

BACK TO THE FUTURE – HOW UK-BASED NEWS ORGANISATIONS ARE REDISCOVERING OBJECTIVITY

The emergence of ‘fake news’ during the Brexit referendum and Trump election campaign sent news organisations scurrying to establish teams of journalists to debunk deliberately misleading stories and verify facts. This paper examines steps to counter false stories and asks whether normative values of objectivity are about to enjoy a comeback. Typical markers of objectivity (freedom from bias, detachment and fact-based reporting) date back to the 19th Century and, despite being ingrained in the Anglo-American news culture, have always been subject to challenge. Recently, the growth of partisan and populist media has illustrated deep distrust in traditional news outlets and is questioning whether it is time to jettison objectivity. But are we experiencing a backlash? Through interviews with senior UK-based journalists at legacy news organisations and analysis of editorial policy statements prompted by a UK parliamentary inquiry, the paper explores how fake news is rekindling debate about objectivity and its potential to make quality journalism stand out. It argues that legacy news organisations in the UK have seized the opportunity to highlight the value of normative practices that draw on familiar components of the objectivity paradigm. But few have the financial strength to bolster the rhetoric with additional editorial resources.

KEYWORDS: Journalism; fake news; objectivity; impartiality; social media

(4993 words, including footnotes)

Introduction

It is more than 30 years since the actor Michael J. Fox captivated cinema audiences in *Back to the Future* with his depiction of the teenager Marty McFly who travelled back in time to meet his future parents. In today's media climate, dominated by the furore over 'fake news' and plummeting levels of trust in traditional news outlets, it seems fitting to ask whether normative concepts of objectivity, impartiality and freedom from bias, relentlessly undermined over the past decade of social media and emotionally laden user-generated content, are about to enjoy a comeback. This paper examines through a primarily UK lens the actions and policies of a number of mainstream or 'legacy' news organisations, focusing on a sample of news agencies, broadcasters and newspaper groups, exploring how they are attempting to restore confidence in their output and how some are now actively promoting fact-based journalism as a counter to openly partisan or populist media. As such, it poses the question whether the battle lines which have already been drawn up between 'professional' journalists and 'citizen journalists' are becoming more deeply entrenched than ever.

To set the context, the paper rehearses briefly how British and American journalism began from the late 19th Century onwards to share values loosely grouped under the umbrella term of objectivity that came to define the profession; and equally how those values have been challenged - by those who rail against value neutrality, by those who feel objectivity is a myth designed to maintain the establishment status quo, and by those who despise a detached liberal media elite. Nowhere have those challenges been more keenly felt than in the controversies surrounding coverage of the 2016 British referendum over membership of the European Union and the U.S. election campaign of the same year that returned Donald Trump to the presidency. For many, the established media appeared out of touch with ordinary voters, missing the populist trends and fixated by experts. Add to this the phenomenon of fake news, with deliberate attempts to deceive the public and/ or generate cash through advertising 'clicks', and it is no wonder that trust in mainstream journalism has declined to new lows, opening up opportunities to alternative providers. As Mihailidis & Viotty observe (2017, 8):

As our social media trumpets its participatory nature, our conceptions of objectivity in reporting nosedive. We are left with a world that is hostile toward any claim of expertise and that is increasingly framed by a kind of postmodern relativism.

That lack of trust spilled over in the UK in summer 2017 when reporters sent to the Grenfell Tower disaster in London¹ were verbally abused as representing news outlets which were seen as elite and disconnected from the social deprivation of their readers. The Channel 4 news presenter Jon Snow later said he and others in the media had become too far removed from ordinary people's lives (2017).

Although it can be argued that there is nothing new in fake news and the attempt to influence public opinion through the media, news organisations and politicians alike have been stung into action. Inquiries have been launched in Britain and Germany and legislation threatened. The BBC, despite its public service remit to uphold "due impartiality", has been under constant attack for its coverage of Britain's decision to leave the EU and has relaunched its 'Reality Check' team to investigate deliberately misleading stories masquerading as 'real' news. Other news organisations have gone out of their way to promote a fact-based philosophy of news.

¹ The Grenfell Tower block of social housing caught fire in June 2017, killing 71 people.

This paper examines these moves and the aims of UK-based editorial policy makers in an attempt to contribute to the debate about the currency and relevance of traditional values of journalism at a time of unprecedented flux and distrust in the media.

Challenges to objectivity and the rise of fake news

There is no shortage of theories about how the Anglo-American concept of objectivity developed through the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was not the result of one “magical moment” (Schudson 2001, 167) but rather due to a convergence of several factors. Partly, it was a means of establishing journalism as a profession distinct from Public Relations; the development of mass printing prompted newspaper proprietors to consider more ‘objective’ news in an attempt to sell to wider audiences; the development of the telegraph led to a clipped prose style which placed facts at the top of a story. By the 1930s, the concept of objectivity had become firmly established on both sides of the Atlantic and, whether advocated or attacked, has retained a central place in the discussion of journalism to this day (Maras 2013, 5). Many definitions shy away from any philosophical interpretation, emphasising instead a common set of *practices* that constitute a professional ideology. These have taken on significance in defining who is, or is not, a journalist in a classic example of ‘boundary work’ (Carlson & Lewis 2015). Mindich (1998) identifies five key components of the objectivity canon: detachment; non-partisanship; the inverted pyramid writing style; naïve empiricism and balance.

During the 1960s, challenges came from journalists, academics and external forces (Maras 2013, 54; Schudson 1978). Objectivity became a term of abuse (Schudson 1978, 160), particularly during the Vietnam War, when ‘balanced’ reporting was seen as playing into the hands of government propaganda. The New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s, featuring writers such as Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion and Normal Mailer, represented another short-lived challenge. Deregulation of U.S. broadcasting in 1987 delivered a heavier blow to the objectivity paradigm, opening the way for unashamedly partisan broadcasters such as Fox News. A further challenge emerged with the era of social media. While the professional boundaries of journalism may have been relatively stable before this time, social media rendered them more porous, leading to consideration of whether they should be re-conceptualized (Singer 2015). Although both professional journalists and citizen journalists claim to have a purchase on objectivity, antagonism between the two camps is deep-seated. It is an object of struggle over professional jurisdiction (Schudson & Anderson 2009, 96). Recent years have seen the injection of fake news into this highly charged environment, with targeted attempts to manipulate public opinion and to earn ‘clickbait’ advertising revenue. In addition, fake news has been used as a term of abuse by those (often politicians) who do not agree with what the media are reporting. As a phenomenon, fake news is by no means new. But the manipulators of opinion in 20th Century propaganda campaigns were more often than not governments. Today’s fake news is often propagated by individuals who can command large audiences cheaply through social media and it offers the ability to make money through advertising clicks. Mark Thompson, Chief Executive of *The New York Times* observed, “our digital eco-systems have evolved into a near-perfect environment for distorted and false news to thrive” (2016).

Initial studies suggest the actual influence of fake news on the U.S. election was minimal. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) concluded that fake news clearly favoured Trump over Clinton but dismissed the idea that it may have influenced the result. The impact has been more in the steady erosion of trust in the media and a growing clamour that action must be taken to stamp out fake news. The UK Conservative MP Damian Collins, chair of a parliamentary committee into fake news, has called it a threat to democracy that is

undermining confidence in the media in general (2017). Edelman’s 2017 Trust Barometer survey found the number of people who said they trusted British news outlets fell from just 36% in 2015 to 24% by the beginning of 2017. In its 2017 survey of 70,000 people across 36 media markets, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that only 24% of respondents felt social media did a good job of separating fact from fiction.

Legacy news organisations fight back

Ironically, the very values of fact-based reporting that professional journalists traditionally espoused have become increasingly difficult to uphold as the financial pressures stemming from social media force cuts in staffing levels and undermine independent news gathering.

How then have the large established news organisations such as the BBC, ITN, Reuters, CNN and the Press Association attempted to break this downward spiral? The analysis in this paper is based on submissions to the first phase of the UK parliamentary inquiry on fake news², public comments and interviews conducted with five UK-based editorial decision makers. The semi-structured interviews were conducted at or shortly after an international journalism conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, which brought together top journalists from legacy news organisations and 100 journalism students from around the world.³ The overall picture that emerges shows that some news organisations have clearly taken the opportunity to launch a counter offensive against fake news. A total of 78 written submissions were delivered to the parliamentary inquiry but only a handful were from actual news organisations – the BBC, ITV, ITN, the Press Association and Guardian News & Media (GNM), the publisher of *The Guardian* and *The Observer* (the rest were from umbrella organisations such as the Society of Editors, academics and lobby groups). No fewer than 30 out of the 78 submissions placed the emphasis on media organisations to promote a pluralist media economy and improve accuracy and fact checking (Bakir & McStay 2017, 13).

Inquiry submissions from these legacy news organisations focused on fact checking and verification, symptomatic of a desire to re-establish traditional values and boundaries. As Hermida observes, verification is a core normative practice in journalism, defining professional behaviour and serving as a boundary to differentiate the occupational ‘turf’ of journalism from other forms of communication (2015, 38). In its submission, the BBC, under attack for its coverage of the Brexit campaign (partly for giving too much air time to preposterous ‘Leave’ campaign claims), emphasised its historic commitment to accuracy but also recent editorial developments. These included the establishment in 2005 of its user-generated content ‘hub’ aimed at identifying and verifying social media material and its ‘Reality Check’ desk, first introduced in 2010. In 2016, the BBC’s former Head of News, Helen Boaden, expressed her concerns about the current news environment on her retirement after 34 years with the corporation. In an article in *The Independent*, she called for ‘slow news’, saying that the media was in danger of running so fast that it was offering only shards of information without context (2016):

In our search for answers to a problem which appears if not intractable then complex, is the speed of the media’s technology – and the politicians’ willing participation in the 24/7 news cycle – obscuring rather than illuminating the issues?

² The inquiry was set up in January 2017 and closed in May following announcement of a snap general election. In spring 2018, a successor inquiry began hearing evidence focusing on Facebook.

³ The Future News conference was held at the Scottish Parliament from July 6-7, 2017. The author represented UK journalism schools on the organising committee.

Boaden's appeal was for public service broadcasters to adhere to what she called age-old values of good journalism – impartiality, accuracy, expertise and evidence. Her successor as Head of News James Harding⁴ endorsed the concept and gave Reality Check a new lease of life in January 2017 when he announced that the BBC was expanding the team and a widened remit would now explicitly tackle fake news:

Slow news means weighing in on the battle over lies, distortions and exaggerations in the news. We have made Reality Check permanent. Now we are going to staff it up. The BBC can't edit the Internet, but we won't stand aside either.

The language of the BBC's submission to the inquiry is that of counter-attack. In an interview, Mary Hockaday, Controller of BBC World Service English, reiterated how values of objectivity and due impartiality have been at the heart of its editorial ethos for decades and are also a public service obligation. In that sense, little has changed. But at the same time, she noted how the global reaction to fake news had cast objectivity back into the spotlight. The creation and consumption of news in a 24/7 digital and social media world had given a new tenor to these conversations and highlighted professional values:

Being a journalist is a professional skill and part of that is being able to stand back ... you can see objectivity about being a stance that is different from partisan journalism or campaigning journalism.

At the same time, Hockaday argued there had been a subtle shift of emphasis towards verification and transparency in the editorial process of reporting. While that discipline and practice has not fundamentally changed from the classic definition of objective journalism, new digital formats have brought the issue back into public debate, allowing the BBC to demonstrate its commitment to fact checking. Reality Check, she argued, is an overt display of that. In an environment of fake news, organisations can put a marker down and find the vocabulary and format to show audiences the commitment to “getting it right” and checking claims being made. In its inquiry submission, the BBC's competitor ITV News also emphasised its long established reputation for impartial, accurate reporting of news, transparency of sourcing and the “kite mark” of best practice provided through regulation of public service broadcasters by Ofcom. In turn, ITN, which feeds news to ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5, said it was more important than ever to invest in quality journalism and fact checking.

The Press Association took a similar line, highlighting the need to uphold responsible fact-based news, accurate and impartial reporting. Echoing a point made by ITV, it bemoaned the dilemma of falling profitability:

In a challenging media landscape that has seen advertising revenues fall drastically in recent years, many newsrooms, both local and national, have had to dramatically reduce the amount of staff they can commit to original reporting and fact-checking.

The Press Association acknowledged that automation and algorithms may help in verification but was adamant that this could not replace the role of journalists seeking out the facts.

⁴ Harding resigned in October 2017 and was replaced by Fran Unsworth.

A news agency such as Reuters⁵, with deep British roots, has based its global reputation on objectivity, freedom from bias and accuracy, values enshrined in its editorial guidelines and Trust Principles⁶, created in 1941 to preserve the organisation’s independence. Those values were highlighted during the 1956 Suez crisis when Reuters instructed its journalists, to the disgust of Sir Anthony Eden’s government, to stop referring to British troops as “our” troops. The values have often been tested and drawn Reuters into controversy, not least in reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and during the attacks of September 11⁷. However, Reuters editors say they have stood the test of time and are today actively reaffirming them. Reuters did not make a submission to the parliamentary inquiry, but its global news editor, Alessandra Galloni, said she believed the future of news was to “go back to the future.”

By ‘*Back to the Future*’, I mean the old-fashioned, boots on the ground, fact-based reporting that is at the very heart and core of our profession.

Reuters Editor-in-Chief Stephen Adler responded after Trump’s inauguration with an internal message to staff urging them to keep the trust principles “close at hand” and recommitting the news agency to “reporting fairly and honestly, by doggedly gathering hard-to-get information - and by remaining impartial” (2017).

This paper has a clear focus on the United Kingdom, but an emphasis on fact checking has also spread quickly in the United States, including the emergence of high profile fact-checking outlets (as opposed to traditional news organisations). A study by Graves et al. (2016) found evidence that a strong factor behind its spread in the United States was the appeal to journalists’ professional values and status concerns. But there has also been a debate about partisan and selective fact checking – a divide has opened up between non-partisan fact checkers and those with a political agenda (Graves and Glaisyer 2012), According to Stencel (2015), fact checks have become new weapons on the political battlefield, used as shields or clubs in campaign ads, stump speeches and debates.

Within that American context, CNN has become inextricably linked to the current debate about fake news, with President Trump more than once denouncing the network. At the same time, CNN and other U.S. broadcasters have reaped the benefit of Trump’s election campaign appearances by pulling in record viewing figures and advertising revenues. As the New York Times put it: “*CNN had a problem, Trump solved it.*” Senior CNN editors and executives are also seizing the chance to promote traditional values of newsgathering the network has been famous for since its live reporting from Baghdad during the 1991 Gulf War. Deborah Rayner, senior vice-president of International Newsgathering, made this clear at the student journalism conference in Edinburgh:

In a way, this is a great opportunity for established media, people are turning to us when audiences are confused and they don’t know what is real and what is fake. That is why it becomes more important than ever to build up the brand ... protecting the sanctity of your journalism, operating at the highest standards is really vital.

Although Britain’s newspapers have developed along highly political and partisan lines, GNM is typical in championing normative values of journalism. It states in its evidence

⁵ The author worked for Reuters as a foreign correspondent and editor for more than 20 years.

⁶ See: <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en/about-us/trust-principles.html>

⁷ As the then Reuters Global Head of News, the author was embroiled in controversy during the September 11 coverage when he urged Reuters journalists not to use the word ‘terrorist’ when referring to the hijackers who carried out the attacks.

to the parliamentary inquiry that organisations should focus even more intently on producing high quality, independent news that can be trusted. In a similar vein to the Press Association, GNM points out how the dominance of digital advertising – placing Google and Facebook at the centre of the news ecosystem - mitigates against investment in quality journalism. The main problem, GNM argues, lies in the fact that search engines and social media platforms have a completely different goal, aiming to retain users and serve advertisers rather than providing users with high quality news. It adds that recent changes to algorithms used by such platforms have favoured content shared by friends and family rather than high quality journalism. ITV went to so far as to call in its submission for properly regulated news organisations to be granted some form of preference in online algorithms.

In Scotland, Tom Thomson, Consulting Editor at the Newsquest Scotland group (which owns the flagship brand *The Herald*), sees fake news as a commercial opportunity that could actually offer a glimmer of financial hope to the ailing newspaper industry:

It is an opportunity for trusted, branded news to have a commercial future – the more fake news, the more obfuscation there is in the wide public domain, the better it is for quality news organisations that stick with the idea of integrity and accuracy. We are seeing it already in digital subscriptions rising as people use quality brands to cut through the fog of fake news.

For the papers in the Scottish Newsquest chain it is, said Thomson, about “getting the facts right.”⁸ It is about stressing the integrity of reporting and attempting to be balanced, irrespective of new digital formats. While driving readers to the papers’ websites through ‘click bait’ stories was an appealing short-term imperative, it risks damaging the brand. The only option, he argued, is to learn readers’ interests through user data and shape coverage without falling into the click bait trap.

A Trump and Brexit bump?

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, President George W Bush famously stated “you are either with us or against us in the fight against terror.” What followed was a period in which large sections of the U.S. media engaged in patriotic coverage. That shift from objective journalism to what Schudson described as “pastoral mode” (2002, 40) allowed some British media organisations that had not toed the Bush line to gain traction in the United States. *The Economist*, according to its chief marketing officer Michael Brunt, saw its circulation double between 2001 and 2008 as more Americans sought a global view (2016). *The Guardian* and other mainstream British newspapers also saw a surge in sales (Greenslade 2001).

All the signs are that there has been a similar ‘bump’ in the wake of the U.S. election and Brexit, favouring providers of ‘serious news’ and trusted brands. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found in its 2017 Digital News Report that online subscriptions and donations are picking up in some countries and people are willing to pay for news if it is sufficiently valuable, convenient and relevant. Mark Thompson at *The New York Times* reported a “spectacular surge” in subscriptions after the newspaper was attacked by Trump as a “failing” institution (2016). Audiences for ITV’s news programmes have been rising, while the BBC’s Hockaday said viewing audiences for its flagship bulletins were in very good health. She put this down to a renewed appetite for trusted sources, adding:

⁸ *The National* is a campaigning newspaper in the Newsquest group supporting Scottish independence. Thomson says that paper “takes a view” which is not the case with the group’s other titles.

I do think that it has been interesting – and good actually – to see that at a time of turmoil ... in the end a lot of people want something better, they want to seek out news and information and a range of views from news organisations and sources that they can trust ... in the end trusted news organisations are really proving their worth.

Of course, 2017 has been a turbulent time for news, particularly in the United States and Britain where a series of terror attacks have fed interest in hard news. However, echoing the September 11 pattern, a recent survey showed that four of the 10 most trusted news sources among U.S. readers are based in Britain – *The Economist*, Reuters, the BBC and *The Guardian* (2017)⁹ (the least trusted included *Breitbart*, *BuzzFeed* and social media generally). *The Economist*, ranked first in the survey, has also seen a post Brexit bounce, with Brunt reporting an 80% rise in traffic to its website. He added in a magazine interview (2017):

We saw quite an unprecedented boost after the EU referendum because people turned to trusted sources for analysis. And then we had a much larger surge of subscriptions as a result of the U.S. presidential election result.

In its 2016 survey of news consumption in the UK, the regulator Ofcom found that 90% of those questioned felt it was important for television news sources to be impartial, compared to 84% for radio news sources and 70% for newspapers (2017). The BBC remained by far the most important news source (for 29% of users), almost five times more than Facebook (6%, although this rose to 19% for the 16-24-year-old age group).

Conclusion

The debate over what constitutes journalism, and indeed antagonism between those who consider themselves ‘real’ journalists and those they would choose to exclude, has been rekindled by the furore over fake news.

This paper has focused on news organisations in the United Kingdom where those boundaries have once again hardened. It comes as no surprise that when faced with disruption, aggressive competition and financial pressures, journalists at established news organisations such as the BBC, Reuters and the Press Association should fall back on tried and trusted values that had served the news industry well for the first 150 odd years of its existence. Analysis of submissions to the UK parliamentary inquiry and the interviews conducted for this paper suggest that legacy news organisations have spotted and seized on an opportunity to highlight the value of traditional normative practices of journalism that draw on the familiar component parts of the objectivity paradigm. This is more than just a chance occurrence featuring a few off-hand remarks by journalists. The parliamentary inquiry gave news organisations a golden opportunity at an executive level to actively promote these values as a clear editorial strategy aimed at re-establishing trust in their news at a time when it had sunk to unprecedented low levels. Their actions have focused on making transparent what has always been a core component of sound journalism, fact checking and verification.

With the exception of the BBC, financially shielded by the public licence fee, many of the UK-based news organisations have, however, been constrained by cost pressures and have relied on highlighting existing practice. As submissions by the Press Association and

⁹ The Reynolds Journalism Institute at the University of Missouri conducted the online survey with 9,000 respondents.

GNM group made clear, producing fact-based journalism requires resources that have been sucked away by Google and Facebook as they corner the market for online advertising. As a result, the action has been long on rhetoric, with little scope for such news organisations to increase editorial resources to back up their words. And as GNM pointed out, the dominance of news distribution through such platforms tends to undermine the connection between users and the brands that generate that news. There are some early indications that this strategy might bear fruit. The Reuters Institute 2017 survey and readership/viewing figures cited in the previous section do illustrate a measure of trust in the legacy news brands, although rebuilding that trust means starting from very low levels. And there are signs that consumers seeking a trusted brand are willing to pay for news, confirming the old adage that good (firmly grounded) news sells.

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