

Impunity in journalism

Jake Lynch

Responsibility in journalism is the theme of the following article, which explores the idea that news plays a vital role in the social construction of reality. Focusing on peace journalism, it argues that news, as a process, is always already involved in the events it covers, and that the real choices are about the ethics of that involvement.

The accusation that journalists ply their trade with impunity is not a new one. Rudyard Kipling's taunt, in a speech he wrote for his cousin, British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, still has a ring of truth seventy years after it was delivered. The press, he declared, exercise power without responsibility - the prerogative of the harlot through the ages.

This is not to say that journalists are amoral. Many are fired by a sense of duty to report the facts, to tell the truth as they see it, without fear or favour; to present the world, as Walter Cronkite used to say to American TV audiences every night, the way it is. It's what Max Weber, one of the founding fathers of social science, called an ethic of conviction.

For several years now, journalists have been discussing how they might develop and put into practice something entirely different - an ethic of responsibility. It's based on the modern understanding that discursive practices, like news, play a part in the social construction of reality.

How does it do this? The jobs of editing and reporting involve choices; choices of which facts to include and which to leave out, and how to put them into context. These choices combine, over time, to exert some cumulative influence over the course of subsequent events.

War reporting

This debate has flourished most noticeably in the context of war reporting. Crucially, a study of the dynamics of conflict means the influence of news can be predicted and traced clearly enough for journalists to know, in advance, the likely effect of particular patterns of coverage. It is the clarity of this game of consequences that is eating away at journalistic impunity and the notion that an ethic of conviction is sufficient by itself.

That sudden clarity is part and parcel of the media-savvy world we now inhabit. Our environment, the very space in which we live and breathe, has become saturated with information. News is there when we pick up emails, receive text messages on the mobile phone, wait in airport departure lounges or simply walk along the street.

It means many people have a profound understanding of how news works. Actors in news stories, from corporate PR, through apparently unsophisticated militias in poor countries, to members of the public, turn out to be media-savvy. They know how to provide facts for journalists to report.

Think of Ali Ahmeti, leader of the National Liberation Army, the armed ethnic Albanian group in Macedonia which burst on the scene, apparently out of nowhere, early in 2001, with what members characterised as a struggle for greater minority rights. Mr Ahmeti was asked on BBC television, in July 2001, what he and his group had gained by taking up the gun. The whole of Europe now knows about our situation, he replied.

Think of contestants on reality TV game shows, re-inventing themselves as outrageous, larger-than-life personalities, saleable to the popular press with their colourful private lives.

The feedback loop

This is the Age of Spin, where every government policy, for instance, comes with a built-in media strategy. Calculations, about the way it is likely to be reported, can affect not just the presentation of the policy but the policy itself.

In story after story, there is no way for journalists to know that what they are seeing or hearing would be happening in the same way - if at all - if no-one ever thought the journalists themselves would cover it. This need not be a pejorative observation. Actually, it is a condition of modernity that we all share. But it does close the circle of cause and effect between journalists and their sources, which is where the ethic of conviction gives way to an ethic of responsibility.

How can any of these people know what to do, in order to be reported in the way they imagine will bring them fame, fortune or political benefits? Only from their experience as readers, listeners and viewers. It means that when reporters report the facts today, they are adding another layer to the collective understanding of how similar facts are likely to be reported tomorrow. That understanding then conditions people's future behaviour. We've called it the Feedback Loop, a way of describing the cumulative influence of news on the course of events.

The NLA, on closer inspection, turned out to be intimately connected with the KLA. How could they have gleaned the impression that a small armed group could command the world's attention, and get journalists to present them as David against Goliath? With the enhanced prospect of international intervention to follow? The answer, to any student of issues in the coverage of the Kosovo conflict, is obvious.

Entrants to Big Brother or Castaway have all been reared on a diet of salacious tabloid 'sexposés' and celebrity lifestyle features. They have seen for themselves how it is possible to parlay one eye-catching episode into repeat exposure, and become 'famous for being famous'. Remember Liz Hurley in that dress.

Reporting the world

One important recent step towards a workable ethic of responsibility for journalists came with a project I have helped to run in London, called Reporting the World. This was a series of seminars, a residential Round Table, publications and a website, introducing journalists to the principles of conflict analysis and inviting them to join a conversation about the ethics of reporting selected important stories on the international news agenda (details at www.reportingtheworld.org).

It involved more than two hundred participants, many occupying senior positions in mainstream news organisations such as the BBC, Times, Guardian, Financial Times, Independent and Sunday Times. In the first seminar, on coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the journalist's traditional ethic of conviction was articulated perfectly by Bob Jobbins, an experienced BBC reporter who was then head of news at the World Service:

'Conflict resolution is something on which I report, not something in which I engage. A side-effect of my reporting may be that it makes conflict resolution harder or easier, but that's a judgement that is made after our reporting.'

Throughout Reporting the World we presented a critique of existing coverage, seen through the prism of the Feedback Loop, to mount an argument for that judgement to be made before and during the reporting as well. Take, for instance, the tendency in so much reporting of conflict to restrict its attention to direct violence in a narrowly defined conflict arena.

In the case of the attacks of 11 September 2001, this was suddenly implanted in the context of a media industry, at least in the US, which had taken its collective eye firmly off the ball of serious international reporting. The lack of a solid, consistent foundation of in-depth news about the wider world led to what Michael Wolff, media writer of New York Magazine, called a state of 'notionlessness' among journalists and their readers and audiences. 'Knowing almost nothing,

we've settled for identifying the villain as some pure spasm of all-powerful, apocalyptic irrationality.?

In the Feedback Loop, if a policy is being formulated as a remedy, a calculation is made first as to whether it is likely to be reported as a realistic solution. This calculation - and, therefore, the policy - depends, in part, on how the problem has been diagnosed.

Diagnose violence as autistic - mad, bad, irrational - and you can more easily accept violence as the remedy. Diagnose it as arising from unresolved issues of structural and cultural violence, across a broad conflict formation, of many parties, pursuing many goals, and a multi-faceted response, based on healing and sustainable development, comes to seem more realistic.

This is also the difference between British Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George W Bush, at least in their rhetoric. Cracks began to appear when the pair held a joint news conference at the White House, back in November. A lasting solution to 'terrorism' would require the Arab-Israeli conflict to be resolved, Blair argued.

No, Bush said, it wouldn't - nor would there be, by implication, any progress on the rest of Blair's ambitious agenda for global development, sketched out in his Labour Party conference speech, weeks earlier.

Ethical checklist

This is the prime issue of responsibility in covering conflicts, a description of the genuine choices facing the journalist. Reporting the World - the book has just been published, setting out these choices in the form of a four-point ethical checklist:

What is the explanation for violence and how does it arise from the way it is reported? What are we led or left to infer about what happens next?

What is the shape of the conflict? A 'tug-of-war' of two parties contesting the same goal? Or a 'cat's-cradle' of many parties, pursuing many goals?

Is there any news of peace or image of a solution?

What is 'our' role in the story?

(To obtain a copy of the book, a hundred-page guide to this debate about war reporting, email: reporttheworld@aol.com).

Attendance at Reporting the World events, and the early reception for the book, encourage the belief that practical ways of taking responsibility for the influence of news on conflicts can find a resonance among senior and influential journalists. Comments on the book include: 'A thoughtful blend of academic rigour and journalistic experience. To read it is to learn a little more about the true nature of things' - Peter Preston, former editor and now a columnist on The Guardian. BBC Special Correspondent Fergal Keane described it as 'First-class' and Susie Orbach, author and psychotherapist, as 'A convincing argument'.

Other professionals felt it was 'Serious and wise' (Professor Ian Hargreaves, Cardiff University School of Journalism) and 'Refreshing, even liberating' (Baffour Ankomah, editor, New African magazine).

Peace journalism

The Reporting the World ethical checklist was not the first attempt in which I've been involved to address issues of representation and responsibility in covering conflicts. In 1997, I chaired the first of a series of conferences on something called Peace Journalism. The term and the concept were coined back in the 1970s, by Johan Galtung, veteran Professor of Peace Studies and now director of the TRANSCEND peace and development network.

Further international conferences followed, along with publications, discussions and engagements to train journalists all over the world. So why did we eventually, in commending this way of thinking to journalists in mainstream news in Britain, set aside the name, Peace Journalism, and use Reporting the World instead? The answer contains much that is instructive about the nature of this debate.

One way of seeing the journalist's ethic of conviction, 'I just report the facts', is as the very essence of English empiricism, with 'the observed' and 'the observer' remaining discrete and separate categories. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to claim that there is something romantic about this. The itinerant reporter, set apart from fellow mortals, restlessly circling the ever-shrinking world and sending dispatches from the front-line about other people's troubles, is an image of elegiac appeal in our profession. It always puts me in mind of William Blake's authorial voice in the Songs of Experience:

I wander through each charter'd street,

Near where the charter'd Thames doth flow -

And mark in every face I meet,

Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

It could be a mission statement for the London Evening Standard!

It all means that journalists are fiercely reluctant to accept that they are, in the phrase used by anthropologists, participant-observers. Journalists, as professional producers of language, are in perhaps the last major field of endeavour to have paid no real, systematic attention to the linguistic turn in Western philosophy. For instance, the BBC guidelines on covering conflicts state that its reporting in wartime should 'reflect the national mood'. There is no acknowledgement of the role BBC reporting may play in constructing that mood.

To suggest that the NLA in Macedonia were following a media strategy does not mean that each member behaved like a sophisticated spin-doctor, consciously pursuing headlines in western news outlets. It does mean that we all internalise narratives which then structure our thoughts, actions and motivations, and the narrative of news has become one of the most important.

Using the term Peace Journalism, immediately calls attention to itself as 'a theory' - easily dismissible, by some, as an option, an alternative to 'just getting on with the job', and a dangerous one because it seems to require 'getting involved'. Whereas the argument in favour of an ethic of responsibility is based on establishing that this is a false choice; that news, as a process, is always already involved in the events it covers, and that the real choices are about the ethics of that involvement.

This is not the case everywhere. I have been privileged to have played a part in introducing Indonesian journalists to this idea that an ethic of responsibility is possible in doing their job. They

have taken very readily to the term, 'Peace Journalism'. Unburdened by English empiricism/Romanticism, the troubles of their country before and since the fall of President Suharto and his New Order regime have brought them up sharp against the principle of personal responsibility to resist tyranny - an antidote to impunity - put forward by Primo Levi: 'If not us, who? If not now, when?'

It means Peace Journalism has taken off there, with a PJ prize, a network of journalists trying to carry out the ideas we've introduced, debate and discussion at many levels. A daily Jakarta newspaper, Sinar Harapan, banned by Suharto, recently reappeared with the slogan, 'Peace Journalism represents the hope that we can live together'.

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