

Best Practices in Assessing Objectivity and Balance

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Section 396(g)(1)(A) of the Communications Act of 1934, as amended, authorizes CPB to “facilitate the full development of public telecommunications in which programs of high quality, diversity, creativity, excellence, and innovation, which are obtained from diverse sources, will be made available to public telecommunications entities, with strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature”. As part of its efforts to carry out these duties, CPB commissioned several white papers to independently examine CPB’s objectivity and balance mandate and provide feedback on its efforts to meet those obligations. This document is one of those white papers. The views expressed herein are solely those of the author(s) of this paper and not of CPB. CPB did not contribute to the contents of this paper, does not express an opinion about the views presented herein, and does not endorse its findings.

Overview

This White Paper will examine the practice and methodology of analyzing journalistic content. We will describe the historical evolution of news and public affairs analysis in commercial and public media, both in U.S. and international contexts, review and critique the typical criteria and concepts used in such research, and consider the range of contemporary approaches. We will recommend formal policies and procedures for conducting regular reviews of public media programming for objectivity and balance, in accordance with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting Office of Inspector General's (OIG) recommendation to the CPB Board.¹

Journalistic assessment is generally concerned with two dimensions -- accuracy and impartiality – which are often seen as distinct. The first dimension involves factualness and verification; put simply, did the journalist get the information right? The second dimension is more complicated, and has many referents: objectivity and balance, fairness, neutrality. Or it is noted in the obverse, as bias or slant. However, in practice it can be difficult to disentangle the dimensions. A critic may claim bias in a journalist's selection of sources to garner facts, or contend that certain facts were excluded to slant a story. As the influential communication theorist Denis McQuail has argued, "It is hard to overstate the degree to which all news information is bound to be an expression, reflection and outcome of values as well as a recital of facts."² Valid, credible assessment of journalistic content, therefore, must be broadly conceived.

¹ CPB Office of Inspector General, *REPORT OF REVIEW*, Review of Alleged Actions Violating the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, as Amended [Report No. EPB503-602, November 15, 2005], p. 37.

² D. McQuail (1992), *Media Performance: Mass Communication and the Public Interest*, London: Sage, p. 223.

Historical Evolution of Assessment Research in the U.S.

When mass communication coalesced as an academic discipline midway through the 20th century, much early research focused on measuring audiences and their media usage, and the effects of media upon public opinion.³ In other words, questions of media performance were secondary. However, there were a number of important early studies that helped to develop a tradition of journalistic assessment. As early as the 1930s, Mitchell Charnley studied the accuracy of newspaper coverage. “As common as the layman’s superficial generalization that ‘the newspaper is always wrong’ is the newspaper man’s defense that the wonder is that so few errors get into print,” Charnley wrote, establishing precedent for accuracy research that continues to this day.⁴ In the 1950s the sociologists Gladys and Kurt Lang studied television reporting of General Douglas MacArthur’s return to New York after being dismissed as commander of U.S. and U.N. forces in Korea by President Harry Truman. The Langs compared TV reports with eyewitness observations and concluded that news accounts followed the lines of a narrative essentially written in advance, in accordance with journalists’ expectations of the story; the phenomenon later came to be known as “media logic.”⁵ Later researchers replicated this approach with other events, such as Vietnam War protests.

However, the model situation for evaluation concerns election coverage, where the criteria for measuring balance (i.e. equal or proportional representation of candidates) are clear. The landmark research in this area was Paul Lazarsfeld and his Columbia

³ K. Wahl-Jorgensen (2004), “How Not to Found a Field: New Evidence on the Origins of Mass Communication Research,” *Journal of Communication* 54:3, pp. 547-564.

⁴ M. V. Charnley (1936), “Preliminary Notes on a Study of Newspaper Accuracy,” *Journalism Quarterly* 13:2, p. 394.

⁵ K. Lang and G. E. Lang (1953), “The Unique Perspective of Television and its Effect,” *American Sociological Review* 18:1, pp. 103-112.

University team's study of press and radio coverage of the 1940 presidential election. The researchers concluded that while Franklin Roosevelt received more coverage in quantitative terms, Wendell Wilkie received more favorable coverage.⁶ Lazarsfeld's study, published in the book *The People's Choice*, established precedent for researchers to assess content in terms of balance and impartiality. *Balance* was generally seen as an outcome of the selection of news (e.g. were the candidates covered in roughly equal numbers of stories?) and was measured through content analysis. *Impartiality* was seen through the presentation of news (e.g. was one candidate treated in more positive terms?) and was measured through qualitative methods, such as textual analysis, which will be discussed in more detail later.

The People's Choice opened the door to numerous studies of news content, including Klein and Maccoby's comparison of newspaper endorsements and news coverage of candidates.⁷ Television's ascendance later drew attention to analyses of network news coverage. The 1972 presidential election between Richard Nixon and George McGovern was the subject of multiple studies. Hofstetter concluded that network coverage was indeed balanced, with little evidence of differential bias among the three networks of the time.⁸ Patterson and McClure, however, argued that the networks favored Nixon; while the amount of coverage was balanced, the researchers concluded that the

⁶ P. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson, and H. Gaudet (1944), *The People's Choice*, New York: Columbia University Press.

⁷ M.W. Klein and N. Maccoby (1954), "Newspaper Objectivity in the 1952 Campaign," *Journalism Quarterly* 31, pp. 285-296.

⁸ C.R. Hofstetter (1976), *Bias in the News: Network Television Coverage of the 1972 Election Campaign*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

nature of the coverage neglected McGovern's policy positions and leadership qualities.⁹ There is an extensive body of research on local television news content.¹⁰ However, few of the local news studies emphasized issues of balance. One exception was a recent Federal Communications Commission-sponsored study, which failed to find significant difference in "partisan slant" of news coverage between stations cross-owned by newspapers and other stations in the same market.¹¹

These studies highlight the historical difficulty of journalistic assessment. Quantitative analysis of balance – sometimes referred to as "stop-watch studies" – may point to important discrepancies in coverage and signal a lack of fair treatment. However, stop-watch analysis alone does not address questions of whether coverage favored a particular candidate or, for that matter, a political party or interest group. Yet another complicating factor is that positive or negative coverage does not necessarily flow from bias; it is largely a function of "real world" external events that implicate candidates. For example, the Iran hostage crisis cast a pall over coverage of President Jimmy Carter's campaign, as noted by Robert Entman.¹²

International scholars have also conducted widely cited studies of fairness and balance. A group of sociologists at Glasgow University has published analyses of television news, primarily focused on the U.K., for more than 30 years as the Glasgow

⁹ T.E. Patterson and R.D. McClure (1976), *The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Politics*, New York: Paragon Books.

¹⁰ L.K. Smith (2009), "Consolidation and News Content: How Broadcast Ownership Policy Impacts Local Television News and the Public Interests," *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 10, 386-453, see Endnote 23.

¹¹ J. Milyo (2007), The Effects of Cross-Ownership on the Local Content and Political Slant of Local Television News, *FCC Research Studies on Media Ownership*, FCC PUR 07000029, <http://www.fcc.gov/ownership/studies.html>

¹² R.M. Entman (1989), *Democracy Without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 89.

Media Group. A common theme of its research is that journalistic claims of objectivity and balance serve “to obfuscate what is in fact the reproduction of the dominant assumptions about our society.”¹³ The group’s most recent study, published as *Bad News From Israel*, focused on coverage of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and argued that Israelis are heard twice as often as Palestinians on BBC One and ITV News.¹⁴

This raises the issue of the polemical nature of some assessment research, which has been used to challenge the legitimacy and credibility of mainstream media.¹⁵ There have been several high-profile examples of such research in public broadcasting, most notably when former CPB Chairman Kenneth Tomlinson commissioned a study of the PBS program *NOW with Bill Moyers*. The study was criticized in the OIG report for its lack of clear criteria as well as a lack of attention to governance issues in the commission.¹⁶ We raise the issue here, not to challenge the Glasgow group’s scholarship or to revisit the Tomlinson affair, but rather to note that assessment may be driven by ideology or political motives, in addition to its use as a tool to improve journalistic practice.

International Regulatory Assessment Traditions

Social and governmental expectations of public broadcasting are generally higher in industrialized democracies other than the United States. This results from longer histories, higher levels of public funding, and stronger competitive footing. Further, the

¹³ Glasgow Media Group (1980), *More Bad News*, London: Routledge, p. 115.

¹⁴ G. Philo and M. Berry (2004), *Bad News From Israel*, London: Pluto Press.

¹⁵ See, for example, R. Cirino (1971), *Don’t Blame the People: How the News Media Use Bias, Distortion and Censorship to Manipulate Public Opinion*, Los Angeles: Diversity Press; E. Efron (1971), *The News Twisters*, Los Angeles: Nash Publishing.

¹⁶ CPB, *REPORT OF REVIEW*, Chapter III.

absence of First Amendment traditions of press freedom often means fewer constraints upon governmental involvement in broadcasting. Accordingly, public law in other nations is largely more prescriptive regarding the obligations of public broadcasters. By extension, then, we may look internationally for assessment models and evaluation criteria.

Most models seek to define public service and to evaluate the degree to which national broadcasters meet those expectations. In many cases, such as Britain, Germany and Canada, international broadcasting laws do make direct reference to impartiality or other variants as content ideals.¹⁷ They fail, however, to provide specific evaluative criteria or methodologies. The notable exception is Sweden.

The Swedish Broadcasting Council in the 1960s and 1970s commissioned several major research studies by scholars at the University of Gothenburg, to determine whether Swedish public service broadcasters were meeting their statutory obligations for “factuality” and “impartiality” (the term “objectivity” is not mentioned in the law).¹⁸ The researchers developed a coding scheme that divided factuality into two components: truth (i.e. accuracy) and relevance, relating to the connection of the source or story to the larger issue. For example, is coverage of a small protest relevant to the reporting of the larger story, or might its inclusion represent bias or slant by appearing to favor or endorse

¹⁷ Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, Journalistic Independence Code, <http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/archive/2008/pb2008-5.htm>; H. Shaughnessy and C.F. Cobo (1990), *The Cultural Obligations of Broadcasting*, Manchester, UK: European Media Institute; U.K. Broadcasting Act of 1990, <http://www.statutelaw.gov.uk>.

¹⁸ J. Westerstahl (1983), “Objective News Reporting,” *Communication Research* 10, pp. 403-424.

the perspective of the protesters? “A description that allows the audience to understand the course of events is relevant,” wrote lead researcher Jorgen Westerstahl.¹⁹

Impartiality is divided into the categories of balance and neutrality of presentation. Balance in this context refers to proportionality of coverage: “all essential parties should, if possible, be included and have a voice, and ... smaller or larger deviations from a strict balance can be tolerated when justified by, for example, the existing supply of information or judgments of relevance.”²⁰ Neutrality means the journalist does not “identify with or repudiate the subject of the report.”²¹

Westerstahl’s team tended to emphasize data relating to impartiality, relative to factuality, which he explained as follows: “Objective news reporting is not accomplished without conscious will; objectivity is not a natural condition. When that will is missing, then the requirement of truth will occasionally be affected, but relevance decisions, balance between the parties in the conflict, and the presentations of the parties will always be affected.”²² Further, Westerstahl wrote, “[I]t is not so much the question of the veracity of individual reports as of the presentation as a whole and its relationship to reality.”²³

Ultimately, Westerstahl argued, such assessment research must take into account the interests of the audience, and requires the broadcaster to “know” the audience, in terms of possessing reliable social-scientific data on demographics and psychographics (what the Swedish team called “extramedia data”). “If one wonders why certain subject

¹⁹ Westerstahl, “Objective News Reporting,” p. 416.

²⁰ Westerstahl, “Objective News Reporting,” p. 419.

²¹ p. 420.

²² p. 421.

²³ p. 416.

areas are given so much attention while others are ignored, or why certain viewpoints constantly recur while others are missing, the need for extramedia data is obvious.”²⁴

“Extramedia data” may also be used longitudinally as a test of journalistic accuracy.²⁵

The Swedish model offers a useful theoretical framework for thinking about evaluation. The next section of the White Paper attempts to identify and define those concepts and criteria that are essential for evaluating journalistic content for balance and impartiality. These are the building blocks for any set of policies and procedures related to assessment.

Concepts and Criteria for Assessing Balance: Source Bias

An important criterion in evaluating balance is the selection of sources. Ideally, journalists would call upon sources from the various sides in proportional numbers and of similar standing (i.e. in terms of status, influence and access to information). In practice, studies show journalists devote “more attention to official, more authoritative, sources or more attention to the ‘voices’ with the best organization and resources.”²⁶ One study found, not surprisingly, that powerful, economically advantaged groups were “more satisfied” with the media coverage they received than were less-advantaged groups.²⁷

Many critics of U.S. media coverage of the build-up to the Iraq War alleged that

²⁴ Westerstahl, “Objective News Reporting,” p. 421.

²⁵ K.E. Rosengren (1980), “Bias in News: Methods and Concepts,” in C.G. Wilhoit and H. deBock (eds.), *Mass Communication Review Yearbook, Vol. 1*, Beverly Hills: Sage, pp. 249-263.

²⁶ McQuail, *Media Performance*, p. 229.

²⁷ T.R. Donahue, C.N. Olien and P.J. Tichenor (1985), “Reporting Conflict by Pluralism, Newspaper Type and Ownership,” *Journalism Quarterly* 62, pp. 489-499.

journalists relied too heavily on administration sources, and therefore failed to be sufficiently skeptical of official policy rationales.

Stavitsky and Gleason, in comparing NPR and Pacifica Radio news coverage in the early 1990s, found the two outlets reported many of the same stories, but often used vastly different sources, reflecting Pacifica's avowedly progressive political stance and NPR's aspiration of the period to establish itself as a full-service, mainstream news service.²⁸ While both organizations regularly used official sources, Pacifica was more likely to use activists and citizens as sources, and NPR was more likely to use "independent" academic experts.

Framing and "Preferred Readings"

Framing refers to the idea that news stories are organized – framed – in standardized formats "with typical 'codes' for presentation which tell the receiver how to 'read' stories."²⁹ As we wrote in an earlier White Paper for CPB: "This perspective contends that news stories may be framed in terms of cultural stereotypes: helpless single mothers or senior citizens being denied benefits by anonymous bureaucrats, hard-partying frat boys out of control on spring break, failed corporate CEOs dismissed with multimillionaire dollar 'golden parachutes.'"³⁰

This "cultural studies" approach to evaluating coverage also holds that such stories have "preferred readings," meaning the writer has embedded a preferred

²⁸A.G. Stavitsky and T.W. Gleason (1994), "Alternative Things Considered: A Comparison of National Public Radio and Pacifica Radio News Coverage," *Journalism Quarterly* 71, pp. 775-786.

²⁹ McQuail, *Media Performance*, p. 231; see, as an example, D.L. Altheide (1985), *Media Power*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

³⁰A.G. Stavitsky and J. Dvorkin (2008), *Objectivity and Balance: Conceptual and Practical History in American Journalism*, p. 4, <http://www.cpb.org/aboutcpb/goals/objectivity/whitepapers/>

interpretation - whether consciously or not - often favorable to the established order. News content is thus shaped within these larger interpretive frames. Conventions of news production, such as close-ups of emotional sources or “stand-ups” outside closed doors by a reporter who has been excluded, may serve these framed narratives. Stand-ups, for instance, impart the implicit power of the journalist, as do radio reports that include the reporter’s narration on location with background sound. Such visual or aural authority is currently missing from new media narratives, but it’s likely that signifiers will be discovered to invest the journalism with added credibility.

Semantic Bias

Also referred to as “discourse bias,” this refers to differential word choice as a component of bias. Communication researchers have long assumed that “evaluative direction is always implicit in the choice of words and phrases in any kind of text, and that such direction is open to decoding.”³¹ Is someone an “extremist” or an “activist”? Journalists in the Northwest wrestled with this in their coverage of the trial of people charged with blowing up SUVs and Bureau of Land Management sites in the name of environmental causes.³² Similarly, complaints over descriptive word choice have been an issue in criticism of media coverage of the Middle East conflict.³³

³¹ McQuail, *Media Performance*, p. 230, see, also, H.D. Lasswell, D. Lerner and I. De S. Pool (1952), *The Comparative Study of Symbols*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

³² S. Tomlinson (2008, June 4). Radical environmentalist Tre Arrow gets 78-month prison term. *The Oregonian*, <http://www.oregonlive.com/news/oregonian/index.ssf?/base/news/1212548168310830.xml&coll=7>

³³ J. Dvorkin (2002, April 2), “Are They ‘Terrorists,’ ‘Gunmen,’ or ‘Guerrillas?’” Ombudsman’s Column, <http://www.npr.org/yourturn/ombudsman/2002/020405.html>

Researchers in the social sciences and humanities have developed elaborate methodologies to measure “evaluative direction” of texts – the broad term for content, which could include news accounts.³⁴ Development of computer-assisted methods has advanced textual analysis, and could be adapted for assessment of journalistic content. Computer-assisted content analysis takes several forms: from simple word counts to identification of subjects or themes to elaborate analyses, utilizing artificial intelligence, that seek to ascribe meaning.³⁵ While much of this vein of research occurs at universities and software has become available “open source,”³⁶ a number of commercial providers offer software programs for “media content analysis,” designed primarily for companies to understand the tone of coverage about their brands.³⁷ Most computer-assisted content research involves analysis of text; however, work done by scientists to code human and animal behavior captured on video offers promise of adaptation for journalistic assessment.³⁸ For example, researchers could study visual elements noted below, such as use of camera angles or “image bites,” in assessing impartiality of presentation.

³⁴ K. Krippendorff (2004), *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; O. Holsti (1969), *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

³⁵ D. Riffe, S. Lacy and F.G. Fico (2005), *Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research* (2nd ed.), Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, especially Chapter 9.

³⁶ See, for example, the VBPro bundle of content analysis software developed by M. Mark Miller, at: <http://www.mariapinto.es/ciberabstracts/Articulos/VBPro.htm>

³⁷ See, for example, <http://www.perceptionmetrics.com/pm/Overview.aspx>, or http://www.mediatenor.com/mca_brain_vs_software.php

³⁸ See, for example, the products of the Dutch firm Noldus Information Technology, <http://www.noldus.com/human-behavior-research>

Concepts and Criteria for Assessing Impartiality: Visual Elements

Researchers have noted a variety of visual elements that may detract from neutral presentation of news. These aspects include large or splashy newspaper or magazine headlines or TV graphics, or differential camera angles.³⁹ In the realm of television news, scholars have noted that visual elements can distract attention from the verbal “text.”⁴⁰ Put another way, the script may be neutral, but the visual elements may convey a particular interpretation for the viewer.

In one recent example, Indiana University researchers Eric Bucy and Maria Grabe studied “image bites,” in which presidential candidates were seen on TV news, but not heard as contrasted with “sound bites,” in which they were seen *and* heard.⁴¹ Finding that candidates were displayed more in image bites than in sound bites, Bucy and Grabe argued that image bites are “vastly underappreciated as a source of political information.”⁴² To understand television election coverage, they conclude, researchers must examine visuals of candidates in addition to their words. They call for “a research program focused on the character of candidate displays, the potential for visual forms of bias, and the visual framing of election campaigns.”⁴³

³⁹ W.E. Ryan and T. Conover (2004), *Graphic Communications Today*, Clifton Park, NY: Thomson/Delmar Learning; R. Williams and J. Newton (2007), *Visual Communication: Integrating Media, Art and Science*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum; H. Zettl (1999), *Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

⁴⁰ R.K. Tiemens (1970), “Some Relations of Camera Angle to Communicator Credibility,” *Journal of Broadcasting* 14, pp. 483-490; R.K. Tiemens, M.O. Sillars, D.C. Alexander and D. Werling (1988), “TV Coverage of Jesse Jackson’s Speech to the 1984 Democratic Convention,” *Journal of Broadcasting* 32, pp. 1-22.

⁴¹ E. Bucy and M. Grabe (2007), “Taking Television Seriously: A Sound and Image Bite Analysis of Presidential Campaign Coverage, 1992-2004,” *Journal of Communication* 57, pp. 652-675.

⁴² Bucy and Grabe, “Taking Television Seriously,” p. 653.

⁴³ p. 670.

Before leaving this discussion of concepts and criteria, scholarly caution is worth noting. While the theoretical and methodological advances noted above offer interesting and potentially valuable avenues for analysis, they require, in McQuail's words, "objective assessment of objectivity."⁴⁴ In other words, they require value judgments about criteria and methodology. "The findings never speak for themselves," McQuail wrote, "and always need interpretation....Conclusions drawn from subtle measures of media partiality in news texts have to be treated with caution."⁴⁵

Contemporary Assessment Initiatives

Much of the current work in journalism assessment may be categorized in three ways: academic research of the type cited above, studies by journalism "think tanks" in partnership with foundations and universities, and "crowd-sourcing" initiatives conducted online. Having focused on academic studies above, this section will describe initiatives in the latter two categories.

"Think Tank" Assessment

Most prominent in this category are the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), formerly affiliated with Columbia University and now funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, affiliated with Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government.⁴⁶ PEJ conducts ongoing content studies of news coverage and analysis of

⁴⁴ McQuail, *Media Performance*, p. 236.

⁴⁵ p. 236.

⁴⁶ http://journalism.org/about_pej/about_us,
<http://www.hks.harvard.edu/presspol/about/index.html>

industry trends as well as annual *State of the News Media* surveys; the Shorenstein Center generally conducts qualitative analyses on themes of press, politics and public policy.⁴⁷

The focus of PEJ's weekly content analysis is the national "News Coverage Index" (NCI) which measures the leading stories in a given week.⁴⁸ Though this emphasis plays a valuable role in helping us understand the agenda being set by U.S. journalists, it does not by itself address issues of objectivity and balance.⁴⁹ Select studies do implicate such questions, such as a joint PEJ/Shorenstein Center study of media coverage of candidate character in the 2008 presidential primaries.⁵⁰ The study sought to determine the "media master narratives," an approach which falls under the category of framing, noted earlier. Methodology was adapted from PEJ's weekly news indices, with researchers characterizing themes of coverage and coding theme as positive or negative. This enabled researchers to conclude that "the dominant personal narratives in the media about Obama and Clinton were almost identical in tone, and *were both twice as positive as negative*"⁵¹ (emphasis added).

By extension, then, while PEJ's regular studies do not directly address the questions of journalistic assessment that are the focus of this White Paper, PEJ data sets could be mined for special studies of objectivity and balance on PBS' *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* and NPR's *Morning Edition*, which are regularly monitored for the NCI,

⁴⁷ <http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/2009/index.htm>

⁴⁸ Similarly, PEJ tracks the leading stories in the "blogosphere" through its New Media Index, and on talk radio through its Talk Show Index.

⁴⁹ See http://journalism.org/research_and_analysis/Studies for a list of PEJ studies.

⁵⁰ Project for Excellence in Journalism and Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy (2008, May 29), *Character and the Primaries of 2008*, <http://journalism.org/node/11266>

⁵¹ PEJ/Shorenstein, *Character and the Primaries of 2008*, p. 1.

as is the British Broadcasting Corporation's international-version website, bbcnews.com.⁵²

“Crowd-Sourcing” Assessment

The term “crowd sourcing” refers to mass collaboration fostered by Web 2.0-style community participation.⁵³ Numerous participatory websites have emerged as *de facto* sources of assessment by aggregating content referred by readers; offering fora for reader reaction, which is often critical; and providing measures of influence. A well-known exemplar is Digg, which invites users to “participate in the collaborative editorial process” by submitting links to content they find interesting, and commenting on the material.⁵⁴ Another popular site, Technorati, an aggregator of blogs, created a “Technorati Authority Index,” measuring the number of blogs linking to a particular website and implying, if not necessarily quality, then at least impact.⁵⁵

A Seattle company known as SpinSpotter went a step further by adding software to the crowd-sourced mix, a free download called “Spinoculars” intended to identify spin and bias in online news and marketing content.⁵⁶ The SpinSpotter approach triangulates computer algorithms which search for vague phraseology such as “critics say,” among other terms, as well as noting stories with just one source, among other issues, referrals from SpinSpotter readers, and an advisory board of journalists and educators as “experts.” SpinSpotters calls on its readers to help “Resuscitate objective journalism”

⁵² http://journalism.org/about_news_index/list_of_outlets

⁵³ See J. Howe (2006, June), *The Rise of Crowdsourcing*, WIRED 14.06, <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html>

⁵⁴ <http://digg.com/>

⁵⁵ <http://support.technorati.com/faq/topic/71?replies=1>

⁵⁶ <http://spinspotter.com/>

while its founders acknowledge the difficulty in doing so. “We just want [the spin] to be transparent, above the surface,” CEO John Atcheson told *The New York Times*.⁵⁷

Obviously, crowd-sourced assessment is vastly different than academic or think-tank-based research, and lacks methodological rigor. But it’s worth noting here as an indicator of citizen interest in the quality of media content, awareness of bias as a problem, and willingness to join the conversation. Some public media organizations are already incorporating elements of crowd-sourced assessment in their websites; more should do so.

Assessment Issues in New Media

The rise of new media platforms raises a new set of assessment issues.

- Because much content on new platforms was “repurposed” from broadcast versions, how does the researcher assess the online or mobile media story differently?
- What’s the “unit of analysis” to be studied when websites may archive past stories on a continuing issue? Can a journalist be criticized for failing to provide sufficient context, or not giving voice to all sides in one story, when the archived stories are a few clicks away?
- How should a researcher assess the totality of coverage when the public broadcaster has produced versions for multiple distribution platforms?⁵⁸

⁵⁷ R. Perez-Pena (2008, October 15), “Online Watchdog Sniffs for Media Bias, *New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/16/arts/television/16spin.html?_r=1

⁵⁸ For an account of multiplatform coverage of a breaking story, see C. Hoyt (2009, February 15), “A Balancing Act on the Web,” *New York Times*, Week in Review, p. 10.

As we adapt our thinking about journalistic practice in the digital age, so too must we rethink journalistic assessment with new media.

Consider the multiple platforms upon which National Public Radio, as an exemplar, distributes content: terrestrial analog radio, terrestrial HD (digital) radio, satellite radio, the web (npr.org), mobile media, Facebook and Twitter. What is the producer's obligation for objectivity and balance *within* a particular platform? Is it sufficient to be objective/balanced and provide source diversity *across* all platforms? This is the digital-age analogue of the old debate over objectivity and balance within a single program or across the program stream. And what are the assessment tools for new media? How do we measure balance on Twitter posts limited to 140 characters?

Yet another wrinkle posed by new media involves "citizen journalism" that may be linked to station web sites, if not published directly on the sites. How does the researcher evaluate the quality of citizen journalism, such as listener-contributed blogs or essays, or audience participation found on websites? If the amount or tone of citizen submissions is not balanced, does the station have an affirmative obligation to commission such content?

We should note that assessment of "aggregated journalism" across multiple platforms would require enhanced understanding of the ways in which people use public (and social) media. Increased access to data from Arbitron's Portable People Meter⁵⁹ will provide some useful data, but CPB or producers may wish to commission special studies to answer relevant questions. Some examples: are people who listen to terrestrial public radio more or less likely than non-listeners to go to station websites? How many listeners

⁵⁹ http://www.arbitron.com/portable_people_meters/home.htm

have Facebook pages? How many use Twitter? Do listeners to public radio's satellite radio or mobile media channels also tune into their local terrestrial signals? A model for such studies is Jacobs Media's "Bedroom Project" analysis of media use by people aged 17 to 28, labeled "Bedroomers" because they spend so much time using media technology in their bedrooms.⁶⁰

In our previous White Paper, "Objectivity and Balance: Conceptual and Practical History in American Journalism," we argued for a new conception of objectivity and balance to account for the profound economic, social and technological changes in U.S. media. This new conception, we wrote, "must accept the ascendance of so-called distributed, or 'wisdom-of-the-commons,' journalism."⁶¹ Regardless of how "legacy media" professionals may feel about it, journalism has become an enterprise shared with the audience. Broadcasters still keep the gates, and enforce the standards, but viewers and listeners expect – indeed demand – to be part of the conversation. Left out, they will abandon mainstream outlets for the "Daily Me," a self-selected diet of online information about one's particular interests.⁶²

A re-imagined, participatory journalistic ideal would inform the concepts, criteria and methods for assessing journalistic content in the multiplatform, participatory mediascape. This conception increases the space for user feedback and contribution -- enhancing the functions of commentary and community building -- while maintaining and foregrounding the traditional model of journalist as verifier. The PEJ, in its 2005 State of the News Media report, noted the ascendance of a "journalism of assertion,"

⁶⁰ <http://www.thebedroomstudy.com/>

⁶¹ Stavitsky and Dvorkin, *Conceptual and Practical History*, p. 30.

⁶² N. Kristof (2009, March 19), "The Daily Me," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/19/opinion/19kristof.html>

driven by the blogosphere and talk programming on radio and cable.⁶³ Clearly, the concept of a distributed, participatory journalistic enterprise taps into this concern. Citizen-generated commentary can serve as the “sharp end of the lance” of news coverage, but should be built upon the verification and contextualization of traditional journalism. That’s why assessment should be directed to ensure an appropriate balance between substantiated journalism and commentary (read: verification and assertion), between professional and citizen-generated coverage, between official sources and those gleaned from “public-insight networks,” and between balanced and point-of-view content.⁶⁴

Recommendations

We conclude with recommendations for formal policies and procedures for analysis of objectivity and balance in public broadcasting, in accordance with the CPB OIG’s *REPORT OF REVIEW*.

We suggest adoption of a program of ongoing, systematic assessment of objectivity and balance. It’s clear from our review of the differing approaches to journalistic assessment that there are numerous criteria and methodologies to bring to bear on content. Therefore it will be necessary for CPB to convene a system-wide conversation with the significant stakeholders in the public broadcasting community, along the model of the Poynter Institute conferences organized in support of the

⁶³ http://www.stateofthedia.org/2005/narrative_overview_eight.asp?cat=10&media=1

⁶⁴ For examples of public insight networks in Minnesota and Oregon, see <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/publicinsightjournalism/> or <http://news.opb.org/pin/about/>

Independence and Integrity ethics guidebooks.⁶⁵ Stakeholders would be asked to define and prioritize the focus of studies, as it would be unrealistic to seek to evaluate all journalistic programming at one time. Should research begin with national radio journalism programs, or TV documentary, for example?

Further, stakeholders should determine the criteria for assessment. For example, should researchers initially study sourcing, or focus on news frames or semantic analysis? Once determined, the public broadcasting community, in partnership with academic researchers, should discuss ways to define and interpret the various measurements.⁶⁶

Finally, this system-wide gathering would consider the dynamic issues, noted above, related to new media platforms.

After the system stakeholders have provided input, we suggest that CPB commission a series of annual studies that would complement the “Open to the Public” reports of feedback on objectivity and balance.⁶⁷ Studies would be conducted by independent academic researchers, dealing with criteria and concepts assigned by CPB. Topics of study would vary yearly, in accordance with feedback reflecting areas of concern from the public and the public broadcasting community. The use of independent scholars would serve to establish the credibility of the research, given past charges of partisanship and polemics. Research findings would be made public by CPB, and would, we imagine, be widely distributed and discussed in the popular and trade press, as well as the blogosphere. This would help to foster a culture of transparency in public media, in

⁶⁵ See <http://www.cpb.org/stations/radioethicsguide/>

⁶⁶ For example: an “image bite” analysis of the *NewsHour* or *Frontline* would require clear and precise definitions of how to “code” each unit of analysis.

⁶⁷ <http://www.cpb.org/aboutcpb/goals/objectivity/>

the spirit of the “Open to the Public” campaign as well as the clarion call of the *Independence and Integrity* ethics process.

Lessons from Fred Friendly

This paper has argued for applying a broad range of communication theories and methodologies in the service of assessing objectivity and balance. In short, we call for developing a program of research tailored to public broadcasting’s purposes. There have been fits and starts toward this end in the history of public broadcasting.

In 1971, Fred Friendly, the former CBS News president then serving as a television consultant to the Ford Foundation, prompted the foundation to convene ten prominent academics.⁶⁸ The scholars were charged with developing qualitative indicators on the social impact of public TV – “what the audience is getting out of it; and what use they make of it” – to augment PTV’s then-new program of audience measurement.⁶⁹ The gathering led to the creation of the little-known, short-lived Public Broadcast Survey Facility, funded by Ford and CPB. The facility launched an ambitious set of studies between 1972 and 1975, when it was disbanded because of resource and organizational problems.⁷⁰

In 1973 the Markle Foundation, a major funder of public broadcasting, issued a call for research methodologies to measure how well the system was meeting the needs of “special interest audiences.”⁷¹ Two years later the National Association of Educational

⁶⁸ A.G. Stavitsky (1998), “Counting the House in Public Television: A History of Ratings Use, 1953-1980,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 42, pp. 520-534.

⁶⁹ p. 526-527.

⁷⁰ p. 527-528.

⁷¹ p. 528.

Broadcasters, hoping to build upon the Public Broadcast Survey Facility, organized a research conference. Conferees called for creation of a national Public Telecommunications Research Council.⁷² Neither the Markle nor the NAEB initiatives came to fruition.

Obviously this is not the time to call for establishment of a new research infrastructure in public broadcasting. But existing partnerships with academics and consultants could be leveraged to develop new ways of assessing news content. And the research momentum could serve to renew interest in and understanding of broader, fundamental questions of how well U.S. public broadcasting is fulfilling its mission.

⁷² Quoted in Stavitsky, "Counting the House," p. 528.