inextricably linked, with regulation offering only partial safeguards for balance and against bias.

Even as publication of the book coincides with radio's centenary,[1] with television well into its second half-century and the Internet firmly established as a major source of news and information, many of the key issues remain unresolved. In democracies and dictatorships alike, the ability to shape representations in the mass media bestows considerable power on those who have it. Used responsibly, it can be beneficial to a range of different stakeholders, and damaging to few. In the wrong hands, it can be at best misleading, and at the other extreme a force for evil. Many journalists understand and accept the responsibility this bestows upon them. Many others do not.

Accepting responsibility does not in itself resolve matters. Achieving balance is more problematic in practice than in principle, not least because we may not all agree on the nature of that 'balance'. This book seeks to discuss the associated phenomena of balance and bias in ways that will be acceptable to a wide readership. We all consume – or are at least affected by – the media, and many of us are practitioners. Even this text, though, will be subject to the same kind of scrutiny it prescribes for others, and indeed the author would expect it to be. It too can only be a partial account of 'realities' perceived and reinterpreted by a single proxy, a concept developed further in Chapter 1. As in the reporting it seeks to analyse, pragmatic decisions have had to be made over its scope, organization and focus, many of which may have been different if taken by somebody else. However, just as the book seeks neither to condemn nor to discourage responsible journalism in any of its forms, we hope it will be read in the same spirit with which it approaches those other texts: that is, sceptically rather than cynically.

There have been other studies of balance and bias in the media, and just as in their time they introduced new material into the public domain, this study has also generated some original material, which you will find in the

case studies in the final chapter and elsewhere in the text. Rather than extensively reviewing earlier works, it is on this more recent data that the book concentrates. New data emerge every day, yet many of the analytical approaches to that data – and the conclusions drawn – will remain relevant as long as the media lack the transparency of personal experience and so make representations that can affect the democratic processes at the heart of society.

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Abbreviations

ABA	Australian Broadcasting Authority
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
ANN	Arabic News Network
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CRBC	Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission
CRS	Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité
CRTC	Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission
DAB	Digital Audio Broadcasting
DRM	Digital Radio Mondiale
DTH	direct-to-home transmission
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
IBA	Independent Broadcasting Authority
ILR	Independent Local Radio
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IRN	Independent Radio News
ITA	Independent Television Authority
ITV	Independent Television
MBC	Middle East Broadcasting Centre
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MMR	measles, mumps and rubella vaccine
MRP	Mouvement Républicain Populaire
NGO	non-governmental organization
NPR	National Public Radio
NUJ	National Union of Journalists
Ofcom	Office of Communications
ONO	Organization of News Ombudsmen
PBS	Public Broadcasting Service
PCC	Press Complaints Commission
PCF	Parti Comuniste Français
PCI	Partito Communista Italiano
PR	proportional representation
PSB	public service broadcaster
RAJAR	Radio Joint Audience Research
RFE	Radio Free Europe
RNI	Radio Northsea International

RSS	Really Simple Syndication
SLD	Social and Liberal Democrats
SNP	Scottish Nationalist Party
UKIP	United Kingdom Independence Party
VOA	Voice of America
VT	videotape (inserts)

Introduction

Balance, bias, impartiality and objectivity: early definitions

Balance and bias are mutually exclusive terms that – despite their essential incompatibility – coexist in the discourse of representation, which is itself inherent in the study of journalism. Put simplistically, balance is the absence of bias, and bias is the absence of balance. Presenting a balanced account would normally require impartiality, or at least adopting an objective, rather than a subjective position and remaining true to it. In a phrase: 'telling it like it is'. That is the 'uncommitted way' in which Wilson, for example, contends issues must be presented in order for that account to be 'balanced' (1996: 45). Being objective means not placing undue emphasis on one part of a representation, in order to distort it, for whatever motive. Therefore objectivity implies detachment from an issue, or at least, representing it in as 'balanced' a way as could be achieved by someone without a vested interest in it. Likewise its antonym, subjectivity, implies common cause with persons or perspectives within an issue.

The concept of bias is itself complex. McQuail suggested four different kinds of bias: partisan, propaganda, unwitting and ideological (1992). The first is explicit support for a particular position and the second more implicit – apparent only to those who are sensitive to the value-laden nature of the comment, descriptions and attitudes in the reporting. Unwitting bias is forced on journalists by the physical constraints of their craft: there is only so much room in a newspaper or time in a bulletin, while McQuail's fourth category, ideological bias, may not even be apparent to those who produce it, because it is rooted in their own preconceptions and attitudes, values and beliefs, which they rarely, if ever, question spontaneously. Useful though those categories may be, they are not incontrovertible and McQuail himself redefines bias in later works (2005: 127).

Problematizing the problematic

Why, though, is impartiality so easily controvertible, and why does it follow that, depending on the context and the complexity of the representation, accusations of bias are so common (Street, 2001: 4)? Unfortunately, it is here

that the usefulness of simplistic approaches diminishes, not least because *demonstrating* the presence or absence of balance and bias is essentially problematic. One person's 'balance' may be another person's 'bias', particularly if their perspectives differ widely, as we shall see. What may seem to one person to be objective may be considered highly subjective by the other.

Even the relationship between objectivity and impartiality is complex: the first assumes there is a single empirical truth about which it is possible to be objective. The second accommodates a relativist's view of the world, in which perspectives may be interchangeable, depending on the values of the person describing the world (Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005: 10). This distinction may be purely academic, in the sense that it may be of no consequence, particularly as Hall argued convincingly that despite the importance of both terms in journalism, neither objectivity nor impartiality exist in practice, but are part of an 'operational fiction' (1974). Schlesinger's observational account of working practices in the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (1987) had already led him to doubt that impartiality was achievable (see Chapter 1). So, what of the 'single empirical truth', or the validity of the different perspectives accommodated by the relativists?

The mass media routinely present images and descriptions that are necessarily partial, as opposed to complete. Often these are detailed and expressive, sometimes they are vivid and even moving, yet for all the investment in technology, the skill and dedication of practitioners, and the considerable appetite of audiences for their output, the media are quite unable to recreate any original experience of the world except in relatively limited detail. Their audiences witness even live events by proxy: they are not at the scene, although they may view what they are shown, read what they are told and hear what is played to them. They may not, however, independently look around, open a closed door, change perspective, ask their own questions or discover information they might themselves have chosen to access if they were truly there. Of course, someone else is there for them – that is, the proxy who has gone to the scene on their behalf – and that someone must choose how to present (or *re*present) the real-life experience of being there.

Representation being only a partial – again meaning incomplete – account of a place, an event or an issue, necessarily involves choices being made over what is included and what is not. A representation that is selective might still be widely considered 'fair' if competing perspectives have been 'balanced' in such a way that none of them gain any advantage from the act of mediation taking place. However, because bias lies in the absence of balance, it exists when one aspect of the place, one take on the event or one side of the argument has been given undue prominence that promotes it unfairly over others, either to its advantage or its disadvantage. Audiences are then further distanced from the realities they seek to experience through the media, because the representations they are being given are less accurate than they could be: in essence, distortions of what they might have found for themselves.

If as journalists we could achieve a perfect balance in our reporting, we could accurately claim to be impartial, as could other broadcasters in television and radio and writers in the press and other text-based media. Unfortunately, someone working in the media claiming to be impartial becomes problematic – and often acutely so – when others dispute that 'impartiality', instead perceiving bias where the originator claims none. In some contexts and over some issues (for example, party politics), being impartial is inherently more difficult, simply because different people may already have aligned themselves with a particular perspective, either through allegiance or because they share common values or beliefs.

There are, however, circumstances in which journalists would not wish to be impartial. Certain issues require partiality, or common cause with a single perspective, to the detriment of another. In what in the West may be termed 'enlightened' democracies, for example, racism is widely perceived to be not only morally wrong but obnoxious. In certain countries, legislation proscribes racist attitudes or such actions as the 'incitement to racial hatred', defined in Great Britain by the Public Order Act 1986 as using words which are threatening, abusive or insulting about a particular racial or ethnic group (Welsh and Greenwood, 2003: 353–4). Even if a sense of decency towards other human beings doesn't inhibit a journalist from 'balancing' the views of a proponent of equal opportunities with those of an outspoken racist, the possibility of a fine and up to two years' imprisonment probably would. Thus is established in law the principle that impartiality is not always acceptable, although such circumstances are of course exceptional, rather than the norm, because in democratic states there are few issues over which legislation is used specifically in order to constrain freedom of speech.

More controversial is the desirability of impartiality over issues where consensual notions of what may be deemed 'common sense' may be considered to be in conflict with a perspective that, although considered maverick by many, may still be shared by others. For example, should the merits of caring for the environment be equally balanced against those of harming it? Should advice about health and safety be carefully balanced with information on how to be reckless? Apparently uncomplicated dilemmas can become more problematic under different circumstances. What if harm to the environment would result from creating new jobs where unemployment is high? How should overwhelming medical evidence suggesting smoking is harmful be balanced against the freedom of individuals to decide their own fate, irrespective of any ambition on a journalist's part to educate and inform?

An academic study which randomly sampled 636 articles out of a total of 3543 about climate change published in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* between 1988 and 2002 found that more than half effectively 'balanced' what the researchers called 'generally agreed-upon scientific discourse' against the conflicting opinions of relatively small numbers of sceptics (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004: 125–36). They considered 'norms of balanced reporting' to be

distancing press coverage of global warming from a common scientific understanding of it as being attributable to humankind, and instead presenting as equally likely the minority view of it as a naturally-occurring and eventually self-correcting phenomenon.

Equally weighting competing yet unequally authoritatively-shared perspectives on an issue can have more immediate – and potentially disastrous – consequences for individuals within audiences. In the UK, a vast amount of scientific data about the combined measles, mumps and rubella vaccine (MMR) was already in the public domain, while from 1998 controversy raged in the media over whether it had caused autism in some children (Batty, 2004). Overwhelmingly, the majority of the medical community, including the Chief Medical Officer and the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, considered MMR safe (Boseley, 2002) and many of them repeatedly said so (Speers and Lewis, 2003: 913–18). Yet the presence of a small number of dissident voices, none of which has ever been able to prove a causal link between MMR and autism, was sufficient for journalists to regularly present what became a terrible choice facing young parents as a simple, although critical, 50–50 between one view and another: either the vaccine was safe or it wasn't, so take your pick, or perhaps even toss a coin (Sandall, 2003). Some estimates considered vaccination rates to have fallen the most dramatically amongst relatively well-educated middle-class, broadsheet-reading listeners to the BBC's 'intelligent speech' network, Radio 4 (Speers and Lewis, 2004: 171–82).

'Balancing' competing perspectives, however sound, may simply be done as a way of producing 'good' copy. Often, for broadcasters, a regulator may demand as much impartiality as is possible, while paradoxically, in the press, promoting a particular perspective over others might be a requirement of the job. That is, in certain territories broadcasting is subject to content regulation: such as in the UK, where Ofcom (Office of Communications) requires the commercial sector to maintain 'balance' in news and current affairs. The BBC is also expected to be 'impartial', because the charter under which it operates, and which is supposed to guarantee its independence from government, says it must (see Chapter 2). However, the British press face no such obstacles to both overt and covert support for individual political parties and perspectives, sometimes because of readership expectation – that is, what readers want to read – and often subject to the whim of the proprietor, who may have a political agenda in addition to the desire to sell newspapers (Allan, 2005: 7–13 and see Chapter 3). In both regulated and unregulated contexts, the implications for democracy are considerable.

Demonstrating impartiality depends on being able to evidence 'balance', that is, to prove the absence of bias. It may be easier for a protagonist, a regulator, or some other stakeholder in a representation to identify the *presence* of bias or the *absence* of balance, and therefore an absence of impartiality, but neither approach to the issue is unproblematic. Identifying bias could hardly be uncontroversial, but measuring and so quantifying it according to

methodologies that might produce a consensus presents further difficulties. Gunter's review of methodological approaches to measuring bias on television acknowledged many of the pitfalls inherent in both quantitative and qualitative analyses, suggesting that even the concept of bias would be difficult to define (1997: 5). Yet, he went on to identify a large number of such studies carried out by academics, broadcasters and regulators alike, each of which has its own constituency of sponsors and audiences (see Chapter 2). Similarly, just as the Glasgow University Media Group pressed on in the face of opposition to their early *Bad News* studies (Street, 2001: 25–8), in studying any aspect of journalism neither should we be deterred by difficulty, even if by considering balance and bias in particular we are problematizing the already problematic.

Understanding balance and bias

This book examines balance and bias in journalism in a number of ways. In the first chapter we will consider the relationship between the reality of first-hand experience and representations of it in the media. Then Chapter 2 examines the implications of balance and bias for the proper working of democracy, and the ways in which broadcasting is often regulated in order to protect it. Chapter 3 considers the relatively unregulated environment of the press, in which constraints on journalistic representation may be few or ineffective, and questions the appropriateness of a tradition that bestows influence through the often dubious privilege of ownership. The following two chapters distinguish between bias in the complementary but quite distinct processes of production and reception: in creating and interpreting media representations or, in essence, encoding and decoding individual texts. Because international contexts sometimes require a reinterpretation of core principles and values, lest our very freedom to hold them should be lost, Chapter 6 attempts to reconcile a number of globalizing forces with often transitory national interest, and asks to what extent ideals should be compromised in times of danger. The final chapter presents a number of case studies from regulated contexts where obligations to aspire to balance have inevitably been met with only qualified success, and one that suggests that with greater freedom may come deceit.

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