

## News Presentation of Contemporary Events: Opinion and Clichés or Expanding Public Understanding of the World

MUSA BARA'U GAMJI, QARIBU YAHAYA NASIDI, ALMANSUR ADO SANI  
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria

**Abstract.** The argument whether news presents opinions and clichés about contemporary events and not educating or expanding public understanding of the world, has to be based on the concept of news and its values. Academically, journalists were seeing as reporting event in a way that misrepresents a specific group in a certain society, and some pessimistic critical academics that have justified this standard are slipping and that the quality of news is declining. Confronting the views of academics about the News and journalism practitioners, responded that news is a first draft of history, which is also an ability to provide both a truthful and objective contemporary account. This paper assessed the influence of news presentation on public knowledge of news events, opinion and clichés in Nigeria. Arguably, journalist can turn everything into clichés and opinion when they are operating under a certain constrain such as censorship. Presentation of opinions and clichés in the news media can also be attributed to the changing pattern of news consumption. If news can be an orientation towards the truth and through truthful accounts of contemporary events, to be presented via journalistic way with accuracy and sincerity, being impartial, balanced and objective or informing people about something that just happened, and needs to be balanced in an accurate and

honest information to the interest of the public, then it should be impartial and objective with a view to educating and expanding public understanding about contemporary events.

**Keywords:** Clichés, Contemporary events, Education, Media, News, Opinion, Public

### 1. Introduction

The argument whether News presents opinions and clichés about contemporary events, not educating or expanding public understanding of the world, has to be based on the concept of News and its values. Therefore, this article will look at the concept of News in different angles, how it is perceived by both academics and practitioners. Jackie (2006) defined News as "unusual or out of the ordinary, and has to be something unexpected and make people talk". Randall (2000) viewed News as "a fresh, accurate, honest and balance information on matters of public interest". In addition, Harcup, (2007) is of the opinion that News is "a selective view of what happens in the world [...] informing people about something that just happened.

Academically, journalists were seeing as reporting event in a way that misrepresents a specific group in a certain society, and

"some pessimistic critical academics have justified that standard are slipping and that the quality of News is decline" (Jackie 2006).

Confronting the views of academics about the News, journalism practitioners, responded that news is a first draft of history, which is also an "ability to provide both a truthful and objective contemporary account" (Jackie 2006). James Gordon Bennet founder of the *New York Herald* (1835) as cited in Harcup, (2007) said "...we shall give a correct picture of the world [...] wherever human nature or real life displays its freaks vagaries".

## 2. The Argument

Delving into the main context of the article, the role of the News in developing public understanding will not be overemphasized. Bell (1991) as cited in Jackie (2006) is of the opinion that "media has a vital role in our understanding of the world", while Jackie has supported the view that "media reflects our need to know about contemporary events".

Thus, journalists, concentrate to justify the objectivity in their profession, is part of the ethics and regulations of the trend, but according to Jackie (2006) "changing nature of the News media environment reflects the complex nature of contemporary News and provision and increased consumer choice".

Of course, going by the academics' critics about the falling standard of News, as stated above, Jackie (2006) confirmed that:

*"...prioritizing what the audience appears to want rather than pursuing a journalist-led News agenda can led to criticism about the falling standards and change in the character of News".* (p.18).

Similarly, these are some of the contributing factors to the argument that News nowadays is more of opinion instead of educating and

expanding public understanding about the contemporary events, especially looking at the concept of human dignity in journalism about some contemporary events like war, conflict and protest. In fact, Jackie's statements as well as the academic critics about the falling standard of News and changing of its characters were supported by (Monogue 1997; 7, as cited in Jackie 2006; 24) where he said *"success journalism is an engine for turning everything into clichés"*.

Arguably, journalist can turn everything into clichés and opinion when they are operating under a certain constrain such as censorship. Allans, (1997) stated that "the then penny Newspapers, then, reporting the News of the day entailed a commitment to a new, distinctive range of news values", despite the fact that the then *Penny Newspapers* was launched based on objectivity and truthfulness which always demanded journalists to distinguish facts from values, to support this Allans (1997) added that:

*"...the American society of Newspapers editors announced in 1923 that; impartiality, sound practice marked clear distinction between news reports and expression of opinion, and that news reports should be free from the opinion or bias of any kind"*(p.308).

Thus, if impartiality can be marked clearly different from opinion or clichés, then news should be impartially treated, and be objective and accurate in nature, especially when covering contemporary events, and that journalists should refrain from being partial, full opinion, through devotion to different news topic like, Agriculture, labour and others, using impersonal fact-centre technique of observation (Allans 1997:309)

My argument therefore, tends to be centralised on the issue of impartiality, as Allans (1997) emphasized its importance in

news coverage that "the concept of impartiality in broadcast tends to be used in place of objectivity", therefore, impartiality entails both objectivity and accuracy in news production. To confirm the importance of impartiality in news with a view to educating and expanding public understanding about contemporary events, Allans (1997) stated that: "*a greater degree of independence would have to be established for the impartiality*".

Being dependent on government or under its surveillance will no doubt make news media especially broadcast which were mostly owned by the government to be partial and subjective in the news coverage, (Habermas 1989 as cited in Allans 1997) argued that: "*...the communicative network of a public made up of rationally debating private citizens has collapse[...] the public sphere has disappeared all its conditions and that the citizens have been transformed into different active consumers and excluded from participating in public debate and decision-making process in the society*" (p.318).

Obviously, if public have denied an access to participate in public debate or decision-making, then it means that the news media presents opinion in news coverage about contemporary events affecting them in the world. To complement the argument, that impartiality in news means; being objective and accurate in a process to educate and expands public understanding of the world contemporary events, one of the *NHK* reporters assigned to cover Beijing Women convention on August 25<sup>th</sup> 1997 as cited in Clausen (2003) wrote that: "*I did not want to report on the convention as if hysterical women gathered together and complained about terrible men were. If I had done that I could see what the reaction would have been. I wanted to avoid doing*

*that I wanted to report the convention not only about social issues, but also about the political and economic implication*" (p, 201)

Originally, the reporter planned to cover the content of the convention, but because of the issue of house style, editor's selectivity and partiality, she was encourage by her superior and ended up focusing on Chinese organisational problem not the entire convention, (Clausen 2003). Likewise, *CNN* reporter, also reported on the Chinese problems rather than the convention itself that was why the *NHK* reporter's superior, in Tokyo wanted her to change her intention and topic of coverage to go along with his opinion, through using competition strategy. Thus, both the *NHK* and the *CNN* reports have to be vetoed and renegotiated again at any place in the hierarchy, (Clausen 2003)

Competition factor due to news media fragmentation also contributed in presenting opinion in news in the name of infotainment, advertisement, some using participatory journalists, user-generated contents with a view to attracting audiences, readers and viewers, in other way dealing with public as consumers not citizens, (Jackie 2007, supporting Jackie's view (Williams 1996 as cited in Harcup 2007) stated that "*...the idea of journalism serving and inform citizenry is undermined by a tendency to treat audience as nothing than consumers*" (p.153). Precisely, *BBC* is established to give the British perspective of the contemporary events, and tends to be impartial, and the *CNN* to give the American perspective tends to be the world's news media. Aljazeera Network channel was also established to give Arab-middle East perspective of the contemporary events, with a view to confronting the western perspective about the happenings in the Middle East and Arab world.

In fact, the News fragmentation also brought the establishment of *PRESS TV* by the Iranian government to propagate the Iranian perspective of the world contemporary events, with a view to confronting the *CNN*. The *RUSSIA TODAY*, a network channel was established to safeguard the perspective of Russia on the world issues as well as *FRANCE TV* to give France perspective. Communism, one of the traditional politics in the world has its own perspective of the world contemporary events, which was the rationale behind the establishment of the China Central TV (*CCTV*) to transmit communist perspective of the contemporary events in the world.

Despite the fact that all the above mentioned News media were claiming to be impartial in news reporting, and conduct their activities in accordance with the ethics of the trends, Clausen (2003) explained that:

*"...there was problem of news flow which tends to complement presentation of opinion and clichés in it, that a study conducted by UNESCO the following problems have been found; (a) the prominence of regionalism, every national system devoted most attention to events happening within and actors belonging to its immediate geographical regions, (b) It was found that politics dominated international news reporting everywhere. Hard news presented by two political categories; political, international and domestic news, followed by military, defence and economic which accounted for the main stories, (c) It was found that political figures dominated the news comprising 25-60 percent of all actors in international news; few other categories of actors received significant mention"* (p,15)

To identify the argument whether news presents opinion and clichés rather than educate and expands public understanding on world contemporary events, if the above

outlined problems were found in the news flow internationally, how can the *BBC*, *CNN*, *ALJAZEERA*, *CCTV*, *FRANCE TV*, *RUSSIA TODAY*, *PRESS TV*, *ITV*, *SKY NEWS* and host of others deviate from presenting opinion of their respective regions, politics, as well as the government of their nations and states? Despite the fact that contemporary broadcasting issue are determined by ownership factor, Clausen (2003) stated that, *"the political character of the national media and the competitive strategies are the influential factors in the presentation and conduct of news"*.

Clausen emphasized that international news flow focused only on a specula singular issue and that news from the developing world would focus on trouble, for instance; the Euro News according to McGregor (1997): *"is a multilingual service which has no visible presenters of any kind, it transmits raw news footage with its natural sound and literally no comment of any kind and less understanding"* (p.23).

Thus, can be traced to the fragmentation of news media, which at the end of the day one might end of with over 100 hours of news program in a 24/7 news real time, and it is likely be impossible to watch all (McGregor 1997). Therefore, how can a public be educated or make to understand any world contemporary events in this kind of chaotic situation in the news media world over, whereby each traditional news service have a clear domestic bias "even *CNN* claim to be the world come close, but they are alike their competitors in seeming to neglect the south hemisphere".

To complement the argument whether news is opinionated McGrogor (1997) exemplified that:

*" BBC world service reporter Misha Glery reported in 1990 that trouble was brewing in Bosnia, and was told by his editor that he was exaggerating, and another example was on the 6th April 1992 when Snipers shot*

*eleven demonstrators in Sarajevo and the Bosnian conflict began in earnest, NBC didn't carry the story"* (p, 35).

These indicated that both the BBC and the NBC demonstrated a scene of partiality in covering Bosnian conflict and used their opinion in presenting the conflict to the public. Even after the regular shaking of Sarajevo on the 21st April 1992, when it was cleared that the big story has broken, journalists arrived late, so if those making the news don't feel for the news what one will say about the viewers, (McGreogor 1997).

For instance, the report of a Polls on International Policy Attitudes, PIPA 2003, as cited in Jackie (2006) indicated that;

*"...those who primarily watch FOX NEWS are significantly more likely to have misconception about events (war on Iraq) than those who primarily listen to NPR or watch PBS and some of the misconceptions are; (a) the belief that weapons of mass destruction WMD had been found by American troops in Iraq, (b) that Saddam Hussain and Bin Laden were in alliance, (c) that Iraq was directly involved in the attacks on the world Trade Centre on 11th September 2001"* (p, 165).

But for British Broadcast according to Jackie (2006) "for News organisation to attract its audiences is not easy especially with a little editorial freedom in dealing with audience political values and prejudices".

Presentation of opinions and clichés in the news media can be also attributed to the changing pattern of news consumption, as a result of which the national newspaper's circulation are around 25 per cent lower than the 1960's and that of regional and local newspapers have either closed or down-sized their operational status, and on the broadcasting stations the use of music is much more than news (Jackie, 2006).

Therefore, if news media aimed at educating or expanding the public understanding about

the world contemporary events, how can they always lose interest from the viewers and the readers?

The issue of censorship/ownership, also contribute in the presentation of opinion in news, for instance the case of 2003 war on Iraq, one of the leading factor was "weapons of mass destruction, WMD" Miller, (2004) stated that "the assumption behind most media reports during the war was to accept the government's line that such weapons existed and might be or indeed were deployed". Therefore, instead of educating or make public informed about real fact in the existence of the WMD in Iraq, news media operating during the war presented government's opinion for the reasons of either ownership or censorship or being embedded and controlled by the military forces.

It has been observed that during that time reports that indicated the existence of the WMD in Iraq were more than those questioned the existence, the former has 86 per cent and the later has 14 per cent (Miller 2004).

Another instance was the invasion of Iraq, most of the news media shown that 26 per cent of Iraq were happy and welcome the invasion or the overthrown of the Saddam's government and only 14 per cent were unhappy and upset. Unlike *Channel 4*, this shown that equal number of 20 per cent for those who were happy and 17 per cent for the unhappy (Miller 2004). Therefore, it can justify that there were some elements of subjectivity in the coverage of the contemporary events like Iraq war of the 2003.

To prove my argument whether news presents opinion and clichés in covering contemporary events, instead of educating or expanding public understanding, as I have earlier mentioned, that most of the established news media were meant for the

interest of their respective governments or proprietors.

While conducting a research on the reporting of misinformation during the Iraq war Miller (2004) stated that " we looked in detail at the way the four channels treated stories in which initial reports, usually coming from government or military sources, proved to be unreliable", so how can unreliable sources of information educate the public on any giving contemporary events? Miller continued that "...they found Sky news at 10 pm was most likely programme to treat such reports as facts, although both the BBC and ITV news tends to do so. But Channel 4 News was exceptional offering most cautious and interrogative coverage" (p, 138).

Despite the fact that objectivity has a vital role to play in news reporting as Jackie (2006) outlined that:

*"Objectivity is vital for news coverage and ideal for journalism profession, based on regulatory requirements and has implication for news process, news content and relationship of (producers and audience)"* (p, 138)

Objectively, which is an element of news that make it to be free from opinion and partiality, has attracted criticism from every angle, some criticised that, objective reporting of contemporary events of the world is possible and that journalistic aspirations towards objectivity in news reporting are undesirable, (Jackie 2006).

Arguably, if journalists should ensure that their news production will be judged by the public based on impartiality and objectivity known for the profession, the above mentioned instances of the contemporary events would have been presented free from opinion with a view to educating and expanding public understanding. But Allans (2004) stated that; "a journalist could hardly; under self-serving perspective, be a

dispassionate non-partisan observer, while at the same time belongs to such a controversial organisation as a union"

For instance, French condemned a worsening quality of journalism which put facts before ideas and attributed it to "Americanisation" (Allans 2004) and that was why objectivity, non-bias reporting of news according to Allans "*slowly becoming institutionalised to varying degrees, throughout the 1920's in the growing professional culture of US and British*"

To support the contention that news educates and expands public understanding on the contemporary events; presidents, governments' officials, military officers and many conservatives according to Thrall, (2000) on the case of Vietnam war all felt that " the press had helped educate the public about the nature and cost of the war and in so doing had helped bring the misguided and ill-fated war to a quicker end" (p, 48).

Historically, the Vietnam War was one of the episode that indicated the dangers of unrestricted press coverage of war, but in another wars; contemporary, most journalists saw themselves as part of the American teams, along with censorship in order not to disrupt American morale, (Thrall 2000).

Thus, journalists always want to present their news coverage in an educative way, but certain constrains make the situation otherwise. Thrall (2000) stated that:

*"... the press began to argue on Vietnam war, in essence that journalists not the government should make the decisions about what should be news and that truth, rather than the impact of that truth should guide a journalist's action"* (p, 48).

With the advent of new media (internet) using online journalism, user-generated content, participatory journalism, become an alternative for news to presents

contemporary events; impartiality, objectivity and balance, with a view to educating or boosting public understanding. For instance, the conflict of Kosovo which was called "the first internet war" was covered and presented online for the viewers with alternatives, viewpoints, background materials and eyewitness accounts, (Allans 2002).

Another instance was that of *September 11, 2001*, attack on world Trade Centre, the internet news websites were the main sources of having cleared and accurate reports for millions of people who were puzzled and frightened by alarmist reports on TV and Radio (Allans 2002) and the recent example was that of China earthquake of April 2008 where the first coverage was by citizen journalists.

### 3. Conclusion

Conclusively, if news can be an orientation towards truth through truthful accounts of contemporary events, to be presented via journalistic way with accuracy and sincerity, being impartial, balanced and objective or informing people about something that just happened, and needs to be balanced information, accurate, honest and of interest to the public it should be impartial and objective with a view to educating and expanding public understanding about contemporary events. (Jackie 2006, Harcup 2007, Randall 2000)

Backing my argument, if we look at the instances outlined in the body of this article, and the slogan of Radio B92 of Belgrade that; "...don't believe any one not even us" and the statement of Christine Amanpour of CNN on Bosnian conflict " I have come to believe that objectivity means giving all sides a fair hearing, but not treating all side equally" (Harcup 2007) and one can conclude that news presents opinions and

clichés about contemporary events rather than educating or expanding public understanding, but Abul-Taher for the Daily Mail, as cited in Harcup (2007;155) said " ..Journalism informs and educates people about the world beyond their own personal experiences".

### References

- Allan, S. (1997) "News and the Public Sphere; towards a History of Objectivity and Impartiality" in M. Bormely and T. O'Malley (eds) *A Journalism Reader*, London Routledge.
- Allan. S (2002) "Reweaving the Internet; online news of September 11", in B Zelizer and Allan (eds) *Journalism after September 11*, London, Routledge.
- Allan. S. (2004), *News Culture; Issues in Cultural and Media studies* 2nd ed, OUP.
- Chomsky, N. et al (2004) *Tel Me Lies; Propaganda and media Distortions in the attack on Iraq*, Miller D (ed) Pluto Press.
- Clausen L. (2003) *Global News Production*, Copenlogen, Business School Press.
- Harcup, T (2007) *Journalism Principle and Practice*, Sage, London.
- Jackie H. (2006) *News*, London, Routledge
- Jackie, H (2000) *Terrestrial TV News in Britain; the Culture of production*, Manchester University press, UK
- McChesney, W (1999) *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, university Illinois Press Chicago.
- McGregor B. (1997) *Live Direct and Biased? Making Television News in the Satellite Age*, London Anorld
- Randall, D. (2000) *The Universal Journalist*, Pluto Press, London
- Thrall T. (2000) *War in the Media Age*, Hampton Press USA.