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A question of balance . . .

Posted on October 18th, 2010 by earleholland

Standing before a room full of student journalists can be unnerving, even for us old scribes. Such was the case last week when I gave a talk on science writing to the staff of the student newspaper.

I had shown onscreen an example of our work – a [recent story](#) that reported on a link between current global climate change and a rise in the Pacific Ocean's [thermocline](#), the boundary layer between warm surface water and its colder, deeper counterpart.

And as it was an actual class – the students get graded on their submissions to the paper – the instructor, a former wire service staffer, rightly asked for feedback on this example. Fairly quickly, one student's hand rose and he asked, "Where is the opposing side?" He was looking for a dissenting view on climate change and the story offered none.

The question was clearly welcome. It offered what academics call a "teachable moment." Since it arose from the student, he'd be likely to learn more than if he'd been showered with a list of "dos" and "don'ts."

The student was really asking about "balance," or rather in this case, his view that the story lacked balance by omitting a climate change skeptic's reaction. Balance is a dogma for modern journalism, a valiant effort by reporters and editors to remove perceived bias from their coverage and offer opposing points of view so that the public might be informed well enough to make responsible decisions.



The lust for balance among journalists has led to a preponderance of "he says/she says" journalism where coverage digresses into opposing views and occasional vitriolic arguments. And while this formula may still work fine for some forms of reporting, it weakens science journalism.

The *modus operandi* for even science journalists today is to include comments from outside experts in stories reporting new discoveries, an attempt to put the report in perspective, even if the so-called expert has little or no first-hand knowledge of the research.

Such comments give the illusion of balance but often offer little of substance for the public . . . [false balance](#).

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In areas of controversy – climate change, for example – adding such “balance” to the story actually suggests that the opinions of scientists are reasonably split between two points of view. In fact, a study last year by researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago was sent to more than 10,000 earth scientists – arguably those researchers most knowledgeable about climate change.

Of those responding — more than 3,000 – 90 percent agreed that mean global temperatures have risen compared to pre-1800s levels, and 82 percent said that human activity has been a significant factor in changing those temperatures.

It’s hard to interpret that data as needing journalistic balance.

But astonishingly, that seems to have been missed by the leadership of the BBC (the British Broadcasting Corporation) when it comes to its own reporting on climate change. According to reporting in the British newspaper *The Telegraph*, the BBC issued new



“guidelines” to govern its reporting of controversies, including topics in science such as climate change. The *Telegraph* story said in part:

“ . . . the BBC’s new editorial guidelines, published yesterday after an extensive consultation that considered over 1,600 submissions by members of the public, say expressly for the first time that scientific issues fall within the corporation’s obligation to be impartial.

“The BBC must be inclusive, consider the broad perspective, and ensure that the existence of a range of views is appropriately reflected,” said BBC trustee Alison Hastings.

“In addition, the new guidelines extend the definition of ‘controversial’ subjects beyond those of public policy and political or industrial controversy to include controversy within religion, science, finance, culture, ethics and other matters.”

The BBC has been a leader in exceptional science reporting for decades and this move towards the democratization of its content – at least in the realm of science – will hardly improve the public’s grasp of such complex issues.

Neither will it help in training the journalists of tomorrow. __Earle Holland



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[David Harris](#) // Oct 18, 2010 at 3:29 pm

Hi Earle,

I wholeheartedly agree with you, as you would expect. I find the new guidelines to follow a common pattern—the non-guideline guideline, also known that the cover-your-ass guideline.

There are many ways to interpret these “guidelines” and statements. For example, if you consider the quote you used above:

—

“The BBC must be inclusive, consider the broad perspective, and ensure that the existence of a range of views is appropriately reflected,” said BBC trustee Alison Hastings.

—

Ensuring that the existence of a range of views is appropriately reflected could mean just about anything. If you accept the judgement of the scientific community, then there is no other side, in general, about anthropogenic global warming. You need to balance both expertise and prevalence, not just fractions of people who think one thing or another.

Otherwise, why aren't most stories also including a quote from the astrologers? By sheers numbers, believers in astrology are much higher than those global warming deniers.

Should every case of a person who passes out drinking also include a quote from somebody who believes in alien abduction as a likely reason for lost time? Those people also outnumber the global warming deniers, as far as I can tell.

The point is that the BBC guidelines are so fuzzy that there doesn't seem to be a way to distinguish between these cases (global warming denial, astrology, alien abduction) without some version of the journalist exercising judgement about where the truth might lie, based on various factors.

The factors that an individual might use to weight their decision might be influenced by their political environment and so the guidelines amount to nothing more than saying to journalists, “We the management don't want to be held responsible for any decisions you as journalists make, so do what you will and you have this guideline to hide behind.”

Professor Mike Carrell // Oct 22, 2010 at 8:06 am

We do have to be cautious here since, as you know, many scientific discoveries and generally held beliefs are often overturned, changed, or modified in the future when new methods or new evidence is found/presented (Think medicine's dismal track record). It is potentially reckless to offer a definitive answer, especially of an early finding.

You are spot-on with your concern that so-called experts comment on research they know nothing about, nor have they even seen in many cases. More responsible “balance” would be prudent to teach our journalism students. Given the lack of true reporting anymore and an increased focus on commentary masking as relaying a story, I think we're facing an uphill battle with today's media.

Joe Bonnell // Oct 22, 2010 at 8:47 am

As an OSU Extension educator, I am faced with similar questions about how and when to provide a range of opinions on a scientific topic. While efforts to present balanced reports on issues are noble, I believe that it is unnecessary to try to meet this goal in every single report or educational piece one produces. Anyone reasonable person knows that every individual has opinions. Some are more informed than others and I believe that its the job of the reporter (or educator) to give enough background on the source to allow the reader to make their own decision about the source's credibility. I don't feel its necessary for the reporter or educator to always offer an alternative or opposing viewpoint, but, over time, reports should reflect a range of opinions, as long as the reader is given enough information about the source to judge their credibility.

[Chris Simmons](#) // Oct 27, 2010 at 1:15 am

Insightful post, Earle. When I attended Ohio State, I actually considered (and briefly majored) journalism. Unfortunately, albeit unsurprisingly, it was such underlying themes of false balance and the ravenous "he said, she said" banter that turned me away.

Instead, I moved toward writing with emotion at its core: copy writing. Crafting messages to change behavior has been my aim every day since graduating.

But, I digress. The lone takeaway that I have from this post – outside of my distaste for all things "journalistic" – is that things just aren't how they used to be. It just doesn't seem like professionals are held to the same standards to achieve the same levels of regard from yesteryear.

Emily // Oct 29, 2010 at 10:03 am

3,000 is not 90 percent of 10,000. I'm confused...

[earleholland](#) // Oct 29, 2010 at 10:11 am

Emily: Go back and look at the posting again.

The total number of scientists polled was "more than 10,000."

The number from that 10,000 that responded was 3,000, so that is the pool of responses the study used.

Of that 3,000, "90 percent agreed that mean global temperatures have risen compared to pre-1800s levels, and 82 percent said that human activity has been a significant factor in changing those temperatures.

Understand?

Earle

[Magasinerig Stockholm](#) // Nov 16, 2010 at 11:12 am

Thanks Earle for clearing things up! 😊

/Johan, Berlin

[Danis Lee](#) // Sep 12, 2011 at 10:38 am

But that's evidence. Of course scientific and technical revolution in the early 1900 triggered all this climate-changing consequences. I don't understand how does it possible not to see this facts.

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