Truth, facts and values

J201 Introduction to Mass Communication

Oct 26 - 2016

Professor Hernando Rojas
hrojas@wisc.edu @uatiff
201.journalism.wisc.edu
#sjmc201
Grand principles of American Journalism

1. Independence
2. Transparency
3. Citizen engagement
4. Holding power accountable
5. Objectivity
6. Balance
7. Fairness
8. Accuracy/Verification
9. Telling the truth
How does one achieve balance?
IN journalism, as in life, balance sounds like an unassailably good thing.

But while balance may be necessary to mediating a dispute between teenage siblings, a different kind of balance — some call it “false equivalency” — has come under increasing fire. The firing squad is the public: readers and viewers who rely on accurate news reporting to make them informed citizens.

Simply put, false balance is the journalistic practice of giving equal weight to both sides of a story, regardless of an established truth on one side. And many people are fed up with it. They don’t want to hear lies or half-truths given credence on one side, and shot down on the other. They want some real answers.
① Recognition of the increasing importance of media as power.

② Audience increasing perception that the media are biased. In part because the media debate bias.

③ Political strategy of “working the refs”…
Balance and false balance

Opinions of Climate and Earth Scientists on Global Warming

Largely Caused By Humans
- Farnsworth & Lichter (2011)
- AGU / AMS Member Scientists
- Anderegg et al. (2010)
- 200 Most Published Climate Scientists

Little or No Human Effect
- Doran & Zimmerman (2009)
- Most Frequently Published Climatologists
- Scientists Publishing on Climate Change
- Climatologists
- Earth Science Faculty / Researchers

Bray & Von Storch (2008)
- Climate Scientists
- STATS / Harris Interactive (2007)
- AGU / AMS Member Scientists

http://blogs.berkeley.edu/2012/05/16/the-climate-misinformation-nation/
Balance and false balance


"Which statement comes closest to your view about global warming? Global warming is caused mostly by human activity such as burning fossil fuels. Global warming is caused mostly by natural patterns in the earth's environment. OR, Global warming does not exist."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mostly human activity</th>
<th>Mostly natural patterns</th>
<th>It does not exist</th>
<th>Caused by both (vol.)</th>
<th>Don't know what causes it/Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9/8-15/15</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/10-14/14</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/16-19/14</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/19-23/14</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
① Is not about pleasing a source, but rather about being willing not to dismiss what they say outright.

② It is about making the same effort to understand different perspectives.

③ It is about giving sources that chance to give their side of the story.

④ It is not about an appearance of fairness but of a pursuit of fairness.
Fairness examples

• When allegations are made about someone we give that person an opportunity to provide their views in our stories.

• If they don’t we communicate this to our audience in a fair way:
  • “________ declined our request for comment”
  • “________ did not respond to multiple requests for comment”
  • “________ did not respond immediately to requests for comment”
① Through objectivity, balance and fairness we try to make rational reconstruction of an event.

② Objectivity is not a personal characteristic, but a professional method of inquiry.

③ Objectivity as a method is plausible and desirable.

④ In an advocacy journalism model we need new institutions to adjudicate claims...
Telling the truth
Truth
“the real facts about something”

Fact
“something that truly exists”

Things are true because they correspond to facts (correspondence theory of truth).

How do we establish that something really occurred?

- Verifiability by others (can we demonstrate that they correspond to experience?)
Facts are not only about natural occurrences but also about human creations.

Money
The president is...

So ultimately facts are based on observation, but also on human agreement (not mere opinions or “truthiness” but established processes for making decisions about reality).
How do we know what is real?

- Intuition

- We believe what someone told us. (Tradition and experts - pros and cons).  

- We personally experience something. (But what “we” experience is also a social product (socialization is a process of “learning to accept what everybody around us ‘knows’))

- Scientific Method. Based on experience and reasoning.
Issues with truth

• Truth in the sense being discussed here is temporal and contextual (this does not mean that anything goes) but rather that through open inquiry it is self-corrective over time.

• Homogeneous versus multicultural societies. In multicultural societies need more mechanisms of inquiry to assert truths. Among these journalism...
Truth and Journalism

• Does journalism achieve this by transferring the responsibility of deciding what is true to individuals?

• By fostering a dialogue rather than a lecture?
Concluding remarks

• As societies become more complex and global, we need journalism more than ever before.

• We need journalism to be more inclusive than ever.

• Without the journalistic function democracy is not viable...
See you Friday.