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# He Said, She Said: The Challenges to Modern Journalistic Practice in Covering Climate Change

MANDY OAKHAM

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**Abstract:** Media coverage of climate change and associated issues is clearly a fiercely contested ideological site. Specifically the Australian context has been used by Murdoch-owned media to attempt to establish a hegemonic dominance of the public discourse in relation to this issue, while at the same time securing other business and editorial objectives.

This paper examines the challenges faced by journalists who cover this issue invoking professional notions of fairness and balance. Further, it will question how it is, that within the profoundly complex modern newsmaking context, notions of professional autonomy, editorial freedom and self-censorship are managed, incorporated and resolved.

In examining these issues this paper will draw on traditional Marxian theory—specifically theories of dialectical change and kernels of contradiction, as well as revisiting Gramsci’s notions of hegemony—to unpack modern editorial processes and test the ability of journalistic practice in reacting to economic, as well as moral imperatives. This paper also draws on the work of US scholar Jay Rosen and his theory of ‘he said, she said’ journalism to assess whether Australian journalists have compromised themselves in the nature of their practice which builds symmetry between two sides of an argument, while placing themselves in the middle of polarized viewpoints and thereby negating any objectives of fairness and balance.

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## 1. Introduction

In an address to the National Climate Change Summit on 6 August 2007, the then Australian Opposition Leader, Kevin Rudd, declared climate change to be the greatest moral challenge of our generation. He argued further that it was not just an environmental challenge, but was also a great economic and social challenge. This paper asks the fundamental question is climate change the great moral challenge for journalism and the practice of journalism?

Previous research by Manne (2011) and Bacon (*et al.* 2011) established that hegemonic discourses in relation to climate change have been propagated and maintained by News Limited media in Australia. As we see currently being played out on the Australian political stage it is relatively easy to lay such charges against Murdoch-owned news organizations and



then equally easy to have the charge of conspiracy theorist fired back by these organizations. Manne (2013) speaking at the People and the Planet conference at RMIT University referred to the success of the movement he terms ‘comprehensive denialism’ and he suggested one of the issues that required future investigation is how these patterns of denialism have taken hold in what he refers to as the ‘Anglosphere’.

However, Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci did demonstrate through his re-working of the notion of hegemony that dominance is never guaranteed and dominant positions have to be won and negotiated. The aim of this paper is not to add to the conspiracy and counter-conspiracy charges swirling around this ‘Anglosphere’, or indeed around the ‘mediasphere’. Rather the intention is to identify a fundamental dilemma for journalistic practice in its attempts to respond to the challenge of covering climate change. This paper will argue that the core dilemma arises from the journalistic ideologies which underpin modern practice, with particular focus on notions of objectivity, balance and fairness. In so doing this paper will also clarify the way in which particular forms of journalistic practice contribute to the establishment of certain hegemonic discourses surrounding climate change.

US scholar Jay Rosen identified as one of the fundamental problems for modern journalistic practice is the approach he identified as ‘he said, she said’ journalism. Rosen’s definition of this journalistic practice is outlined below:

- There’s a public dispute;
- The dispute makes news;
- No real attempt is made to assess clashing truth claims in the story, even though they are in some way the reason for the story;
- The means for assessment do exist, so it’s possible to exert a factual check on some of the claims, but for whatever reason the report declines to make use of them;
- The symmetry of two sides making opposite claims puts the reporter in the middle between polarized extremes (Rosen 2011).

In 2011 Rosen argued that there had been widespread misunderstanding of his original premise. He suggested that this particular form of journalistic practice was ‘failing to do the reporting required to shed light on conflicting truth claims’ (Rosen 2011). He continued by contending that journalists have used the ‘he said, she said’ model as a shield against attacks of bias. He argued that journalists and news organizations can allow this desire to escape criticism to overwhelm what should be natural journalistic instincts to test truth claims. He urged journalists to avoid ‘refuge-seeking behaviour’ and focus instead on truth telling (Rosen 2011).

This model can be seen in operation in Australian news outlets when confronted with the problems inherent in covering climate change. That is, journalists, ever mindful of attempting to maintain some semblance of fairness and balance, even if only at the ideological level, present stories in the format of two completing ‘sides’. For example, this is what the pro-climate change science ‘camp’ are saying (‘he said’), while this, is what those on the skeptical ‘side’ of climate change are saying (‘she said’).

## **2. Journalistic ideology: New times but old mindsets?**

What the Rosen model of ‘he said, she said’ form of journalism practice exposes is the inherent contradictions now infusing both journalistic ideology and journalistic practice. Oakham (2005) in her PhD research identified the strong oral traditions and the strength of the ideological socialization which are present when young journalists enter the profession in Australia.

Zelizer (1993) explained how this ideological socialization occurs.

‘[J]ournalists ... create community through discourse that proliferates in informal talks, professional meetings and trade reviews, memoirs, interviews on talk shows, and media retrospectives. Through discourse, journalists create shared interpretations that make their professional lives meaningful; that is, they use stories about the past to address dilemmas that present themselves while covering news’ (Zelizer, cited in Berkowitz 1997, p. 27).

Adopting Marxian language one of the major ‘kernels of contradiction’ underpinning these communities of ideological discourses is the notion of objectivity. It is not the intention of this paper to dissect the philosophical problems inherent in this concept of objectivity but it is sufficient to note that despite these difficulties this concept still pervades thinking around the defining features of Western journalism practice. Maras has a basic criticism of this concept and that is,

‘... objectivity is itself a form of bias and is not responsible’ (2013, p.64).

Maras contends that because journalists tend to rely on official sources when generating news coverage, this results in coverage that tends to favour the status quo and discourages genuine watchdog type journalism. Glasser in his seminal 1984 essay argued that objectivity allows journalists to shift responsibility away from their own actions with such claims as we don’t create the news, we just report it, therefore we are not responsible for consequences of our reporting.

As Glasser (1984) explained,

‘As a set of beliefs, objectivity appears to be rooted in a positivist view of the world, an enduring commitment to the supremacy of observable and retrievable facts. This commitment, in turn, impinges on news organizations’ principal commodity—the day’s news. Thus my argument, in part, is this: Today’s news is indeed biased—as it must inevitably be—and this bias can be best understood by understanding the concept, the conventions, and the ethic of objectivity.’

‘Specifically, objectivity in journalism accounts for—or at least helps us understand—three principal developments in American journalism; each of these developments contributes to the bias or ideology of news. First, objective reporting is biased against what the press typically defines as its role in a democracy—that of a Fourth Estate, the watchdog role, an adversary press. Indeed, objectivity in journalism is biased in favor of the status quo; it is inherently conservative to the extent that it encourages reporters to rely on what sociologist Alvin Goulder so appropriately describes as the “managers of the

status quo”—the prominent and the elite. Second, objective reporting is biased against independent thinking; it emasculates the intellect by treating it as a disinterested spectator. Finally, objective reporting is biased against the very idea of responsibility; the day's news is viewed as something journalists are compelled to report, not something they are responsible for creating' (Glasser, 1984).

It is therefore the ideological dialectic at work within journalistic culture and practice which results in hegemonic discourses emerging, but also provides the potential for change if there could be a synthesis of contradictory professional ideologies to produce a new form of practice which could be described as responsible or even emancipatory journalism?

### 3. The Australian journalistic terrain

Australian journalism is undoubtedly still convulsing from what has been described as the 'perfect storm' that brings together the tsunami of digital technological change and the loss of traditional business models that have supported the practice. The aftershocks of that storm have seen drastic reductions in newsroom staff, outsourcing of some aspects of newsroom production processes, and an increased concentration of media ownership. A report funded by the Australian government and the industry body, The Walkley Foundation, was released earlier this year acknowledged that this perfect storm had intensified pre-existing issues in Australian journalism such as increased press concentration, falling newspaper circulation and increased competition for audiences from other media and digital platforms. The report, *Journalism at the Speed of Bytes*, found that despite these problems the Australian newspaper publishing market 'is holding its value, estimated in 2012 at \$4.9 billion, but industry forecasters predict its future substitution by online publishing' (O'Donnell and McKnight 2012, p. 9).

The report continues with this overview,

'Australian newspaper companies, like their international counterparts, are responding to the current crisis by diversifying into non-newspaper businesses, restructuring news operations, adopting user-pays digital news models, and shedding staff. These strategies are directed to ensuring the newspaper business survives ... The newspaper business in Australia is now operating in uncharted waters. More than 1,000 journalists' jobs have been lost in the last three years, with a consequent drop in newsroom capacity to produce the same quantity and quality of daily journalism—all with no guarantee that the digital destination will restore jobs or newsroom resources' (O'Donnell and McKnight 2012, p. 9).

If journalism in Australia was an eco-system then it would surely be described as an extremely volatile and fragile eco-system, and perhaps an endangered species when looked at long term. Of course the current journalistic terrain is not just the result of current technological and economic factors. As previously identified, the ideological habitus in which journalism is practised is a major causal factor contributing to the tendency of Australian journalists to fall into uncritical adoption of the 'he said, she said' approach. This brief overview of the journalistic terrain and the economic and technological factors impacting that terrain would appear to confirm that is not a time for radical rethinking of such easy options in terms of reporting practices. Another factor which emerges from this

ideological habitus is the fraught relationship between Australian journalists and notions of professionalism.

#### **4. Problems with the ‘P’ word**

Today’s journalistic habitus in Australia has been formed by a number of historical, social, cultural and technological forces. Hirst and Harrison (2007) make clear the link between the historical origins of journalism within the 19<sup>th</sup> century media landscape and the continuing ambiguities in the socio-cultural status of journalists in stating that,

‘By the 1870s more newspapers were employing reporters, but their status in colonial society was fairly low. According to some accounts of the time, journalists were lacking in morals, learning and self-respect. Colonial journalists had an “ambiguous” status according to Mayer. It seems to have been taken for granted by most writers that journalists were not just “ordinary” workers’ (Hirst and Harrison 2007, p. 85).

Hirst and Harrison add that,

‘[b]y the end of the nineteenth century Australian journalism had largely outgrown the image of the Bohemian and the wild colonial boy, no doubt because of the greater discipline required of the commercial newsroom’ (2007, p. 86).

Vine (2009) argued in her PhD thesis that ‘larrikinism’, or at least an ideal type of the larrikin, continues to determine variants within the Australian journalistic habitus. Vine (2009) further highlighted a possible link between this journalistic larrikin approach and an affinity with working class origins and traditions within Australia.

Henningham (1998) found ‘Australians journalists were typically young, well-educated, middle-class, and male.’ And, ‘estimated there were around 4,500 journalists working in mainstream newsrooms at that time’ (cited in O’Donnell and McKnight 2012, p. 36). According to the *Journalism at the Speed of Bytes* report, Henningham found these journalists were,

‘committed to information dissemination, valued autonomy and editorial policies, frequently held “somewhat left-of centre political views” and faced two main challenges: media ownership concentration and new media technologies’ (Henningham, cited in O’Donnell and McKnight 2012, p. 36).

The report found that ‘Australian and British journalists rated the watchdog or adversarial role more highly than their American counterparts’ (O’Donnell and McKnight 2012, p. 36). According to the *2007–2011 Worlds of Journalism* project Australian journalists did value objective reporting and ethical frameworks, but,

‘were fundamentally pragmatic, and tried to find a balance between giving audiences what they wanted, and reporting news that journalists thought they should know (Hanusch, 2008). Deuze (2008) noted that the homogeneity underpinning journalistic perceptions and practices has given coherence to news



work, but, at the same, has meant newsrooms tend to have inward-looking, self-referential cultures ... ' (cited in O'Donnell and McKnight 2012, p. 36).

Nolan in his 2008 overview of the studies of professionalism and journalism such as Aldridge and Evetts (2003), Green and Sykes (2004) and Soloski (1997) attempts to identify what some of the criteria of professionalism, that journalism as a practice, would have to meet, which include:

- The association between professions and public trust and public responsibility and a level of social status;
- The capacity for high levels of technical and ethical judgement;
- Barriers to entry which mandate specific qualifications and/or training;
- Systems of self-regulation which in turn are based on high levels of specialist knowledge;
- Other systems of regulation operating through effective professional associations.

Nolan (2008) further builds a list of the problems associated with journalism which may combine to prevent its classification as a true profession. Among the things he argues journalism lacks, are:

- A unified body of theoretical knowledge;
- Consistent basis of training;
- No definite pre-requisites for practice;
- Lack of real independence from employers;
- Lack of sanction of breaches of codes of ethics;
- Lack of public trust and public esteem.

Dunn (2004) however defined professionalism as a 'calling founded on a body of knowledge, a call to public service and an ethical framework of practice.' The author of this paper would argue that these three fundamentals are clearly evident in Australian journalism practice. A declared hostility between industry and the academy is another significant barrier to the adoption of a fully professional model in Australian journalism practice but there is also another powerful challenger lying outside these dissenting ranks. The issue of defining just who is a journalist is now a fundamental question facing all associated with the practice.

## **5. Trust me I am a journalist**

Trust has become another core issue for Western journalism practice. Australian journalists have always suffered from extremely bad reviews from their consuming publics. The annual survey of professional esteem has always ranked journalists very low and interestingly print journalists have always scored lower than their television colleagues. Amanda Wilson, a former editor of one of Australia's most respected broadsheets, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, writing in the report *Journalism at the Speed of Bytes* suggests that 'erosion in public trust' has collided with the 'newcomers in the digital space' (Wilson, cited in O'Donnell and McKnight 2012, p. 3).

‘The faltering economics of the newsgathering industry has left journalism in a climate of fear. A cloud of doom has descended on those who care about quality, independent journalism as they watch the means of funding it—revenue from advertising—move from the steady decline of recent years into freefall. The bottom of the cliff from which it has taken this dive is not visible at this point’ (Wilson, cited in O’Donnell and McKnight 2012, p. 3).

Keane (2012) reported the results of research conducted by Essential Research polling which found that a two-year long slide in trust in most of Australia’s media outlets had halted, with trust flat or rebounding slightly for many outlets. The news was good for Australia’s national broadcaster, the *Australian Broadcasting Commission* (ABC), which retained its undisputed title as Australia’s most trusted media. Trust in ABC television news and current affairs rose two points to 74 per cent, its fourth straight rise, and ABC radio lifted two points to 69 per cent. The news however was not so good for Murdoch owned platforms in Australia. For example,

‘the news is worse for News Limited. *The Australian* suffered a nine-point fall in trust, down to 60%. *The Herald-Sun* fell three points among Victorians to 51%; *The Courier-Mail* had the biggest fall, down 14 points to 51%. And bringing up the rear is Australia’s least-trusted major newspaper for two years in a row, *The Daily Telegraph*, which lost three points to 49% among NSW readers. Just under one in five readers say they have “no trust at all” in the Telegraph, by far the highest level of no trust, and a further 30% say they have little trust’ (Keane 2012).

## **6. Way forward?**

This paper has highlighted that climate change could be seen as one of the greatest moral challenges to the practice of journalism, and that a fundamental hindrance to the practice in responding to this challenge, has been the contradictions arising from the ideology which continues to pervade modern practice. One of the practical problems which emerges from these ideologies has been what Rosen (2011) identified as ‘he said, she said’ journalism. In the Australian context, there are also the fundamental compounding issues surrounding definitions of professionalism, and the natural resistance within Australian journalism to accept labels of professionals and the subsequent perceived threats of direct government regulation of the practice.

Rosen (2011) does provide an answer to this core dilemma for journalism and has lobbied for a re-engagement of the journalistic imagination, that is, just as Mills (1959) called for a re-engagement of the sociological imagination to make those fundamental reconnections between everyday lived experiences and social structures. The exhortation of Mills is equally applicable to modern journalists when he wrote,

‘... every self-conscious thinker must at all times be aware of—and hence be able to control—the levels of abstraction on which he is working. The capacity to shuttle between levels of abstraction, with ease and with clarity, is a signal mark of the imaginative and systematic thinker’ (Mills 1959, p. 34).

Journalists need this capacity in thinking to shuttle between the structures that constrain them, that is, their commercial, political, social context, world views/ideologies and the lived experience of the stories they cover. The way forward then, may lie in increasing the awareness among journalists covering climate change of the need to shuttle between layers and camps of thinking, rather, than taking up ideologically determined positions in their practice.

Rosen (2011) argues that in responding to this fundamental challenge, the practice of journalism must focus on ‘more reporting, not editorializing or picking a side’. Journalists need to be engaged with assessing the truth telling claims of both sides in the climate change debate not engaging in ‘refuge-seeking behaviour’ that fits well with commercially driven demands of news production. Yes, technology has given us the insatiable 24 hour news production—typified by the ‘get it up now’ mentality—but simultaneously, the rapid developments in digital technologies have given journalists new tools to negotiate and develop expertise in this next layer of truth assessment.

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