

Should journalists be objective at all times, including in the coverage of war, conflict and humanitarian crises?

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The concept of objectivity in relation to war and conflict is a long debated argument as many journalists have contrasting views. Some journalists want to remain objective as it allows them provide factual accounts of their surroundings. However, other journalists may react differently to the issues they face and a lot of journalists try to show their integrity by coming forward and neglecting objectivity. In this essay I aim to explore these opposing arguments and offer an explanation as to why journalists should or should not be objective.

When proposing the question, 'should journalists be objective at all times?', it is important to firstly focus on 'objectivity' and what that means. Many journalists in the field have attempted to define objectivity, McGoldrick (2006,p.2) explained how it 'developed at the time of urbanisation, industrialisation and the advent of consumerism'. So, advancements ultimately allowed newspapers to grow and so in order to keep consumers they had to follow certain guidelines. Traditionally, objectivity was seen as 'the value of fairness'(Rosen 1994, as cited in McGoldrick, 2006, p.2). Kinsey (2001, as cited in McGoldrick, 2006,p.2) defined it as "an effort to report the facts without developing – or at least without revealing – an opinion about them". Ultimately, it's the opposite of subjective, so the journalist should remove all opinion and influence from their work when reporting objectively. There are a multitude of reasons for why a journalist would want to remain objective in their work, for example appealing to a broader audience is more desirable and in turn generates the organisation more revenue.

The war presents journalists with many issues and as mentioned, a lot of journalists try to show their integrity by coming forward and neglecting objectivity. The Bosnian war (1992-1995) is an appropriate case study for this, during the Bosnian war, BBC reporter Martin Bell 'proclaimed that he could no longer be impartial in the face of the daily atrocities of that conflict' (McLaughlin, 2016,p.2) , so he advocated for 'journalism of attachment', this placed emphasis on 'the moral duty to tell 'the truth, however inconvenient, over and above the professional obligation to be impartial' (Bell, 1998, as cited in McLaughin,2016,p.2). During the Bosnian war, some journalists felt as though 'objectivity was not reflecting real life, it was instead constructing it' (Mclaughlin, 2016,p.38), this is perhaps why Bell felt responsible for reporting the truth. Bell's main argument with objectivity is that to be objective is to be neutral, ' the neutral reporter is detached from the world, passively recording events'. That is not something he thinks journalists should strive to be as it makes them 'dispassionate' (Bell, 1998 as cited in Ward, 1998, p.1).

In his book 'in harm's way', Bell (1996, pp. 205-208) opens up about how he 'allowed such shading of the truth' in his early career (p.205), this may explain why he later went on to coin the term 'journalism of attachment'. When Bell was reporting on the Northern Ireland conflict in 1969, he expressed how a person of 'authority' approached him and told him to exchange 'catholic' for 'refugee' in his reporting, even though everybody was aware they were Catholics. This 'shading of the truth' was employed as they did not want to 'provoke

another riot'. Bell also learnt from this experience that he needed 'attention' as there was this 'immediacy' for the 'live shot'(p.208) and that reporters tended to congratulate themselves on their talent and on 'how fast and wonderful' they were (p.208).

Bell's journalism of attachment has received both scrutiny and support, for example channel 4's journalist, Alex Thomson, supported Bell's journalism of attachment as he had similar views when reporting on Kosovo in 1999. Although he believed that truth needed to be achieved, he was not objective in his reporting. Thomson explained that to be objective in war implies that there is 'a kind of middle ground of explanation which can legitimately explain why these people are being raped and tortured and burned out of their houses?' (McLaughlin, 2016, p.16). Thomson would rather let people 'make their own moral judgement' after he has presented the facts of what has happened. So in support of this argument, journalists should not always remain objective as it is not always possible to whilst being honest, especially when reporting on sensitive areas such as conflicts. As Thomson said, being objective supports neither side so you remain in the 'middle ground' where you can accept both sides and it is not easy for journalists to accept torture or other unethical experiences that happen in conflicts and war. Although this idea of attached journalism received a lot of support, many journalists have found issues with it as they believe journalists should remain objective at all times, regardless of their surroundings. Ward expresses how objectivity and attachment are not 'necessarily incompatible or even rivals' (Ward, 1998,p.3) whereas Bell sees them as opposition. Ward believes that both standards 'can and should work together in many reports' so a journalist can be both passionate and factual in their reporting. In terms of war, Wade is critical of the fact that some journalists may not be able to effectively follow journalism of attachment, he believes that 'reporters with less integrity than Bell, would devolve into unsubstantiated journalism where biases parade as moral principles'(Ward, 1998,p.4). In regards to this, to neglect objectivity during war is not going to benefit every reporter. Bell has set this ideal that one can be invested in an event and that leads to complete honesty, however, as Ward mentioned, it could lead to bias reporting. Journalist David Lyon also believes that objectivity serves an audience fully, reporters 'need to preserve their position as observers not players' (Lyon, 2007,p.3). In conclusion, to neglect objectivity during war is not for everyone and there are specific journalistic guidelines for a reason; it enables all journalists to report the facts so they should attempt to achieve objectivity.

The Iraq war in 2003 is another important case study when looking at whether journalists displayed signs of objectivity or not during conflict and whether they should have. The main findings of research into both the Vietnam and Iraq war show that 'the news tends to privilege official sources, especially those from the White House' (Aday, Livingston and Hebert, 2005, p.4). Bennett (1994, as cited in Aday, Livingston and Hebert, 2005, p.4) also found that 'news coverage of war and foreign policy is indexed to the limited range of elite opinions'. This may leave readers questioning whether they have received factual information; one could argue that journalists reporting on both wars were not objective in their stance as they were only receiving specific, elite sources. The Iraq war created an 'embed system' where '600 journalists were placed with the front line... before and during the war' to enable better reporting. This was in response to the Gulf war in 1991 where

coverage was 'tightly controlled' (Fahmy and Johnson, 2005, p.2). Ultimately, the embedding system was designed 'to improve press and military relations by allowing reporters to tell the soldiers' story'. However, there were certain restrictions as journalists could not report on '19 categories of information' (Fahmy and Johnson, 2005, p.2). As 'embedding' in journalism had not been conducted before, many scholars and other observers were critical, they believed 'that embedding meant only a slice of the war could be reported while the broader picture of the war was lost: and that the military version of the war was the only one featured' (Fahmy and Johnson, 2005, p.1). In a survey conducted by Fahmy and Johnson (2005, p.9), they found that only 57.4% of embedded journalists during the Iraq war 'indicated their personal attitude toward the war had little or no influence on reporting the conflict', this figure is considerably low as just under half would have been influenced by their surroundings meaning they would not have been reporting objectively. Research into the Iraq war also focuses on different news organisations from both America and Iraq and analyses what their main stories were during the war and whether they were objective in their reporting. Al Jazeera, which is 'a satellite channel based on the BBC model that broadcasts internationally but whose audience is primarily in the Arab world' claims to be objective, however, during the Iraq war they were accused of being 'virulently anti-American (Katovsky and Carlson, 2003, as cited in Aday, Livingston and Hebert, 2005, p.4). Furthermore, 'all of the American media largely shied away from showing visuals of coalition, Iraqi military, or civilian casualties... reporters chose instead to present a largely bloodless conflict to viewers' (Aday, Livingston and Hebert, 2005, p.10). Additionally, at the start of the war many critics had concerns about embedded journalists being 'in bed' with the military, however, research conducted by Aday, Livingston, and Hebert (2005, p.13) debunks this claiming 'embedded reporters had among the highest percentage of neutral stories (91 percent) of any type of reporter'. Overall, this case study highlights how important it is to at least attempt to achieve objectivity otherwise the reader will only get a 'slice' of information or receive a completely bias overview of the opposing country during war. However, as conveyed in the Iraq war, it is not always possible to be objective all the time, especially during embedded journalism where journalists only receive a certain amount of information from a particular side. Furthermore, linking back to journalism of attachment, it is not always appropriate in war to remain 'neutral' and objective, it is inevitable that Iraq news organisations like Al Jazeera were going to mainly convey support for Iraq and American news organisations were going to be supporting their military.

To ensure journalists who are reporting on war are receiving valuable resources, The Dart Centre created a space for journalists to access 'timely articles, expert interviews, journalist-to-journalist advice, tipsheets and other resources'. Their research project is 'dedicated to informed, innovative and ethical news reporting on violence, conflict and tragedy' (Dart Center, n.d.) which is beneficial for journalists who are entering conflict and perhaps want to take the journalism of attachment approach. Furthermore, it is vital that journalists get training in this field; tips from other journalists may help them to achieve objectivity whilst still being invested in their work.

In the advent of mass media and 24 hour news, the immediacy for information has increased; with this comes a lot of pressures on news organisations. When competing with

not only yourself but other organisations, sticking to journalistic guidelines may be neglected or even unachievable. Tuchman (1972, p.7) explained how sometimes journalists 'cannot check that claim in time to meet his deadline'. This is in direct conflict with objectivity as arguably facts are not being presented to the readership. Furthermore, when reporting on the Bosnian war, Roy Gutman revealed that when he 'wrote the famous newsday report in which he first claimed that Bosnian Serbs were running Nazi-style 'death camps' he did not bother to check the facts ... he was in a hurry to tell the world 'the truth' (Mick Hume, 1997,p.9). However, the opposing argument is that because their stories do have such a quick turnaround, they cannot get attached to the story and instead remain objective which is respected in this field of work. Furthermore, objectivity can actually help 'to minimize the risks imposed by deadlines, libel suits, and superiors' reprimands' (Tuchman, 1972, p.4). Ultimately, the post-cold war era has enabled objectivity to thrive, however, it has also experienced some issues. It is important to note that the opposite of objectivity in journalism is not always 'bias' , which is 'the intentional slanting of content in favour of a preferred actor, such as a political leader or party' (McNair, 2017, p.4), so to not be objective does not necessarily mean to lie or twist the truth to benefit 'a preferred actor' ,as McNair says.

There is no doubt that war, conflict and humanitarian crises have a massive strain on journalists and their work, this is evident from 'the journalism of attachment'. It creates many problems with reporting on factual information as journalists can become too invested in the conflict, like Bell. Investigative journalist John Solomon (2018) expresses his opinion and says that although reporting subjectively on war or conflict may 'emotionally satisfy' the journalist, 'the injection of opinion... diserves the public... depriving viewers and readers of a neutral set of facts upon which to make their own decisions and opinions'. Many journalists are therefore torn between remaining objective and being completely invested and attached to their surroundings. Ultimately there should be no correct way to report as long as they reach their required audience and present no incorrect information. Some journalists or organisations however, may argue that regardless of a specific journalists standpoint, they should at least try to achieve objectivity.

To conclude, journalists have different standpoints on whether they should remain objective during war, conflict and humanitarian crises so there is no concrete answer as it is such a complex concept. One could argue that objectivity is vital in reporting on sensitive cases as it presents the reader with facts and not feelings. Furthermore, it allows the reader to create their own moral judgement and opinions. On the other hand, journalists like Bell wish to neglect objectivity when they are reporting on issues in this field as they do not want to become neutral reporters and accept the disturbing issues that present themselves during conflicts. In some regard, it may be deemed impossible for journalists to remain entirely objective as arguably personal biases are driven by external factors that can influence ones reporting.

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