

# Not every journo can be Hunter S. Thompson

Objective journalism is being undermined by journalists with literary ambitions, writes **Noel Bushnell**.

**A** long time ago on a newspaper far, far away, the [insert own adjective here, e.g. crusty, then-famous] editor marched up to his sub-editors table with something on his mind. The subject of his agitation was unclear but his message was not.

'There will be no comment in the pages of my newspaper,' he snarled at his [stunned, soporific] subs and everybody else in the big open space that housed most of his journalists.

All of us there knew what he meant, even I as a [callow, brilliant] cadet reporter. Someone had indeed inserted 'own adjective' or some other comment into a news story that let the reader know the reporter's thoughts on the matter in hand.

Forty years later, news reportage is littered with the authors' opinions and, it seems, nothing is thought of it. Readers of supposedly straight news reports are told routinely in them what to think.

None of the handwringing about the demise of 'quality journalism' following the Fairfax retrenchments came anywhere near identifying this subjectivity syndrome as an element of quality. And yet the commentators should have, since the really worrying part of the Fairfax announcement was that most of the cuts among journalists would be of sub-editors.

Subs are the unseen hands who turn reporters' copy into newspaper reading and as such are the guardians of language, form and balance. It is they who make the myriad little judgments

that go into what the reader eventually receives.

They are the ones who permit—or often enough create—words like the following from the *Australian Financial Review* to reach the reader: 'Queensland Premier Anna Bligh began election campaigning in earnest yesterday, launching a program to fix the state's *crumbling* health system, as well as its lack of early childhood education programs and *woeful* emissions record.'

Leave aside the clumsy construction (if you can) and focus on the two words highlighted, for adjectives are the weapons of choice, the Saturday night specials, in making sure readers get the point.

But they are not the only ones. Adverbs are also frequently aimed at readers. Try this, from *The Australian*: 'The *supposedly* revolutionary new hybrid rice strain, known as Super Toy HL-2—the HL being Mr Lelono's initials—was supposed to triple output and, miraculously, require no replanting after its initial harvest.' [Also note the use of 'revolutionary new' and its effect on the tone.]

Then in *The Age*, there's an old favourite, the inverted sentence: 'In a damning indictment, he [Peter Costello] observes:...' This structure has almost infinite variations and at its most developed can be applied to whole stories, so that a reader has to wade through paragraphs of interpretation and comment before getting to reportage of what may have happened. By which time, of course, the reader has been given a particular point of view as a starting point.

You don't have to comb the news pages for this stuff. All the examples above were taken from prominent positions in three different papers. Their identities and the bylines are irrelevant

to this discussion, which is not about the biases of particular organisations but about language, perhaps the most important way in which the media creates and feeds public opinion.

Critics of one persuasion or another focus on the overt campaigning, the agenda items, the choices of stories to highlight and the treatment of those stories within the pages of newspapers. Apart from outrageous usages, the actual language is taken for granted. Almost casually, then, it becomes common knowledge that Queensland's health system can't deliver good care and the state is poisoning the planet, that Mr Lelono is a conman and that Costello despises the subject of his comment (in this case, John Howard).

Reporters employ many such tricks to tip readers that what's being reported isn't necessarily the truth, that it's their duty to report but not to believe. In the end, though, they don't decide what is published, or how.

It is the duty of editors and their subs to decide that. In the cases cited, did they make active decisions to present the language as published or did they simply let it through? Either way, they need to reassess what they are doing. In football parlance, they need to take a good hard look at themselves.

This is generally true across all newspapers. Editing at the language level is at a low ebb. Newspaper managements should insist that editors edit and give them the resources to do it. *Inter alia*, this means strengthening, not weakening, the subs table, so that, at the very least, the words presented are properly considered, that the inbuilt commentary is not gratuitous.

This is only small comfort, because the underlying problem will remain, but

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with casual acceptance out of the way as a reason, the subjectivity syndrome can't be fobbed off as an accident of time and resource constraints in the editing process. The issue needs to be understood as not about left or right, conservative or progressive, western suburbs or eastern suburbs but about best practice—the quality journalism, in fact, that has caused so much angst of late.

Let it be said: subs and editors are not usually neglectful of the words they permit to be published—indeed, they are by and large very choosy, especially in making sure they are politically correct. Therefore the default position is that the words published have been considered and are meant to be there.

Thus the subjectivity syndrome allows the point of view of each player in the news media—and this brings in radio, television and the internet—to be easily understood. Readers, listeners and viewers are rarely in doubt of the stance being taken.

Yet investigations by the Press Council and the ABC's complaints tribunal regularly report the absence of bias. Column centimetres or airtime given to each side of a debate are carefully measured and pronounced roughly equal and so the reportage or commentary was considered to be balanced and, by definition, unbiased.

Why then do so many readers, viewers and listeners come away with the distinct impression they have been given a particular message? It can only be the words chosen. When they are direct and clear, there can be little complaint. But when they are casual and insidiously routine, watch out—propaganda is being delivered.

The trouble goes back a long way, coincident with the anecdote at the start of this article, to the so-called New Journalism of the likes of Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe, who put their sensibilities, if not themselves, at the centre of their reportage (and let's be clear, both of those named were fine reporters and fine writers). Their success with this technique led just about all of us in the news trade to try it out and persuaded editors and others who

should have known better to allow it to flourish, although very few journalists have the talent and capability to pull it off. And certainly New Journalism techniques are inappropriate for day-by-day reporting.



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The assertion that objectivity is impossible, so the inherent subjectivity ought to be recognised, is just so much sophistry, an excuse for laziness and a lack of discipline. The objective ought to be reporting that is accurate and clear so that the consumer can make his or her own assessment of the facts. This will never be perfectly achieved.

In newspapers, space constraints require skilful summarising, often making one or two words substitute for many. Stories need to be bright. Verbatim reportage is dull and often as mislead-

ing as an inaccurate summary. A whole range of judgments and compromises need to be made as to what is presented and how. But none of that should cause the objective to be abandoned.

Notionally, of course, newspaper best practice, for as long as it has been a formal theory, is to place a clear divide between news and commentary, which is why labels like 'analysis' and 'comment' appear on pieces among the reportage outside the nominated opinion and features pages. News reports are supposed to answer the standard 'who, what, when, where, why' questions and 'colour'—i.e. commentary—is hived off into separate pieces, mostly by the specialist reporters who populate the pages of our daily newspapers.

This doesn't seem to be enough to satisfy many reporters today. Indeed they rarely identify themselves as reporters any more. They are journalists—modern Muggerridges or Wolfes or Waughs—and as such their view is so important that it can't be separated from what they are journalising on.

Their editors let them do it and add their own little bit in the process. This is the real heart of the 'quality journalism' debate and its relationship to the decline of newspapers. Could it be that newspaper readers are turning off, not just because of lack of time to read or any of the other usual reasons that are proffered, but because they can no longer trust the reportage?

The printed word has an integrity that can't be matched by the other media. This is the core strength of newspapers and the one that ought to be the platform for maintaining newspapers in the face of competition from the electronic media.

Fairfax management and their aggrieved journalists would be better off focusing on that. If they continue down the path they are on—management cutting resources they should not and journalists seeking validation of their self-indulgence—quality journalism will indeed disappear and the forecast end of newspapers will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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