

Rethinking Objectivity in News Reporting in the Digital Age

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Abstract: This paper examines the place of news objectivity in online news reporting. It argues that the Internet is a strong communication avenue in this age of digital communication which allows for an instantaneous posting of news messages online. It maintains that the Internet gives room for journalists to write as much stories as possible and meet the yearnings of the people. The study aims at finding out whether online versions of news stories are objective and to find out the effect of lack of news objectivity on online news reporting. In order to drive home the argument of the study, the social responsibility theory of the media was employed. Using survey research design, the researchers were able to sample the opinions of respondents. It was, however, revealed that most online news stories are not objectively reported. Based on this finding, the researchers recommended that scholars and media professionals should re-examine the whole essence of news objectivity and propose a better definition that can encapsulate the issue of news objectivity or better still re-examine the profession to see if the concept “news objectivity” can be removed from the code of the profession, so as to protect the dignity of journalism.

Key words: Internet and objectivity

Introduction

In this age of digital communication, the Internet as a medium has redefined the face of communication. “Nowhere, except in dreams have reality and fantasy contended for our attention more than on the Net” (Watson, 2003:230). This is why Stovall (2005:117) opined that “the essence of the Web is news, but the web is not a newspaper on a computer screen. Nor is it a broadcast station that you can pick up through a browser. It is different from traditional media in some significant and profound ways”. One of the ways in which the Net is different from other media is the instantaneous nature of news reporting which is unique to the Internet. Strovall (2005:117), writing on the instantaneous nature of the Internet notes that:

The news of the capture of Saddam Hussein could not have come at a worse time for the nation’s newspapers. The deposed Iraqi strongman, the subject of an intense man hunt for months, had been pulled out of a “spider hole” by American troops near his home town of Tikrit on Saturday evening, December 13, 2003. Words of his capture had remained a secret for about twelve hours while his

identity had been confirmed.... Yet, no newspapers carried a word about the capture of Sadden Hussein that morning. It was too late... But most newspapers... turned away from their print products and instead concentrated on their electronic product, their web sites.

It was only through the news websites that Hussein's news could be reported. This is to highlight the importance of the web and how instantaneous it could be. It is important to note here, therefore, that a news web site is "a site that is devoted to delivering timely news and information to its audience. Those producing the site observe the traditional customs and practices of journalism in gathering, writing and presenting the news. The question of credibility continues to plague the web and those who work in it, particularly in journalism. Those legitimate questions of credibility often revolve around one of the most important characteristics of the web: Speed. Journalists like to work fast and tell their stories quickly, especially when competing journalists are involved. Just about any journalist will tell you that getting an exclusive story, a "scoop", is the best feeling in the world" (Stovall, 2005:131).

However, "the expectation of news organization on their journalists is that they will gather and handle information objectively. Part of the culture of journalism is that journalists will not pursue a political or social agenda; rather, their professional agenda is one of gathering all relevant information from all relevant sources. That information should be presented accurately and fairly. Sometimes, this orientation is referred to as objectivity" (Stovall, 2005:131).

The concept of "objectivity" in the news business has become rather contentious among communication scholars. Some argue that "the very idea of story selection from among the very many events that occur in a day is fraught with subjectivity" (Anim, 2006:7).

Nonetheless, we cannot deny that some stories in the mass media lack objectivity. Take for instance, "the penchant for the Nigerian mass media especially the newsmagazines to eulogize and chant the praise songs of some non-performing governors to the chagrin of the masses. In some very shameless cases, these magazines devote their centre-spread on the advertorials and supplements of these rogue governors displaying phantom projects in which countless millions are allegedly spent. If, in fact, such supplements and advertorials reflect truly the height of development in the country, we would not be suffering from the infrastructural problems that are today our collective lot" (Ekwueme, 2009:97).

In Ekwueme's analysis, it is evident that there exist cases of subjectivity in news reporting. And since most media houses make use of the Internet to further distribute their news stories to their heterogeneous readers, such cases of subjectivity are likely to be transferred to their web version of news reporting.

Although, there are controversial opinions on the issue of objectivity, while some hold that reporters should be neutral completely, others opine that reporters are to subject personal opinions to their news report given that it is to the benefit of the masses. The issue here is that; who determines the interest of the masses in a news report? Is it the function of the news event itself or that of the journalist whose duty it is to report the event? Either way, the basic issue is that news objectivity is a case of great concern and with the Internet in view, it becomes a more complex issue due to its vulnerable nature of accessibility.

Therefore, this study is committed to rethinking the face of news in this digital age, especially as it has to do with the Internet and news objectivity.

Statement of Problem

In this age of digital communication, most online newspapers, media houses with web sites for news accessibility and private individuals (journalists and non-journalists), who operate private sites or blogs are always in a hurry to present reader with the latest information of the day. The reason for this is to draw the attention of many online readers of news stories to their private web pages. Everyone wants to be the first point of call for a given story. This situation, honestly speaking, is a welcome development.

However, it has its own concomitant disadvantage. This disadvantage is made clearer when the garment of objectivity is unveiled on the stories covered. News objectivity, which is the basic principle of news reporting, is not really taken into consideration in most online contents of the news stories. One may even attribute it to the fact that some web pages give the reporters enough room to write as much as possible and post enough unedited photos to support their news stories.

Even in some cases, where the professional journalists would want to present what Bob Woodward of the Watergate scandal fame called “the best obtainable version of the truth” (Anim, 2006:7), others who are not trained journalist would capitalize on the ease of the Internet accessibility to throw caution to the wind. The result of this is news stories that are practically one sided and considerably subjective. To worsen the whole matter, scholars are already debating on what constitute news objectivity. To them; is news objectivity total neutrality of the reporter or partial neutrality plus little subjectivity in favour of the masses?

The aims of this study, therefore, are; to find out whether online versions of news stories are objective; to find out the effect of lack of news objectivity on online news reporting; and to examine the fate of news objectivity in this era of digital communication. Based on the aforementioned objectives, the researchers are motivated to ask the following questions;

1. Are online versions of news stories objective?
2. What effect has lack of news objectivity on online news reporting?
3. What is the fate of news objectivity in this era of digital communication?

2. Literature Review

With the ongoing debate in the field of communication, different scholars are beginning to question that issue of objectivity especially when it comes to its application in this contemporary era of digital communication.

In a research study conducted by Bradley Osborn, in 2001 on "Ethics and Credibility in Online Journalism, the researcher concluded that adhering to conventional ethics and credibility can help ensure the success of online journalism.

The researcher noted that when print was the only medium available to the journalist, ample time was available for proper research, editing, and publication. Indeed, only a few early publishers had access to a printing press with which to make product, as mass media progressed, and new forms of print and broadcasting appeared, the time allowed for journalistic reflection shrank. The Internet allows news and information to move at tremendous dispatch, limited only by the speed of the electron or electromagnetic wave. The immediacy brought by the online environment, a medium where everyone is a potential publisher, allows for even less deliberation by the journalist and editor. The speed and anonymity provided by the Internet can play fast and loose with journalistic ethics. The Internet has created a fourth kind of journalism next to radio, television, and print journalism (Osborn, 2001:2).

Sandra Mins Rowe an editor of *Portend Oregonian* cited in Osborn (2001:3) notes that "the newest news dispenser, the runaway Internet, makes a journalist out of anybody who has a modem. It values speed and sensationalism above accuracy. New media will not accept our standards. We are foolish to treat them as if they have. This is a grim time for newspapers".

Online reporters struggle with credibility because many who publish on the web are untrained in journalism or industry standards. Striving for accuracy can help. There is a pressure on journalists to break news, to scoop. This was what prompted Ellen Hume, a media analyst to call for the abandonment of the scoop culture of 100 years ago. This scholar noted that net journalists are taking even less time to check their stories than they did in the old media adding that the rush to put news stories online is undermining journalism everywhere. (Osborn, 2001:7). Therefore taking exceptional care to be late rather than wrong can increase credibility, something difficult to regain once it is lost. The loss of balance and fairness through under sourced and inaccurate reporting will make it much more difficult for the press to perform its watchdog function (Cowan, 1998).

Osborn, concludes by saying electronic media certainly can be credible, but their advantages of speed and audiovisual enhancements tempt the journalist to hasten his/her copy. The internet can deliver in-depth stories and news, as well. However, audiences mostly look to this medium for the quick news bites rather than more detailed information. The Internet spans the globe, encompassing all manner of geography and political/government entities. Today we see online webcasts of news (www.freedomforum.org) and even the injection of audience input in breaking news (www.cnn.com/cnn/programs/news.sists). It is a brave new world in the field of online journalism. Adhering to conventional ethics and credibility can help ensure its success (Osborn. 2001:13). The essence of this argument is based on the fact that most content of online news are devoid of objectivity and if there is no other way to correct the situation, therefore there should be a rethinking of news in order to fit in this current age of digital communication.

Similarly, objectivity and balance have been an issue of concern in the field of journalism in recent times. Several studies have tried to lay to rest the debate on the issue, but it turned out that their findings always would open new angles to the issue under discourse.

Natalie Jomini Stroud and Stephen D. Reese, in their studies, carried out in 2010 on “Objectivity and Balance: How do Readers and Viewers of News and Information Reach Conclusions Regarding Objectivity and Balance?”, concludes, based on the results of their findings that news and public affairs programming, could demonstrate their objectivity and balance or could use it to adjust and monitor news content. As perceptions of a media outlet can colour public perceptions (Stroud and Reese, 2010:30).

The researchers add that credibility is intimately connected to audience perceptions just as Tseng and Fogg (1999) agrees that “credibility is a perceived quality; it doesn’t reside in an object, a pieces or information” (p.40). In other words, media may be objective and fair by various accepted standards, while still being regarded as not credible by the audience. Credibility has been connected theoretically and empirically with judgments of trustworthiness and expertise. Media credibility has been measured with survey items asking the public to report their beliefs about bias, trust, fairness, and accuracy (Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003).

In the aggregate, trust in the media has plummeted (Moy & Pfau, 2000; Pew Research Centre, 2005). In 1985, 89 percent of the public had a favourable opinion of network television news and 81 percent had a favourable opinion of major national newspapers. In 2007, only 71 percent had a favourable opinion of network television news and 60 percent had a favourable opinion of major national newspapers (Pew Research Centre, 2007). At the same time, people have developed fragmented beliefs about which media outlets they perceive as more trustworthy (Pew Research Centre, 2004). In Nigeria, people prefer AIT news in most cases against NTA and channel TV or Silverbird. Their actions are all product of their perception.

In most cases, stories that emphasize only one side of a controversial issue, lead audience to see bias. Balanced stories that present both sides of controversial issued in equal proportion are perceived as less biased than imbalanced stories that emphasize one side of a controversial issue (Fico, Recardson, & Edwards, 2004). Certain features of articles seem to trigger audiences to label articles biased. When asked to identity biased portions of news articles, audiences are more likely to label quotations within the articles as introducing bias rather than facts or summary statements (D’ Alessio, 2003).

In sum, public perceptions of news media performance follow how elites (both journalists and public figures) publicly assess the news media’s performance, adding that production techniques also influence audience credibility judgments. There is no doubt that the public does not always think about bias in the news in the same way that journalists do. Secondly, the media may be objective and fair, while still being regarded as not credible by the audience. Thirdly, judgments of news media performance are influenced by the actual features of news stories. For example, when stories present only one side of an issue or use tabloid production techniques, audiences judge the story to be less credible. Fourthly, audiences generalize their judgments of media bias beyond a single article or broadcast to entire news

organizations. Impressions of news sources strongly colour people's ability to evaluate the content of media messages from that source (Stroud and Reese, 2010: 25).

In a related development, Jonathan S. Morris in his study conducted in 2007 on "Slanted Objectivity? Perceived Media Bias, Cable News Exposure and Political Attitudes", found that the new audience exposed to a particular media, exhibit different behavioural attitude when compared with those that are exposed to other sources. The objective of the study was to explore the consequences of a fragmented television news audience. Claims of media bias in political news reporting have been commonplace for decades. Pundits, journalists, and interest groups constantly spar over whether or not bias exist as well as which political actors tend to benefit and suffer most as a result. Elected officials and candidates for office, especially Republicans, bemoan how the media impedes their ability to effectively conduct a campaign (Morris, 2007: 708). Bob Dole, for example, argued in 1996 that his presidential campaign against Bill Clinton was stumbling because of the news media's leftward tendencies, particularly those of the New York Times (Kurtz, 1996). George H.W. Bush criticized the press along the same lines, and made his displeasure in this regard a common theme in his re-election campaign, frequently echoing the slogan: "Annoy the media: re-elect Bush (Eveland and Shah, 2003).

In recent years, however, accusations of bias in political news reporting have intensified (Niven, 2002). Although media critics continue to rail against what they consider to be a liberal media (Bozell, 2004; Goldberb, 2002; Kohn, 2003), others argue that bias exists in the opposite direction, stemming primarily from the pressure of media owners that favour Republicans (Alterman, 2003; Bagdikian, 2004; Brock, 2004; Scheuer, 2001). Politicians, of course, continue to criticize media bias as well, arguing that the political agenda of media owners, managers, and reporters often distort the message and ultimately do a disservice to the democratic process. (Morris, 2007:708).

Americans commonly believe that bias exists in the news, but the nature of the apparent bias varies (Eveland and Shah, 200; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken, 1994). Most significantly, individuals who see bias in political news reporting believe that the direction of the bias counters their own political beliefs (Perilloff, 1989; Vallone, Ross, and Lepper, 1985). Research indicates that strong partisans are more likely to see counter-attitudinal media bias than independents or weak partisans (Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt, 1998; Gunther, 1992). This phenomenon, together with intense elite rhetoric about the presence of bias (Watts et al., 1999) contributes to a heightened public sense of a media bias even though little evidence from content analysis supports it (Niven, 2002 as cited by Morris, 2007:709).

Theoretical Framework

This study is built on social responsibility theory. This theory, according to McQuail (2005:172), holds that "the media have obligations to society, and media ownership is a public trust. News media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant. The media should be free, but self-regulated. The media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct. Under some circumstances, government may need to intervene to safeguard the public interest".

This theory is a fallout of the private commission of inquiry set up in 1942 under the able chairmanship of Robert Hutchins. Its report was presented in 1947.

The findings of the commission (Hutchins, 1947) were critical of the press for its frequent failings and for being so limited in the access it gave to voices outside the circle of a privileged and powerful minority. The report coined the notion of social responsibility and named the key journalistic standards that the press should seek to maintain. A responsible press should provide a full, truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning. It should serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism and be a common carrier of the public expression... The report criticized the sensationalism of the press and the mixing of news with editorial opinion. In general, the commission supported the concept of a diverse, objective, informative and independent press institution (McQuail, 2005:171).

This theory was adopted for this work because it hammers on the journalistic principles upon which journalists are to operate. Prominent in this principle is the issues of objectivity in news reporting. According to the theory, journalists are to be objective when presenting a given news story meant for the consumption of the masses. Editorializing to it was strongly condemned. Objectivity, according to this theory means that journalists or reporters should try as much as possible to avoid injecting their personal opinion into any news story they are assigned to cover.

The aforementioned analysis is no doubt the crux of the study under investigation. The study is of the opinion that news objectivity is fast becoming an issue of concern, especially in the area of online news reporting and as such there is every need for journalists to either go back to the drawing board to review the journalistic principles presented by this theory or be forced to redefine the face of news in this age of digital communication.

Therefore, the relevance of this theory to the work under investigation is that it stresses the need for journalists, whether from the traditional media or new media (Online journalists), to maintain the ethical code of the profession for the general good of the masses. Prominent in this ethical concept is news objectivity, upon which this work is built.

3. Methodology

The research design for this study is the survey method. This is because survey allows for the study of people's opinion over a given issues of concern. The population of this study centred on both staff and students of the department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The choice of the population is anchored on the fact that the students and staff of the department are already at home with the concept of Internet and news objectivity.

In selecting an appropriate sample size for this study, non-probability sampling technique was used. The researchers were able to study all the academic staff and postgraduate students in the department due to their manageable number. However, 40% sample size of the undergraduate students was used. This amounted to 220 sample size.

The questionnaire was used as an instrument for data collection. Apart from the staff and post-graduate students, the instrument was randomly distributed to the undergraduate students. The instrument had two sections: the demographic and psychographic sections. The demographic section was used to elicit

information about the bio-data of the respondents while the psychographic section focused on the research questions. The instrument, however, was self-administered using the class representatives of the undergraduate and post-graduate classes in the distribution and retrieval of the questionnaire. A response window of two weeks was given to the respondents to complete the questionnaire.

However, out of 220 copies of the questionnaire that was distributed, after several efforts, only 202 were returned and used. This represents a 91.8% return rate. The questionnaire was face validated by two communication experts who are senior lecturers in the department of Mass Communication. The data collected were analysed using tables and simple percentages.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The tables below provide the demography and psychographic analyses of data collected in the cause of this study.

Table 2 analysed the sex of respondents. From the table, 113 (55.9%) respondents are male while 89(44.1%) respondents are female.

From the table above, 133(65.8) respondents fall within 16 – 25 years, while 44(21.8%) respondents fall within 26 – 35 years of age. Whereas 23(11.4%) and 2 (1%) respondents fall within the age categories of 36 – 45 and 46- above respectively.

In table 4, 113 (55.9%) and 72 (35.6%) respondents are undergraduates and BA, BSc/HND holders respectively, while 14 (6.9%) and 3 (1.5%) respondents falls within the categories of people with MA/MSc and Ph.D/Above respectively.

From the table above, 187 (92.6%) respondents agree to have surfed the net for online news, while 15 (7.4%) respondents do not surf the net for online news.

Table 6 analysed data concerning the common sites visited by most respondents in search of news online. From the table, 89 (44.1%) respondents said they have visited the Daily Sun news online, while 65 (32.2%) respondents said they have visited the Guardian news online. On the other hand, 72(35.6%) and 48 (23.8%) respondents said they have visited Thisday news online and Newswatch news online respectively. Thirty-five respondents representing 17.3% opined that they have visited football sites for football related news stories.

The table above shows whether online news stories are objective. Sixty-eight respondents (33.7%) opined that online news stories are objective, while 108 (53.5%) respondents opined that most online news stories are not objective. However, 26 (12.9%) respondents were indifferent on the issue of online news objectivity.

From the table above, 64 (31.7%) respondents opines that if news objectivity is lacking in news reporting, it will affect people's perception of news especially on the Internet. Forty-five (22.3%) and 67 (33.2%) respondents respectively belief that lack of news objectivity will create a bad image for journalism profession and might go ahead to affect the ethical codes of the profession. On the other

hand, 17 (8.4%) and 36 (17.8%) respondents respectively opine that the absence of news objectivity in news stories might reduce the professional pressure on modern day journalists and make journalism a free for all affair.

4. Discussion and Findings

During the course of this study, the researchers found out that there were more male respondents than their female counterparts. This is anchored on the fact that table 2 reveals that 113 (55.9%) respondents are male while 89(44.1%) respondents are female. Table 3 further provided analyses which shows that 133(65.8) respondents fall within 16 – 25 years, while 44(21.8%) respondents fall within 26 – 35 years of age. However, 23(11.4%) and 2 (1%) respondents fall within the age categories of 36 – 45 and 46- above respectively. It was equally found that majority of the respondents do surf the net for news stories, considering the fact that those who said yes were 92.6% as indicated in table 5.

However, from the analysis in table 7, it was revealed that most online news stories are not objectively reported. This discovery is based on the fact that out of 202 respondents, 68 respondents (33.7%) opined that online news stories are objective, while 108 (53.5%) respondents opined that most online news stories are not objective. The percentages of those who opine that most online news stories are not objectively reported are more than those who agree that they are objective. This finding goes a long way to show that most online news stories are far from being objective. They are more or less like their print version.

Analysis from table 8 exposes factors that might serve as tumbling blocks for the growth of journalism profession if news objectivity were to be lacking in news reporting. From the table, 64 (31.7%) respondents opine that if news objectivity were to be lacking in news reporting, it will affect people's perception of news especially online news reporting. Forty-five (22.3%) and 67 (33.2%) respondents respectively agree that lack of news objectivity will create a bad image for journalism profession and might go ahead to affect the ethical codes of the profession. While, 17 (8.4%) and 36 (17.8%) respondents respectively opine that the absence of news objectivity in news stories might reduce the professional pressure on modern day journalists and make journalism a free for all affair.

Conclusion

News objectivity is an ethical aspect of journalism practice which has helped to isolate individual journalistic bias and opinions from the actual state of events. As one of the ethical codes of the profession, it has helped to protect the dignity of the profession. Therefore, if this code is not redefined or re-examined, the profession might be dragged to the mud or to disrepute. To salvage the profession, therefore, it is imperative for the concept to be re-examined.

Recommendations

The researchers, therefore, recommend that;

Scholars and media professionals should re-examine the whole essence of news objectivity and propose a better definition that can encapsulate the issue of news objectivity or better still re-examine the

profession to see if the concept “news objectivity” can be removed from the code of the profession, so as to protect the dignity of the profession.

Journalists on their own part can make it a point of duty to make sure that news materials sent for publication are devoid of their personal opinions. This would help set the pace for most citizen journalists who are not trained professionals to learn the act of news writing by reading online news stories of trained professionals.

Media professionals in the academia and media houses should ensure that the issue of news objectivity is properly taught at the formative stage of most journalists, so that they won't depart from it when they start practicing and posting materials online.

Future researchers should see this work as a resource material in their studies in this and other related areas.

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