

Should news get personal? Emotion and objectivity in the face of suffering

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2014/07/30/should-news-get-personal-emotion-and-objectivity-in-the-face-of-suffering/

2014-7-30

Should journalists covering suffering allow their own emotions to become part of the story?

[see comments and selected tweets at the bottom of this article for reaction]

Jon Snow's [heartfelt monologue](#) about the suffering of Gaza's children has become a YouTube hit amongst those who have been shocked by the images of the appalling injuries and deaths of citizens in that narrow strip of land. Predictably, [others have criticised it](#) as a one-sided piece of propaganda.



What interests me is not just the alleged 'bias' itself, but the evident personal feeling that this broadcasting titan put on display. Will it help the cause he so obviously cares about? And does it make for good journalism?

The classic idea of 'objective' reporting on conflict and suffering is that the job of the journalist is to witness, analyse and leave the judgements and campaigns to others. The BBC's Matthew Price expresses this doctrine perfectly in an [interview](#) [in at 2'48"] he gave after reporting on Haiti (where Jon Snow also famously emoted on screen). In it he says that his mission was to do the reporting straight in the hope that people would see the coverage and give money or take action as politicians to change things.

Of course, there's no such thing as purely objective reporting, but it's easy to spot journalism that isn't. Sometimes the journalist will become involved and that can have a dramatic impact, as when Anderson Cooper [famously rescued a child in Haiti](#) from a riot on camera.



It's impossible to make cast-iron rules about this sort of thing. Journalism is a craft not a science. Personally, I think that the best TV reporters actually under-write and let the images and victims' own voices speak for themselves.

Certainly, human interest can be a great way to connect viewers or readers to remote victims of injustice or violence. However, when the journalist's own emotions become part of the narrative then there's a danger of losing trust.

Displaying such feeling may actually play into the hands of the next Israeli spokesperson interviewed on Channel 4 News. And viewers more sympathetic to Israel may also wonder if his heart is in it when he has to take other sides to task.

Editorial Introspection

I always welcome it when journalists talk publicly about their work. (My think-tank would be in trouble if they didn't!). It is good that journalists are transparent about how they do their job. But should this introspection become part of the editorial output?

Of course, journalists are only human and the strain of suppressing normal feelings in the face of the horrors of war is immense. We regularly have wonderful foreign correspondents come to give talks at Polis and it's clear that they find it therapeutic. One outstanding journalist who claimed to have been unmoved by reporting on a disaster actually broke down when he viewed the footage again in front of the students. He had bottled up those emotions for over a year.

But that is the job. It's a tough one but that's the responsibility of journalism. To provide as honest and informed an account as possible.

Complex Dispute

So I remain somewhat uneasy about Jon's video. I feel very uncomfortable with the way that people on social media approve of a piece of journalism simply because it reflects their point of view and disparage reporting that challenges them. So I don't think it helps if journalists allow themselves to become emotional cheerleaders for causes in such a bitterly divided and complex dispute – even where the suffering is so disproportionately on one side. Channel 4 News were right to keep it on YouTube because it has to be seen as a side-bar to the programme's main mission which is to strive for a kind of objectivity. Though with platform convergence that kind of separation loses meaning.

[Some have argued](#) that TV regulation is out of date and this kind of more personal narrative should be allowed on terrestrial TV. As it is, I am not convinced that it would have broken Ofcom rules in itself. Jon's call to action: "we can't let it go on...together we can make a difference" was so vague to be somewhat meaningless. It's not as if they put up a caption with a telephone number for donations to the Hamas Fighting Fund.

Impartiality is measured over a programme or series of programmes. The idea is that you are tough on an Israeli in an interview but then suitably tough on a Palestinian. Yes, Snow focused (almost) exclusively on the plight of Palestinian children and (almost) ignored the wider context but that's the story he was telling in that particular film.

Online Boost

I suspect Channel 4 bosses will be delighted with the profile that this film – which remember was not broadcast on the TV programme itself – has given to a show that, like its rival Newsnight, is suffering from falling viewing figures. It's certainly given a boost to their online traffic. It fits into their increasingly creative offering online.

But does it represent a shift in the ethos of public service broadcasting that ITN is legally obliged to follow? Has the Internet age made Ofcom's stipulations on impartiality irrelevant? As James Ball [argues in the Guardian](#), should TV be allowed to be partial in pursuit of younger audiences more used to non-stop comment?

Well, it's not such a departure. Channel 4 already has a remit to be an alternative to the BBC so in that sense this kind of experiment is in their DNA. Many of C4News' reporters already have plenty of attitude. I think the better question is whether a more extreme version of emotionally-charged, campaigning journalism would work?

Does Channel 4 News want to adopt the Fox News strategy of speaking on behalf of a particular political demographic? Does it want to brand itself, like The Guardian, as a 'liberal' news organisation?

As Channel 4 News is already heading into niche territory in the analogue market this might seem logical. Though the research suggests that when big stories break people run to organisations like the BBC precisely because they want to get the news in a relatively straight fashion. In an age of information overload and digital distortion people want trusted guides to events, not just bleeding hearts or subjective campaigners. I wonder if such a strategy would put off the many people who like Channel 4 News because it is a serious, intelligent, robust journalistic programme, not because it's politically partisan.

[A big declaration of interest. I worked for eight happy years at Channel 4 News. I think Jon Snow is one of the best journalists I ever worked with and the show is as good as it's ever been.]

UPDATE:

Jon is not the only journalist talking about their emotions in connection with reporting on Gaza. AFP's Sarah Hussein has written [a powerful article](#) on her return home after a spell covering the story.

UPDATE REACTON

There's been lots of reaction to this piece and almost all of it passionate but polite and thoughtful. There are some comments attached to this blog but here is a sample of some the tweets. I will only include those that made critical or

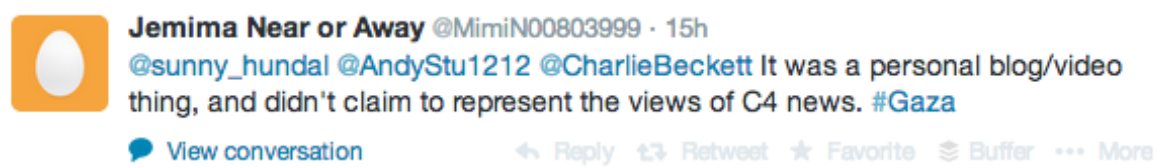
additional points and I realise that twitter is hardly representative of wider audiences.



Yes, 'we' are supposed to get emotional, but I was arguing that journalists should not. When a story is this emotional it really needs someone to add in some cold analysis about power and politics, otherwise it's just a grief-fest.



Yes, Jon is perfectly capable of being balanced. My problem is not with his journalism, but what is in the mind of the viewer. As I wrote, it's good for journalists to be transparent but once you reveal your feelings in such a strong way, it's difficult for the viewer to see you as disinterested.



I think this is one of the problems of convergence. I don't think the film was labeled as personal. Jon is THE face of Channel 4 News so it does feel like he is speaking as the brand itself. Many people will watch C4News online so won't see this film as different to the rest of the output. The idea of a 'blog' as a personal space is no more certain anymore than the idea of one's tweets being personal. That doesn't make it wrong to make a film like that, but I think it makes it impossible to say it was 'just personal'.



This (tongue in cheek?) tweet was typical of many that said that Jon would be right to cross a line and make a partisan plea because the rest of the media is so pro-Israeli. Let's leave aside the conspiracy theories for a moment, but it is palpably not true that we haven't seen vast amounts of coverage in the UK showing the suffering of the Gazans. Every newspaper and bulletin I have seen has shown huge amounts of emotionally searing testimony. There is a bigger and more complex question about how that coverage has been framed. But I would argue that taking an emotional approach actually hinders those who are trying to draw attention to the wider geo-politics that means Israel is able to carry out this operation without any threat of serious sanctions or reprimand. We need more analysis, not angst.

