



Journalistic objectivity in Media risk debates: challenges & opportunities

N Praveen Kumar

University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India

Abstract

Journalists profess that their goal and responsibility is to provide an unbiased account of a news story to the public. Journalistic objectivity implies that a journalist has to present all sides of an argument fairly while reporting a news story without any personal interest. The biggest challenge to the objective norm rises out when dealing with stories which involve risk to people. Risk stories are stories which deal with accidents, disasters, epidemic outrage or about emerging technologies. Giving balance views of opposing/two sides may in fact create uncertainty and fear among the people. If there is no alarm, then the task of a journalist is left unaccomplished. Scholars in media studies and other disciplines see media as an instrument for social control, even though media organizations proclaim themselves to play a 'watchdog' role in society. Contrary to the notion of objective journalism, advocacy journalists strongly criticize this norm and argue that neutrality or nonpartisanship is almost impossible in practice as newspapers inevitably take a point of view while covering news and are more often dependent on corporates. Media scholars like Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky show how such a notion of objective journalism in practice is pro-establishment and favors only powerful corporates. Is media bias an intrinsic part of journalism and is journalist objectivity possible forms the basic question of this paper. The paper sets to argue that this norm even though may not be real or existing one, but is definitely a desirable one.

Keywords: objectivity, risk communication, balance, polarization, journalistic norms.

1. Introduction

Ethics in media, especially in the era of numerous television channels and a variety of newspapers across the country, has been under a serious scrutiny in the recent times. With rise of paid journalism along increase in the corporate ownership of media houses, journalists' norms such as objectivity, fairness, accuracy are now largely contested across the globe. Australian media scholar Salleh (2001:28) points out that fairness, honesty, non-emotionalism, accuracy, independent reporting free from political pressures, coupled with the highly contested notion of objectivity are commonly regarded as hallmarks of good journalism. Do these characteristics really exist in day to day practice of journalism is a question that we all need to inquire. Or

to put in other words, how one can be an ethical or an objective journalist in his/her day to day work is the challenge before us now. It becomes more challenging to understand the idea of journalistic objectivity while dealing with risk stories. A brief note on understanding the concept of risk follows this section to understand objectivity norm in risks context.

2. Construction of risks in media

It is difficult to give a particular or an exact definition for the word risk. The most probable definition for risk which is ubiquitous is the probability definition of risk. Rowe (1977) defined risk as the potential for realization of unwanted, negative consequences of an event. Or to put it in other way, the term 'risk' denotes

the likelihood that an undesirable state of reality (adverse effects) may occur as a result of natural events or human activities. On the other hand, constructivists argue that definitions of risk are constructed in the process. They add, 'risk and safety are not objective conditions "out there" simply waiting to be perceived by citizens or calculated by professional risk analysts.

The reality of risk for most of us exists mainly in images created by others. Risk is not an outcome of media and public discourse, but it exists in and through processes of discourse. Risk, which is never constant, is created and recreated in discussion (Stallings, 1990). Taking a lead from probability definition of risk, much of the talk about risk communication typically has a public relations model whose objective is to convince potential victims by ridiculing or nullifying their risk perceptions (Lee and Short, 1993). In this context, the role of media becomes ambiguous and uncertain in communicating risk.

3. Importance of media in risk communication

In any democracy, public opinion has a strong influence on decision-making process. So, individuals and decision-makers need to be well informed about scientific aspects in public issues in matters of scientific concern. When there is more than one claim or argument within scientific community on a scientific issue which has impact on general public at large, then individuals need to have some factual background in order to assess the quality of evidence being presented and more than that, to reach at a decision.

Well known scholar, Ulrich Beck affirms that modern society can be termed as a risk society since it is always in the process of debating, preventing and managing risks that are produced by itself. He further adds that, media occupies a core position in the risk society where hysteria and politics of fear about risks are instigated and aggravated by the mass media (Beck, 1995: 332)

Iyengar (1991) points out that media rather than challenging the existing beliefs and opinions of viewers, often reinforce the beliefs and opinions they already hold. Accordingly, people tend to select (confirmation bias) and interpret (assimilation bias) information which confirms their belief and opinions. However, there is an exception to this. In cases where people don't have any direct personal experience or little experience, media consumers tend to rely more on it to form an opinion. As a result of this, media becomes a potential player to influence public thinking (Iyengar, 1991) in

matters of such concerns. The role of media, is not to maintain power relations or to confirm existing beliefs, but is to challenge and change it.

Science communicated through media at times can trigger political action by setting a fixed or predetermined agenda. The arguments put up by scientific organizations or science experts across media are likely to be interpreted as matters of social relevance by the political establishments. In a way, media draws out a 'picture of society'. From a constructivist point of view it is evident that media are not mere translators of risk information from scientists to public. They have a larger role to play.

How this notion of objectivity is perceived across the globe is an interesting question that needs to be answered. Indian academia, most often looks and tries to learn from the west. Its focus has been basically two different schools or horizons: one is the UK journalism and the other one is US journalism. However, there is exception to this one, with other under developed nations such as China and Brazil have also been compared to in the recent times.

4. US and European journalism: A comparison

The role of media in the western democracies generally is to provide a balanced discussion of important issues to the public so that they can make up their minds about issues which might affect them (Priest and ten Eyck, 2003:30). In the US context, to be objective is not to reflect personal point of view of the reporter while writing a news story. Contradictory to this, in European journalist context, a little relaxation can be witnessed to this norm. Journalists are free to express their point of view or inclination to one or the other side (Priest and ten Eyck, 2003:30). So, the job of a journalist in US context is limited to just reporting a news story without any further analysis on it. On the other side, journalists in European context are expected to analyze the news reports they write (Priest and ten Eyck, 2003:33). However, in the recent times, the European journalism is also showing indications of moving towards US journalist approach in dealing with the norm of journalistic objectivity (Priest and ten Eyck, 2003:33).

The two different visions of the norm of objectivity makes our task more difficult and challenging. Is subjective reporting a desirable one over objective reporting similar to the UK tradition of journalism or one should strive for objective journalism on the lines of US tradition? Or are these two completely distinct and is it possible to do away with

one and adhere to the other completely? The obvious answer to this is a big 'no'. The quest or impulse to look at the west for ideals has been worrisome aspect of Indian journalism. Why one has to borrow the ideals and ethics from the west? Why can't we look back into the roots of our own tradition? We need to move beyond this UK or US dichotomy rather than blindly imitating US or UK model.

5. Fourth estate tradition of journalism

The fourth estate journalism privileges scientific authority and has in fact been modeled itself on science. The objectivity norm embraced by US journalism is a clear evidence in this regard (Nelkin 1995). However, we can notice a change in the direction in recent times, where it is moving away from a top-down watchdog "telling people what they need to know" towards "amplifying conversations society has with itself" (Deuze 2005: 455).

Fourth estate tradition of media emphasizes that journalists should act as watchdogs by disclosing information of conflicting or contested views and generate a public debate (Schultz 1998; Deuze 2005). This tradition highlights conflict between scientists and other actors in society and also within scientific community and thus highlights social dimensions of a technological debate (Dunwoody & Peters, 1992). In other words, journalists informed by fourth estate tradition are expected to challenge the limited institutional representations of risk (Salleh, 2008:242). Media is seen as an instrument for social control in society, even though media organizations proclaim themselves to pay watchdog role (Priest and ten Eyck, 2003: 33).

6. Sensationalism in media

Accusations of bias and sensationalism are quite common phenomena these days on media. And a major chunk of it comes from scientific community which has always held media responsible for providing a distorted image of reality to the public. Any news report which doesn't coincide with the estimates of scientific community is generally regarded as biased one and any such report is usually considered as distortion created by journalists (Dunwoody & Peters, 1992: 203). There is another reason for calling media as biased as it tends to give more attention to critics and opponents than to scientific experts (Nelkin, 1987). During normal science period or when science is not controversial, the ideal of objectivity may not be at stake altogether. The problem arises while reporting

scientific controversies. This ideal is largely contested as it might give equal space to non-scientific voices.

Dichotomization or to evaluate things as good or bad has been the tendency of journalists for time immemorial. Journalists dichotomize risk rating, and label it either useful or risky. The complicated or intermediate positions and opinions in between are usually ignored (Pavlik, 2001). This simplification may lead to create sensation and bias. Unlike scientific experts, journalists and laymen overestimate the occurrence of risks that are rare and this usually results in dramatization of content in media (Bauer et al 2002a). Furthering this, Gorke and Ruhrmann (2003:231) add that there is a tendency among journalists to compare risks of advanced technologies to the risks of everyday life which often leads to sensationalist news stories.

To contradict this false allegations on media, Dunwoody and Peters (1992) point out a methodological error in all such criticisms. They point out that, most of the studies which charge media with bias and sensationalism accusations in dealing with science or risks stories generally stem out from a positivist understanding science. Dunwoody & Peters (1992: 204) say that one needs to have a standard baseline to charge or call someone as biased or sensationalist. They find this as problematic as they posit that there is no standard baseline to call scientific understanding as the final or the ultimate one (Dunwoody, Peters, 1992: 204). Thus the word sensationalism in media becomes as ambiguous as the word objectivity, especially in science reporting.

Avoiding conscious exaggeration is a key to objective and non-sensationalist reporting which we should bring into practice. Sensationalist media tendencies are hindrances in the practice of good journalism. But in the market crazy environment, sensationalism has become the order of the day. It is hard to see any news without exaggeration now-a-days. These are obvious signs of bad and undesirable journalism.

7. Objectivity reduced to balance

Media plays multiple roles such as entertainers, watchdogs, gatekeepers, and as even agenda setters which often conflict each other (Kasperson & Kasperson, 1996:97-98). The other norm of journalism, popularly known as balance norm, comes handy to journalists when dealing with controversial topics. The balance norm of the press stress that in cases where a journalist confronts with a truth claim that cannot be

easily determined or tested, then his/her job is to present both the sides to readers so that they can decide own their own (Dunwoody & Peters, 1992:211). However, this doesn't solve the problem, in fact it further creates a new one. The main problem with the balance norm is that it is often difficult to classify various stakeholders in to proponent or opponent categories. This problem becomes bigger when a trivial point, which doesn't find space anywhere, finds an outlet in media debates.

Another quantitative technique one could try out is to list all the possible stakeholders and try to provide space to all of them in media rather than just limiting to two major views. On the flip side, requirement of having a dramatic value to news story may be lost in the process and also it is quite challenging for a journalists to devote his/her time while covering a single news story. This may not be practical at the ground level as journalists have to work within deadlines and also, this doesn't necessarily remove the subjectivity of journalists from what they report.

8. False balance leading to polarization

The biggest challenge for any journalist is to engage readers throughout the story. This challenging task, quite often this effects the objectivity norm. Journalists, while reporting science stories, reduce objectivity to mere false balance by giving two opposing sides equal weightage in covering the story, irrespective of the credibility or value they possess (Kennedy & Overholser, 2010: preface:viii).

In the process of reaching out to larger audiences, complicated issues become oversimplified; uncertainty is downplayed; controversy is highlighted over consensus. Sensationalist media reporting stresses on breakthroughs that and disproportionately emphasize the negative side of a news story as it is believed that negativity attracts public attention more than positive aspects. Inexperienced reporters, in their impulse to make science reports more appealing, mostly end up in promoting conflict and personality over substance. The quest for truth of a journalist in this context merely reduces to focus on who is winning or losing the race and who gains public and political support in the battle (Kennedy & Overholser, 2010: 14).

There is a possibility that actors in a debate can manipulate journalists by demanding them to follow the ideal of objectivity norm (Dunwoody & Peters, 1992). Kitzinger and Reilly (1997) states that in cases where official sources are reluctant to talk to media, journalists urge to seek information from alternative sources may eventually provide a platform or space

for 'mavericks'. In order to be heard or quoted in media, usually claim-making groups often locate or place an incident along with similar previous events (Stallings, 1990:89).

Nisbet and Lewenstein (2002: 384) argue that in times of political controversies, the objectivity norm of journalism is likely to create a polarizing effect, by counterbalancing every negative consideration with a positive one in media coverage. The positive side of controversies is that the usually unheard voices which otherwise don't find space in media, may also get a space in media coverage during the peak time of controversies.

9. Shifting of balance in reporting with events

New discoveries and breakthroughs also shifts the reporting and often shifts the balance of risks in media (Marks *et al*, 2007:184). Choice of sources used in reporting has a huge impact on media objectivity. University scientists are considered as credible sources than industry experts while dealing controversial science stories (Priest, 2001).

Changing events can not only shift the balance of source influence, but they can also introduce new frames to a debate that may mobilize or allow access to interests previously not included in the media and policy agenda-building process (Nisbet & Lewenstein 2002: 367).

During heightened political controversy, media negativity increases along with a proportional increase in positive coverage in media. Stakeholders on either side of the debate increase their media lobbying efforts and create a number of competing claims to feature in news stories. This proportional raise in both the positive and negative media coverage can be attributed to objectivity norm of journalism (Nisbet & Lewenstein 2002: 384). With changes in technologies and with new developments emerging out, in new and fast-changing scientific fields, the balance of risks and rewards shifts and also their associated media coverage (Marks *et al*. 2007:184).

10. Reproducing power relations

Be in the west or in the east, most of the media organizations are owned by corporations (with an exception to communist regimes, where the state may own media organizations). Corporations, generally have their own interests and investments in other areas in a specified region. News organizations and journalists are more likely to project a pro-corporate and pro-establishment point of view. So, the media bias is

inherent as they depend on official sources and corporate houses for existence and survival (Priest and ten Eyck, 2003: 30). Their job becomes quite contradictory. They have to serve two, often contending or rival groups at the same time and be objective at the same time.

News organization tries to maintain power relations in societies. They do so this by privileging views of existing dominant groups and by downplaying alternative voices that are considered as aberration or deviant in a community (Crawley, 2007: 320). Lack of balanced coverage is more likely to induce undue prominence and power to certain sub-set of stakeholders (Lore *et al*, 2013). In a study on GM debate in media, they found that farmers, who are supposed to at the core of the debate, didn't receive much of media attention (Lore *et al*, 2013: 147).

11. Contradictory norms

Journalists' norms and norms that guide scientists often appear to be contradictory. Weigold draws a comparison between journalists' and scientists' professions. He says that Journalists' norms and those of scientists frequently appear to be contradictory. An important value of science is objectivity, not so much in the choice of questions or theories, but in requiring tests that permit theoretically incompatible outcomes. For scientists, hypotheses must be falsifiable and tests of the hypotheses must be replicable, so that others working in the discipline, including those with hostile theoretical views, may subject theories to rigorous scrutiny. Conversely, journalism is a subjective enterprise. Indeed, some journalists have given up on the notion of objectivity and adopted the very different concept of "fairness" (Weigold, 2002: 7-8).

Irrespective of the disparities in the qualifications of sources, fairness norm of journalism urges journalists to present balanced views to reader rather than privileging single authority (Weigold, 2002).

12. Scientism and objectivity

Kastenhofer (2008:92) states that risk debates follow the ideal of objectivity, dispassionate, uncompromising and calculative rationality where emotionalism to issue being reported is seen as irrational and often objectionable. Emotionalism here implies the emotional detachment of journalist from the content he/she reports. Following this ideal, journalists trust in scientists and science often find scientific community as rational and the larger public as emotional or not rational. As a result, reporters usually get attracted

towards the 'rational accounts' of scientists often downplaying stressing public concerns.

Some science writers perceive or view science as objective and as an unqualified good enterprise. So, they find it obsolete to present a balance view of science as they feel that science, which undergoes through peer-reviewing process, is inherently balanced and doesn't further require any balancing (Conrad, 1999). But recent developments in the field of science and technology studies have challenged this notions strongly. The whole idea of 'science as unqualified good' has been under severe attack in recent times. Science journalists are now urged to follow same scrutiny and scepticism as other journalists do.

13. Myth of objectivity

Journalists in the media profess that their goal and responsibility is to provide an unbiased account of a news story to the public. But having unbiased journalists need not necessarily guarantee news content to be objective and neutral. Journalists' bias may creep into the story selection process. Nelkin (1987:91) believes that ideal of objectivity is no longer seen as plausible and journalists have found out a new approach which presents balance diverse points of view, "by presenting all sides fairly, and by maintaining a clear distinction between news reporting and editorial opinion." Recent studies in media have clearly demonstrated that there is nothing called as journalistic objectivity and is myth and is difficult to achieve on the ground level (Gorke and Ruhrmann, 2003:209).

Priest and Eyck argue that journalistic objectivity is difficult to attain in media reporting.

"Objectivity" may be a defensible ethic on the grounds of the media's role in democracies, but it is also necessarily a mythical standard in practice; choices about which issues to emphasize, how to define them, which sources to treat as legitimate cannot be made "objectively" but reflect judgment and values (Priest and ten Eyck, 2003: 30).

14. Creating drama and creating confusion

A story doesn't get its attention if not conveyed in interesting terms. What amounts to interesting terms differs from person to person. But, there are some strategies that are employed by media professions and even the common public to narrate a story. Creating drama is one such a tool. A plain story interests nobody, ideally and on the flip side a sensationalist story may distort the journalistic ideals. Journalists are caught up in this trap.

Controversies tend to create drama and thus draw attention of larger public concerns than normal science events. In order to create drama, journalists may develop controversy where none existed previously by balancing out opposing arguments of expert scientists. This has been the usual practice to construct journalistic objectivity and to create drama in news reporting. Media are often criticized for interpreting science on the basis of non-scientific values. Their main motive is seen to be profitability over direct communication and objective reporting. For the same reason, media has been accused of being sensationalist by exaggerating scientific uncertainties and thus creating a conflict in the public domain (Young and Mathews, 2007:135).

15. Conclusion

From a constructivist point of view, news media doesn't provide an exact mirror of social reality (Allan, 1998), thus encouraging viewers to accept particular definitions of reality over the others. It, in fact presents a codified version of reality for us. Media are not objective sources of truth free from political or governmental forces, but are subjective and partisan

of certain claims.

Every journalist should work on improving objectivity in news reporting. Achieving objectivity has to be his/her ultimate goal. But what constitutes as objectivity and what is subjective view is a debatable question, which is out of horizon of this paper. The biggest challenge now is to minimize interpretative reporting and get rid of false objectivity and balance. Of course it is needless to say that it is easy to say but a difficult task to achieve it on the ground level, albeit, it gives a direction for a journalist. To provide objective or unbiased reports, media organisations and journalists have to cross check the validity of the claims made by their sources. This will definitely help them to move towards objectivity.

At the end of the day one has to acknowledge the fact that news production itself is a result of series of judgements made daily to fill column inches in newspapers on a regular basis. And to realise that media doesn't reflect or mirror objective reality out there in totality, untouched by human hands (Salleh, 2001: 32). Albeit, objectivity is still a desirable ideal to give a positive direction to journalism.

References

- Bauer, M.W. 2002a : Controversial medical and agri-food biotechnology: a cultivation analysis, *Public Understanding of Science*, 11(2), pp. 1–19.
- Beck, U., & Press, P. 1995 : Ecological politics in an age of risk.
- Clarke, L., & Short Jr, J. F. 1993 : Social organization and risk: Some current controversies. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 375-399.
- Crawley, C. E. 2007 : Localized debates of agricultural biotechnology in community newspapers: A quantitative content analysis of media frames and sources. *Science Communication*, 28(3), 314-346.
- Deuze, M. 2005 : What is journalism? Professional identity and ideology of journalists reconsidered. *Journalism*, 6(4), 442-464.
- Dunwoody, S., & Peters, H. P. 1992 : Mass media coverage of technological and environmental risks: a survey of research in the United States and Germany. *Public Understanding of Science*, 1(2), 199-230.
- Görke, A., & Ruhrmann, G. 2003 : Public communication between facts and fictions: on the construction of genetic risk. *Public Understanding of Science*, 12(3), 229-241.
- Herman, Edward and Noam Chomsky. 1988. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon.
- Iyengar, S. 1991 : Is anyone responsible? How television frames political issues.
- Kasperson, J. X., Kasperson, R. E., Pidgeon, N., & Slovic, P. 2003 : The social amplification of risk: assessing fifteen years of research and theory. *The social amplification of risk*, 1.

- Kastenhofer, K. 2009 : Debating the risks and ethics of emerging technosciences. *Innovation—the European journal of social science research*,22(1), 77-103.
- Kennedy, D., & Overholser, G. (Eds.). 2010 : Science and the Media. Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
- Kitzinger, J., & Reilly, J. 1997 : The Rise and Fall of Risk Reporting Media Coverage of Human Genetics Research, False Memory Syndrome' and Mad Cow Disease'. *European journal of communication*, 12(3), 319-350.
- Lore, T. A., Imungi, J. K., & Mubuu, K. 2013 : A framing analysis of newspaper coverage of genetically modified crops in Kenya. *Journal of Agricultural & Food Information*, 14(2), 132-150.
- Marks, L. A., Kalaitzandonakes, N., Wilkins, L., & Zakharova, L. 2007 : Mass media framing of biotechnology news. *Public Understanding of Science*, 16(2), 183-203.
- Nelkin, D. 1987 : Selling science. How the press covers science and technology. *New York: Freeman, 1987, 1*.
- Nisbet, M. C., & Lewenstein, B. V. 2002 : Biotechnology and the American media the policy process and the Elite Press, 1970 to 1999. *Science Communication*, 23(4), 359-391.
- Pavlik, J.V. 2001 : 'News Framing and News Media: Digital Tools to Re-engage an Alienated Citizenry', in S.D. Reese, O.H. Gandy and A.E. Grant (eds) Framing Public Live: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World pp. 311–322. Mahwah, New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Priest, S. H. 2001 : *A Grain of Truth: The Media, the Public, and Biotechnology*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Priest, S. H., & Ten Eyck, T. 2003 : News coverage of biotechnology debates. *Society*, 40(6), 29-34.
- Priest, S. H., & Ten Eyck, T. 2003 : News coverage of biotechnology debates. *Society*, 40(6), 29-34.
- Rowe, W. D. 1977 : *Anatomy of risk*. John Wiley.
- Salleh, A. 2001 : Science in the Media: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. *Australian Science Teachers' Journal*, 47(4).
- Schultz, J. 1998 : *Reviving the fourth estate: Democracy, accountability and the media*. Cambridge University Press.
- Stallings, R. A. 1990 : Media discourse and the social construction of risk. *Social problems*, 37(1), 80-95.
- Warren G. Bovee 1999 : *Discovering Journalism*. Greenwood. p. 203.
- Weigold, M. F. 2001 : Communicating Science A Review of the Literature. *Science Communication*, 23(2), 164-193.
- Young, N., & Matthews, R. 2007 : Experts' understanding of the public: Knowledge control in a risk controversy. *Public Understanding of Science*, 16(2), 123-144.

