

On Mediated Emotions, Journalistic Complacency and Apathy. An Interview with Andrew Bissell.

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Andrew Bissell from Bournemouth University in the United Kingdom spent 30 years in the role of a journalist. After a successful career in various English newspapers, he decided to change his role and become a university teacher in order to transmit practice to theory. His specialization is the formation of a journalist and journalists' identity. In this interview, he reflects on the technological and organizational evolution of the media, i.e. the transition from a typewriter to the Internet and the usage of social media. Such a change has brought new and better opportunities for being critical, but it has also increased the emotional involvement of media recipients. Although the media environment is nowadays very "confused and nebulous", clarity will emerge, claims Bissell.

Thirty years in the newspapers in a life of one person is a very long period of time. From today's point of view in the role of a university teacher, what would you say is the most problematic aspect of the journalist's job?

When I speculate about the concerns associated with the media outputs today, I think that one of the biggest problems is that the media take too many terms like "environment", "conflict", "refugees" and lots of others and give a very certain interpretation on it. Now when I am teaching it, I am very interested in multiple interpretations, which reflect individuality of all of us. Therefore, I am keen to fight against stereotypical portrayals of very complex subjects.

Could you give me a specific example of how the media supports stereotypical representation, particularly through visuality, i.e. news photographs?

For example, I live in Bournemouth, in the United Kingdom, and typically, before I lived there, all the picture representations of Bournemouth that came to me were pictures of elderly people. It was downed on me increasingly that whenever Bournemouth was mentioned, it was in picture form represented in terms of photographs of seniors walking on the beach or elsewhere. I am a very keen football fan and when I moved there, I realized that the real images that truly capture the town today as I know it are about the passion of the football crowds, passion of young people, of the students. However, those pictures were never ever captured in the media and still are not until this day.

What do you think is the source of such a stereotypical representation and distortion of reality?

Obviously, I have a certain perspective on what the media do to the images representing environment, as I was selecting the pictures in the industry myself and I knew that I myself was guilty of reinforcing the stereotypical views of the environment. Later on, I became very interested in different messages that are portrayed in pictures of environments and how it all frequently depends on the media message and whoever is behind the specific media, what they want to send out. It can way too often turn a topic or a subject like the environment and make it almost a cliché, a subject heading that almost loses meaning or becomes familiar with just one interpretation.

The trouble is that we got locked into a perception of certain things that were relevant to the community. I think that we were right in terms of the issue that we were focusing on, but we did not realize that this little problem there was actually broader and that there were different issues as well that needed to be reported.

Could you again mention an example in order to better imagine the situation?

Speaking again about Bournemouth, there are areas that are deprived and are associated with various social problems like prostitution, high crime level etc. And I suppose that when a story arose about that particular area of Bournemouth, we would naturally keep on portraying it in the same way furthermore. We had created what we thought was a “correct” picture of Bournemouth and there might be a tendency to continue to feed that picture.

And how about readers’ reactions to this locked perception?

There were times when the community would remind us that their environment was more complex than that and there were good things happening in that area etc. and that would draw us up and make us think: hold on a minute, we have got to realign our perception of that community. Still, it would be the community to remind us that pictorially we were not representing it accurately. We always wanted to be in tune with the readers, but now I think that thanks to social media we are far more in synch with them, because they tell us.

Subconscious habit combined with journalistic complacency**Was this developed familiarity with just one interpretation and its representation intentional?**

No. The biased messages that we were putting out, if I can speak personally, were never intentional. What I think is interesting from my point of view now when I reflect it is that once I was doing it, I was not even conscious of it. I just did it out of habit – it was never a conscious decision to deceive or introduce bias; it was just a subconscious journalistic habit carried along in this sort of media stereotypical habit of image perception.

How did you develop this subconscious habit?

I think that it happens over a historic timeline. At the beginning of that timeline, the pictorial representation of an issue is genuine, because it has just developed. The problem is that over time, that community obviously develops in different ways, but the media, if it is not careful, continue to just maintain that particular image of it at one point and that was timely at that pointing time and continues to defy it over time. Consequently, it turns into a familiarity. We became journalistically complacent and always associated a certain topic with certain imagery. So I would call it a journalistic complacency, and perhaps a journalistic naivety. I am hesitant to blame it on time pressure or serving a particular market.

Has it never been due to a commercial pressure?

There is always a commercial aspect; you want to serve the community and you genuinely want to address social problems, but equally you have got to make money so that you can do that. But I cannot remember going into a meeting in which we would ever say that we can sell X numbers of newspapers in that community if we run a story about it.

The Internet and the social media: shift from monologue to dialogue**How did the progress of changing the perception of certain issues continue after the advent of the Internet?**

What I have noticed, and thankfully the journalists responded to it, is that the social media, the Internet and the citizen journalism has been in position to constantly remind us that old perception is no longer relevant or it is more complex than it was. Social media sites have played a very important role in moderating our complacency and moderating our force in interpretations, because of course, over that timeline, journalism has gone from very much this monologue – this feeding the public – to a dialogue. We have had to involve “them”, because they are creating the news as much as we are. This closer and also interactive relationship has enabled us to get to a more realistic picture of the community, of the environment they – we – live in. Social media have now helped us to remedy that subconscious journalistic habit, to an extent

How else has journalism been affected by the Internet and the social media in the context of selecting information?

What is happening to journalism is the transformation of the gatekeeping role, which is not only limited to the journalists anymore; the public thus keep now the media far more accountable than ever before.

Also, there are huge challenges in terms of what evidence you can trust from communities. Obviously, the Internet and the community involvement has damaged considerably the economic model of the traditional media, because the news that we could just have had a monopoly on is influenced by everyone having the possibility

to run their own website. This is indeed a very rich environment in terms of democracy and hearing voices.

Confused and nebulous forum with better opportunities to be critical

I can see that you are very optimistic about these challenges we are facing. Do you think that it is now, in the digital age, easier to fight against stereotypical portrayals?

I have seen the transition from the typewriter to where we are today. I personally think, in my mid-fifties, that stereotypical representation has always been the case. But my generation was even more in the dark about things. And I can surely say is that the Internet and social media have provided increasingly better opportunities for us to be critical. It is not perfect – there is still mass confusion and mass trust issues.

What has happened with the notion of what is the “truth”?

What happened is that people have known about particular affiliations of established media, whether they are left, right, centre or liberal or whatever. Unlike in social media, you do not know where it comes from or the validity of the truth or anything.

...Which is very confusing.

It is. In terms of accountability, the readers of, for example, the Daily Mail in the UK know what to expect. But the Internet has enabled them to continue discussing about that. So I think the Internet, as a part of its gatekeeping role, has increased awareness of the subtleties and the prejudices that are inherited in the traditional media.

Are media recipients' critical skills developed enough to recognize the inherited prejudices? Or is there a high level of confusion among them because of the low trustworthiness of the media in general stemming from the spread of disinformation and the so-called filter bubbles?

I think that there has always been a degree of confusion and hierarchy, class struggles and power issues connected with the commercial and political interests. But at least now there is a forum, confused and nebulous, for change and critical analysis, despite all its flaws. I think that, looking at it idealistically or philosophically, ultimately the media is there to serve the public and this is at least a platform which can be developed to ensure about works in better ways for the future.

Clarity will emerge

To sum it up, the confusion has always been here, but now we have the chance to discover what really matters and we can finally create the whole picture of reality.

Exactly – even though it may sound very idealistic. Again, as we were saying, it is all about perspectives and from my perspective on that journey, I think we are now in a far healthier space because, ultimately, civilization for me means discussion, em-

bracing different perspectives. There is a lot of rubbish on the Internet, but I think that the relationship between the outside, the Internet, and the traditional media, will mature over time. And in that, I think that clarity will emerge steadily.

Are we Internet-adolescents now?

Yes, there may be phases of development. I think that we need much more distance before we can really analyse what is happening at the moment. But from my limited snapshot, which is only 35 years, I think we are moving to a better place. In the pre-internet era, I doubt that somebody was aware of a broader picture.

But now it is very complex, massive challenges are ahead and basic journalistic principles are being shaken to the core. For example, codes of practice, impartiality, objectivity, the identity of being a journalist; all this is up in the air before that confusion, it is a stepping stand to a future. We cannot see what the future is, but we are moving in the right direction. Because ultimately, the public should not be subservient to the media, it has to be in harmony in some way. I think the more we hear other voices, the more we are getting there.

What are these core journalistic principles that have to be rethought and revised?

Obviously, every country has its own code of practice. But the bearing essentials are to be fair, accurate and balanced. If you are a responsible journalist, you have to make sure of acting that way. And I always strove for that. So if I was going to provoke emotions, if it was a news story, it would be balanced and if it was an opinion, it would be labelled as an opinion and in the end it would say: what do you think? Do you agree or disagree? In that way I could spark an emotional dialogue. I was very keen on hearing voices; I just wanted just as much emotion displayed as possible.

Mediated emotional package

Speaking about sparking an emotional dialogue, what do you think is the role of the emotion in this whole process?

I think that emotion is an absolutely innate human condition and therefore it affects everything we do, whether it is journalism or whatever. For me, it defines the very being, without it we are not human. Everything is emotion and life itself is worthless without emotion. So ultimately journalism's key task is to capture feeling and emotion and how people perceive the world.

Did you intentionally try to provoke emotional responses in the readers?

Yes. As a news editor, I was always trying to provoke emotion in other people by gathering materials that would provoke emotional responses to what we were giving the readers. Understanding that I was portraying a certain perception, I was always trying to stimulate emotion in the reader. We created an emotional package, and that is where the mediation comes in, of course. I used to call them "second-hand emotions" – emotions shaped by media.

I would be bringing my picture of the pollution, for example, and put it out there. And internally, I always assumed that the use reader would take that package and would absorb it, soak it up and sieve it through his mind and at the end there would be a certain emotional condition, in which he or she would interpret what is relevant.

The trouble is to what extent the emotion is in you or me and to what extent it is mediated...

The degree to which my package effects your emotion is impossible to say because it is not just my package what is going on in an individual. Everything around you is and everyone else is too. This is why journalism is such a responsible job, because you are aware that you are creating a package to stimulate some sort of emotional response.

Still, are you aware of the fact that journalism very often captures negative emotions like hatred or fear, which affects how we perceive the world and consequently create our environment? I mean, the media often transmit negative emotions and that is why many people may feel deceived and depressed...

I was very aware that sometimes the emotions that were being exhibited by people are not really pleasant. Let's use a common example: the terrible immigrants, they are doing XYZ, we cannot allow them to come in, etc. This is almost a rehash of a subliminal message they receive from media so their emotions in this case can be based on media.

Well, you are aware of it, but I am afraid that most of the journalists do not think in these terms; they may not be aware of how dangerous their perceptions they are transmitting to the others are.

I think we just individually handle with it all the time: segregating our genuine emotions from the emotional messages that come in from all sorts of things. You are now giving me messages; I am getting messages from literature, from other sources. We go through this huge sorting process and come to an emotional state of being – and that is an individual process.

Flexible emotional approach

What does this sorting and selecting process include?

As a journalist, once you get an emotional package, if it is a genuinely news story, you just make sure that you have got both sides of the story, so it is balanced. Then, as a reporter writing for instance about global warming, I would also invite an expert to present his view as a way of stimulating emotion. But then it would not be a news package, it would be an opinion. I was often getting people to write opinions and comments as a trigger to invite other people to come up with alternative arguments.

Is it then necessary to clearly distinguish between what we consider the “objective news” and what we perceive as an “opinion”?

If it were a comment piece, we would assemble the package that would reflect one particular view, and if it were news, we would assemble pictures that represented the whole debate, both sides. I would strive to do that. But however fair I attempted to be, I was also aware that I was giving some specific sort of message. You cannot avoid that. That is the massive responsibility of the media. The very choice of words in the headline is a message. The point is to provide other people with a chance to give their own emotionally provoking view. That is the most important thing to me. That is the only safeguard.

Is it possible to manage it when journalism is market-driven?

I fell personally that we were able to do it. Yes, we had pressure to sell, absolutely. But I learned that we would sell more if we clearly distinguished between news and comments. As a result, we stimulated much debate and controversy with certain opinions. Being fair, accurate and balanced served us commercially much better than any other approach. It worked and I fairly believe that it still does work.

I have never felt under pressure to pursue a certain emotional agenda because that would make us more money. We were quite flexible in our emotional approach. That openness for me was driven in a narrow direction – my agenda was to clarify my position. I just felt that with fairness, accuracy and balance, you could stimulate debate and controversy. The best commercial success you can get is reader involvement. And as long as I could involve people as much as possible with their views, that was the best commercial way forward.

Therefore, creating a good and healthy environment is about emotional openness, responsibility, keeping the balance and distance...

Yes. And that is also a great challenge for journalism and journalism education: to be critical and to really examine what people are saying and try to separate the mediated emotion from real emotions. Someone has to take the responsibility for channelling the emotion. The more you can embrace of the emotions, the more you can represent and reflect, the better. And the great thing about the Internet is that it has made us aware of more diversity of emotion and views.

The task today for journalists and journalism educators is to really embrace that and reflect this diversity and make sure that their own biases are apart, admitting that my opinions are just as valid as theirs. But most importantly, you have to represent the diversity of emotions.