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Media Objectivity and the Rhetoric of News Story Structure

Introduction

The modern mass-media news report, arguably one of the most influential of contemporary text types, is the focus of on-going debate both in the academic literature and in popular culture. The media itself, for example, claims a special epistemological status for its texts, asserting that, at least in principle, the news report is factual, disinterested, impersonal and objective. The general public, meanwhile, remains equivocal, relying more or less uncritically on the news for much of its understanding of issues and events in the public domain, while, nevertheless, viewing journalistic discourse with suspicion, as often inaccurate, commercialised, sensationalist and biased. Media theorists, of course, usually regard news reporting as value laden and ultimately ideological, as a social force typically acting to support the interests of various economic and political elites.

The primary purpose of this paper is to provide additional support for the view of the news report as ideological, as a value-laden story telling mode by which key social values and cultural motifs are reproduced and ultimately naturalised. My exposition is somewhat different, however, from those most usually found in the media studies literature in that I am not concerned with the ideological orientation of individual news items, as such, but with the potential of the generic structure of standard news items to support and naturalise ideological positioning. I am concerned, therefore, not with the particular ideological values of individual news items but with the rhetorical potential of the English-language news item, as a distinctive text type, to influence assumptions, beliefs, value judgements and expectations.

The context out of which this exposition arose was one, however, in which it was not possible to simply ignore or too cursorily dismiss the alternative views of the news report, particularly the media's own view of news reporting as value-free. The analysis was developed in the course of a journalism training program prepared for, and delivered at Australia's multi-cultural, multi-lingual Special Broadcasting Service (SBS)¹ over some five years in the mid 1990s. The cross-cultural, multi-lingual nature of SBS was such that the usual approach to teaching journalistic writing adopted in

¹ SBS is an Australian government-funded broadcaster, providing multi-lingual, sub-titled television as well as radio in more than sixty languages. It employs around 300 radio journalists who broadcast news, current affairs, social affairs, arts etc programming in languages other than English to local migrant communities, as well as some English language programming and programming by indigenous Australians. One of its primary roles is to reflect Australia's multicultural diversity, something that Australia's other media have failed to do, to challenge racist attitudes and to ensure adequate coverage of issues relating to indigenous Australians. The journalists come from diverse backgrounds and many are politically engaged as a result, at least in part, of their experiences as refugees from political violence, economic deprivation, repression and intolerance.

'mainstream', mono-lingual media organisations was not appropriate. The diverse cultural and ideological backgrounds of the trainee journalists was such that they were typically sensitive too and critical of the ideological assumptions which condition the discourse of mainstream news reporting. Nevertheless, the parameters of the training program, as set by SBS management, were such that trainees needed to be able to produce standard news reports according to the mainstream model and to understand the distinctive rhetorical properties of this text type. Specifically, they needed to be able to make a considered response to the claim that this text type is impersonal and objective, not the least because this was the view of mainstream news reporting held by SBS management.

In this paper, therefore, I account for the rhetorical potential of the modern English-language news item, as a genre type, to reproduce and naturalise social values while, simultaneously, addressing the media's claims of objectivity for this text type. I will demonstrate this rhetorical potential with reference primarily to a *Sydney Morning Herald* report of a violent attack upon a humanitarian aid convoy in Iraq some years after the Gulf War. I have chosen to use this item as exemplification for two reasons. Firstly it is a typical example of what journalists term an objective 'hard news' report. Secondly, the item was used as a discussion point in the course of the SBS journalistic training program mentioned above and specifically in the context of an exploration of the notions of subjectivity and objectivity. The item typically triggered a lively debate among the trainees, with opinion frequently divided on whether it was 'objective' in the usual journalistic sense of the word. It is perhaps most noteworthy in this respect that one trainee from the Kurdish-language group declared the item to be 'profoundly racist' and to reflect an anti-Kurdish bias so strong that it had overwhelmed the Western media's customary anti-Iraqi positioning. The item is set out below.

Kurds blamed for aid worker's death

By RICHARD MACEY, TINA DIAZ and AAP (Sydney Morning Herald, 9/1/93 p3)

CARE Australia's aid program in Iraq has been suspended indefinitely after an attack in which an Australian worker was shot dead and another wounded.

Iraq's charge d'affaires in Canberra, Mr Karmal Issa, warned yesterday that such an attack-- which is being blamed on local Kurds, not Iraq soldiers or police -- might happen again.

Mr Stuart Douglas Cameron, 45, a Brisbane father of two, was killed, and Mr Joe Martinico 43 from Melbourne, was shot three times on a road near the village of Chamchamal, in northern Iraq.

The territory, in Sulaymaniyah province, is under the command of United Nations forces.

Mr Cameron, who was a CARE area manager, Mr Martinico and two Kurdish aid workers are believed to have driven to Chamchamal to resolve an argument among local Kurds about the distribution of kerosene.

CARE Australia, which has 19 workers in Iraq, had been distributing cooking kerosene, food and clothing in the country's north.

Winter is coming, and with it temperatures plunge below zero.

The agency's national director Mr Ian Harris, said yesterday that the team left the village about 4.30 pm local time, on Thursday.

Their vehicle was clearly marked with UN and CARE identification.

"The vehicle ... was flagged down and when it stopped, it was riddled with bullets," he said.

Mr Cameron was killed, but Mr Martinico survived with wounds to his hand, arm and shoulder. One of the two Kurds -- a driver and a guard -- was also wounded

At least three gunmen were reportedly involved in the attack, near the village of Takiya.

A CARE spokesman in Jordan, Mr Robert Yallop, said last night that the attackers had been armed with Kalashnikov rifles.

"It is the standard equipment of the Kurds," he said.

Mr Issa visited senior Foreign Affairs officials yesterday and apologised for the shooting. A department spokesman said Mr Issa had promised Iraq would do everything possible to capture the gunmen and bring them to justice.

"But he said he could not give an assurance that this instance could not occur again," the spokesman said. "He said Iraq had no police or other officials in the north and that the area was run by Kurdish factions."

The spokesman said Mr Issa blamed the United States and the UN for the lack of law and order.

A representative of the Kurdish Democratic Party, Mr Safeen Dizayee said in Ankara that it was still too early to determine who carried out the attack, but that inquiries were being made.

He blamed "Iraqi agents", and said the incident fitted a pattern of recent attacks and intimidation on Western relief efforts.

Both Mr Cameron's wife and mother were too upset to talk to the media yesterday. A friend said: "The family has been shattered. Mr Cameron had two lovely daughters, aged 14 and 12."

CARE Australia's director of operations, Mr Ian Pennell, said Mr Cameron had known the risk involved in going to Iraq.

"[He] was a dinky-di Aussie who knew what dangers he faced but he would have given everything for his cause.

"He was a fantastic bloke and he knew life was always a risk He was prepared to put himself out."

Mr Martinico's mother and one of his brothers did not even know he had left Australia.

Mr Peter Martinico said that when he last saw his brother, two years ago, he had been working in Melbourne, importing smallgoods: "Today I find out he's been shot and he's doing relief work: from what he was doing to relief work was like chalk and cheese"

His mother, Betty, had not seen Joe for nine years: "I told her this afternoon - she took it very hard."

The Foreign Affairs spokesman said the department was waiting for a report, being prepared by UN officers, on the shootings.

A CARE official in Jordan said last night that Mr Cameron's body would be sent back to Australia. She did not know what Mr Martinico planned to do.

Media notions of objectivity

For the media, objectivity can be said to turn on three inter-related text construction principles or practices which I will term 'neutrality', 'balance' and 'reliability'.²

Under neutrality, the 'hard news' reporter refrains from expressing opinions about, passing judgement on, or responding emotionally to the material presented. All such explicitly subjective evaluations are confined to the quoted comments of attributed sources. Under the notion of balance, the report is constructed so that more than one point of view or version of events is provided, at least in those items seen as dealing with contentious matters. This requirement typically obtains when blame or negative criticism is directed at an individual, group or institution and is understood as providing a 'right of reply.' Under the notion of reliability, the 'hard news' reporter supposedly ensures that the sources used to supply subjective evaluations and versions of events have appropriate knowledge, expertise, authority or social standing. Where there is some doubt about the 'reliability' of the source (for example,

² Similar formulations can be found throughout the journalism training and media studies literature. See, for example, McQuail 1987 or Lloyd 1994. The particular formulation set out here, however, is derived from my own 15 years experiences as a reporter, sub editor and journalism trainer in the print and broadcast media. For an account of the historical emergence of the notion of objectivity in the media see Schiller 1981.

they have a criminal record or some hidden or undeclared vested interest), this will be revealed.

The ‘Aid worker’s death’ item can be seen as ‘objective’ according to these practices in that,

- the authors themselves pass no explicit value judgements on the events described (the question of implicit evaluation will be explored in a later section),
- multiple points of view are presented – most notably Kurdish interests are given an opportunity to respond to the accusations directed against them,
- the quoted sources have ‘official’ status within the particular institutional contexts.

It is, of course, possible to argue that ‘neutrality’, ‘balance’ and ‘reliability’, as so conceived, in no way eliminate the ultimately subjective and ideologically-determined basis of such news items. Ideological position and rhetorical purpose will determine which sources are deemed ‘reliable’ and hence quoted, which opinions and versions of events are selected for inclusion, which claims are emphasised and given textual prominence, and so on. (It is, of course, a commonplace in the academic literature that no text can be value-free, impersonal or disinterested. Habermas, for example, declares that the common-sense notion of objectivity ‘deludes the sciences with the image of a self subsistent world of facts structured in a lawlike manner, it thus conceals the priori constitution of these facts’ – Habermas 1971.) My purpose here, however, is not to directly address the text compositional practices of mainstream journalism but rather to focus upon the product of journalistic practice – the distinctive pattern of text organisation by which this supposed ‘objectivity’ is manifested. In the following sections, therefore, I will set out an account of the structure of the modern English-language news item with reference to its rhetorical potential and ultimate ideological functionality. In the course of this discussion, I will reflect on the implications of this rhetorical potential for journalistic commonsense notions of ‘objectivity’.

The generic structure of the modern English-language news item

Social evaluation and the headline/lead

The typical English-language print-media ‘hard news’ item is dominated by its opening phase, constituted typically of the headline and first sentence (termed either the lead or the intro). The centrality or textual pre-eminence of this opening headline-plus-lead phase has been widely noted both in the academic and the journalistic training literature. Accordingly, this opening stage is said to provide a summary of the key elements of the report, to set out what is central or most ‘newsworthy’ about the material under consideration. Thus van Dijk states, ‘Together they [the headline/lead] express the major topics of the text. That is, they function as an initial summary.’ (van Dijk 1988: 53). Lloyd similarly observes that the headline and lead single out the ‘news point’ or ‘angle’ of the news story and summarise its ‘essential news elements’ (Lloyd 1994).

We see such a singling out and summarising of a crisis point or point of maximum impact in the 'aid worker's death' report.

Kurds blamed for aid worker's death

CARE Australia's aid program in Iraq has been suspended indefinitely after an attack in which an Australian worker was shot dead and another wounded. Here the writers have extracted from the material and succinctly combined the following elements:

- there has been an attack on an Australian aid convoy in Iraq
- one Australian worker has been killed
- another Australian worker has been wounded
- Care Australia's aid program in the region has been suspended
- Kurds have been blamed for the attack.

In saying that this opening phase singles out and summarises what is the 'major topic' or what has greatest importance or 'news value', it is essential to stress that any such assessment of 'significance' or 'newsworthiness' must necessarily be conditioned by ideologically determined assumptions about social value and the social order. Clearly the opening to the 'aid worker's death' report is shaped by an evaluative process by which, for example,

- the accusations of the Iraqi official in Australia are given much greater weight than those of the Kurdish spokesman in Turkey,
- the wounding of a Kurdish member of the aid party is afforded much less significance than the wounding of an Australian member (it is introduced much later in the report),
- the suspension of an Australian aid program is seen as a maximally important aspect of the incident.

Under a different set of assumptions about social value, the report might just have easily begun with,

Iraqi agents blamed for aid worker's death

A member of a humanitarian aid project in northern Iraq has been killed after an attack which is being blamed on Iraqi agents intent on disrupting Western relief efforts. Two other members of the team were seriously wounded.

This is not, of course, to seek to argue on any journalistic grounds in favour of either headline/lead but, rather, to demonstrate that the selection of material for maximum emphasis in the opening phase is necessarily evaluative and interpretative. (For further discussion of the evaluative and interpretative properties of the headline/lead see White 1997 and White 1998)

The body of the news item: specifying the headline/lead

The body of the standard news item is constituted of textual components which act to specify in various ways material presented in the headline/lead. Following extended research into the structure of the news item reported in Iedema et al 1994, White 1997 and White 1998, the modes of specification of the headline/lead can be grouped under the following categories:

- **Elaboration:** the specification provides more detailed description or exemplification of information presented in the headline/lead, or acts to restate it or present the material in the headline/lead in different terms.
- **Cause-and-Effect:** the specification describe the causes, the reasons for, the consequences or the purpose of the ‘crisis point’ presented in the headline/lead.
- **Concession:** the specification presents material which is represented as contrary to or frustrating expectations raised by elements of the headline/lead.
- **Justification/Counter-Justification:** when the headline/lead contains an argumentative or contentious assertion, the specification acts to reinforce that assertion, provide evidence for it or some other form of rhetorical support. Alternatively, the specification acts to challenge or undermine the assertion presented in the opening.
- **Contextualisation:** the specification places the events or statements of the headline/lead in a temporal, spatial or social context. For example, the geographical setting will be described in some detail or the ‘crisis point’ will be located in the context of preceding, simultaneous or subsequent events. Prior events of a similar nature may be described for the purpose of comparison.
- **Appraisal:** Elements of the headline/lead nucleus are appraised, typically by some expert external source, an eye-witness or otherwise interested party, in terms of their emotional impact or by reference to some system of value judgement.³

The functionality of the body of the news report in specifying the headline/lead by means of these relations is demonstrated in the following specification analysis of the ‘aid worker’s death’ report.

[Headline/lead: crisis point and summary of core elements]

Kurds blamed for aid worker's death

CARE Australia's aid program in Iraq has been suspended indefinitely after an attack in which an Australian worker was shot dead and another wounded.

[specification 1: elaboration – more details in relation to ‘Kurds blamed’]

Iraq's charge d'affaires in Canberra, Mr Karmal Issa, warned yesterday that such an attack-- which is being blamed on local Kurds, not Iraq soldiers or police -- might happen again.

[specification 2: elaboration – details of ‘worker shot dead and another wounded’]

Mr Stuart Douglas Cameron, 45, a Brisbane father of two, was killed, and Mr Joe Martinico 43 from Melbourne, was shot three times on a road near the village of Chamchamal, in northern Iraq.

³ Van Dijk (1988) has proposed a set of constitutive categories by which he analyses the structure of the news story – for example, ‘Summary’, ‘Main Event’, ‘Episode’, ‘Consequences’, ‘Verbal Reactions’ and ‘Comment’ (1988: 52-56). At first glance my categories may appear to repeat or overlap those of van Dijk. It is necessary, however, to note that van Dijk’s approach and objectives are significantly different from my own and his categories, upon closer analysis, reflect this difference. Van Dijk’s orientation is a cognitive one and he seeks, therefore, to develop a cognitive model of how the reader extracts information from and comes to understand the news item. Accordingly his category of ‘Episode’, for example, is a cognitive construct which is built up by the reader from material distributed discontinuously across the text – it is made up of the ‘main events’ plus any ‘context’ and any ‘background’. Typically, therefore, this category of ‘Episode’ will not correspond to any continuous unit of text. In contrast, the text linguistic approach I adopt means that my analysis is more firmly based in the specific grammar and discourse semantics of the text under consideration. Accordingly, the categories I propose are discourse semantic rather than cognitive, and necessarily reference actual units of text. They are largely based on the analysis of inter-clausal (logical) relations developed in Systemic Functional Linguistics (see, for example, Halliday 1994).

[specification 3: contextualisation – geographical and political setting]

The territory, in Sulaymaniyah province, is under the command of United Nations forces.

[specification 4: contextualisation – events surrounding/leading up to the attack]

[Mr Cameron, who was a CARE area manager, Mr Martinico and two Kurdish aid workers are believed to have driven to Chamchamal to resolve an argument among local Kurds about the distribution of kerosene.

[specification 5: contextualisation – the context of the Australian aid program and the convoy which was attacked]

CARE Australia, which has 19 workers in Iraq, had been distributing cooking kerosene, food and clothing in the country's north.

Winter is coming, and with it temperatures plunge below zero.

[specification 6: contextualisation – sequence of events leading up to the attack]

The agency's national director Mr Ian Harris, said yesterday that the team left the village about 4.30 pm local time, on Thursday.

Their vehicle was clearly marked with UN and CARE identification.

[specification 7: elaboration – details of the fatal attack]

"The vehicle ... was flagged down and when it stopped, it was riddled with bullets," he said.

Mr Cameron was killed, but Mr Martinico survived with wounds to his hand, arm and shoulder. One of the two Kurds - a driver and a guard -- was also wounded

At least three gunmen were reportedly involved in the attack, near the village of Takiya.

[specification 8: elaboration + justification – provides more details of the attack but also lends support to the blaming of the Kurds]

A CARE spokesman in Jordan, Mr Robert Yallop, said last night that the attackers had been armed with Kalashnikov rifles.

"It is the standard equipment of the Kurds," he said.

[specification 9: appraisal – moral judgements passed on the attack and the attackers]

Mr Issa visited senior Foreign Affairs officials yesterday and apologised for the shooting. A department spokesman said Mr Issa had promised Iraq would do everything possible to capture the gunmen and bring them to justice.

[specification 10: justification – further support for the claim that Kurds are to blame]

"But he said he could not give an assurance that this instance could not occur again," the spokesman said. "He said Iraq had no police or other officials in the north and that the area was run by Kurdish factions."

[specification 11: appraisal - United states and UN implicated in moral evaluation]

The spokesman said Mr Issa blamed the United States and the UN for the lack of law and order.

[specification 12: counter-justification – challenge to the blaming of the Kurds]

A representative of the Kurdish Democratic Party, Mr Safeen Dizayee said in Ankara that it was still too early to determine who carried out the attack, but that inquiries were being made.

He blamed "Iraqi agents", and said the incident fitted a pattern of recent attacks and intimidation on Western relief efforts.

[specification 13: appraisal - the emotional meaning of the attack for members of the victim's family; positive evaluation of the victims in moral terms]

Both Mr Cameron's wife and mother were too upset to talk to the media yesterday. A friend said: "The family has been shattered. Mr Cameron had two lovely daughters, aged 14 and 12."

CARE Australia's director of operations, Mr Ian Pennell, said Mr Cameron had known the risk involved in going to Iraq.

"[He] was a dinky-di Aussie who knew what dangers he faced but he would have given everything for his cause.

"He was a fantastic bloke and he knew life was always a risk He was prepared to put himself out."

Mr Martinico's mother and one of his brothers did not even know he had left Australia. Mr Peter Martinico said that when he last saw his brother, two years ago, he had been working in Melbourne, importing smallgoods: "Today I find out he's been shot and he's doing relief work: from what he was doing to relief work was like chalk and cheese" His mother, Betty, had not seen Joe for nine years: "I told her this afternoon - she took it very hard."

[*specification 14: contextualisation – events subsequent to the attack*]

The Foreign Affairs spokesman said the department was waiting for a report, being prepared by UN officers, on the shootings.

A CARE official in Jordan said last night that Mr Cameron's body would be sent back to Australia. She did not know what Mr Martinico planned to do.

Thus we see that the role of the elements of the body of the standard 'hard news' report is primarily to develop the material presented in the opening, to refer back to the headline/lead through a series of specifications. One noteworthy feature of this structure is that the order of the specifications which make up the body can be changed with relative freedom. This flexibility is demonstrated by the following reworking of the report in which an number of specifications have been removed and the remainder substantially reordered. (A few minor changes, mainly in nominal reference, have been made to accommodate the reordering. These are shown in curly brackets. The original position of each specification in the textual sequence is shown by the numbers in round brackets.)

[*Lead: crisis point and summary of core elements*]

CARE Australia's aid program in Iraq has been suspended indefinitely after an attack in which an Australian worker was shot dead and another wounded.

[*specification 1 (2): elaboration – details of 'worker shot dead and another wounded'*]

Mr Stuart Douglas Cameron, 45, a Brisbane father of two, was killed, and Mr Joe Martinico 43 from Melbourne, was shot three times on a road near the village of Chamchamal, in northern Iraq.

[*specification 2 (6): contextualisation – sequence of events leading up to the attack*]

{CARE Australia's} national director Mr Ian Harris, said yesterday that the team left the village about 4.30 pm local time, on Thursday.

Their vehicle was clearly marked with UN and CARE identification.

[*specification 3 (7): elaboration – details of the fatal attack*]

"The vehicle ... was flagged down and when it stopped, it was riddled with bullets," he said. Mr Cameron was killed, but Mr Martinico survived with wounds to his hand, arm and shoulder. One of the two Kurds {in the team} - a driver and a guard -- was also wounded At least three gunmen were reportedly involved in the attack, near the village of Takiya.

[*specification 4 (5): contextualisation – the context of the Australian aid program and the convoy which was attacked*]

{The agency}, which has 19 workers in Iraq, had been distributing cooking kerosene, food and clothing in the country's north.

Winter is coming, and with it temperatures plunge below zero.

[*specification 5 (4): contextualisation – events surrounding/leading up to the attack*]

Mr Cameron, who was a CARE area manager, Mr Martinico and {the} two Kurdish aid workers are believed to have driven to Chamchamal to resolve an argument among local Kurds about the distribution of kerosene.

[*specification 6 (3): contextualisation – geographical and political setting*]

The territory, in Sulaymaniyah province, is under the command of United Nations forces.

[*specification 7 (12): appraisal – attribution of blame*]

A representative of the Kurdish Democratic Party, Mr Safeen Dizayee said in Ankara that it was still too early to determine who carried out the attack, but that inquiries were being made.

He blamed "Iraqi agents", and said the incident fitted a pattern of recent attacks and intimidation on Western relief efforts.

[*specification 8 (1): appraisal – attribution of blame*]

{However}, Iraq's charge d'affaires in Canberra, Mr Karmal Issa, yesterday {blamed the attack on local Kurds} and warned that such an attack might happen again.

[*specification 9 (13): appraisal - the emotional meaning of the attack for members of the victim's family; positive evaluation of the victims in moral terms*]

Both Mr Cameron's wife and mother were too upset to talk to the media yesterday. A friend said: "The family has been shattered. Mr Cameron had two lovely daughters, aged 14 and 12."

CARE Australia's director of operations, Mr Ian Pennell, said Mr Cameron had known the risk involved in going to Iraq.

"[He] was a dinky-di Aussie who knew what dangers he faced but he would have given everything for his cause.

"He was a fantastic bloke and he knew life was always a risk He was prepared to put himself out."

Thus the new report places in linear sequence elements which occupied the following positions in the original order of the report: 2, 6, 7, 5, 4, 3, 12, 1, 13. The reworking demonstrates that it is not only possible to remove some specifications entirely, but, more notably, to re-sequence or reverse the order of those that remain. Iedema et al (1994) and White (1997, 1998) demonstrate that this potential for reordering – which they term ‘radical editability’ – is a common property of the typical modern ‘hard news’ report. The claim here is not that the text is unchanged by such an editing – the reworked report clearly carries a different rhetorical import – but that it is possible to make such changes and still end up with an entirely functional, coherent and equally typical ‘hard news’ report.

This property of ‘radical editability’ is a function of the text organisational principle by which typical ‘hard news’ reports are shaped – what Iedema et al (1994) and White (1997, 1998) have termed a ‘nucleus/satellite’ or ‘orbital’ structure. Under this orbital arrangement, the key relationship is between some central textual nucleus (the headline/lead, in the case of the news item) and a set of dependent satellites which act to specify that nucleus. In such orbital structures, the key organising principle is one of univariate dependency between nucleus and satellite, rather than a linear progression of multivariate elements. That is to say, the sub-components of the body of the text do not link together to build a linear semantic pathway by which meaning is accumulated sequentially, as the text moves through some predetermined sequences of distinct stages. Rather, textual structure is formed as individual sub-components enter into the dependency relationship of specification, not with immediately preceding or following textual elements, but with the nucleus, which thereby acts as the textual centre of gravity. This ‘orbital’ pattern of textuality is illustrated diagrammatically in Figure 1 below.

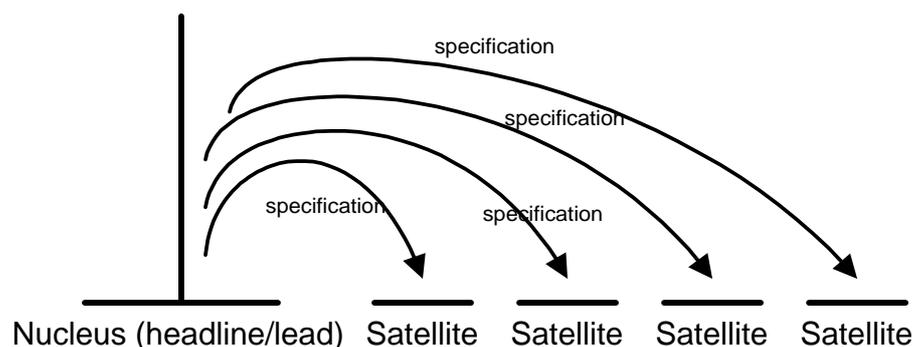


Figure 1: orbital structure illustrated

The radical editability of such news items follows naturally from the orbital principle of textual organisation. Since the key relationship for such texts is that between satellite and nucleus, regardless of distance and regardless of linear sequence, then there is typically little by way of cohesive integration between adjacent satellites. It is rare for a satellite to rely substantially on material from an immediately preceding satellite or to look forward to what is to follow immediately after. In Sinclair's terms, satellites are not very 'prospective' (Sinclair 1994).

A well documented feature of the modern news item is its failure to map chronological sequence in the manner of the 'traditional' narrative. (See, for example, van Dijk 1988, Bell 1991, MacDougall 1982 and Friedlander and Lee 1988.). This lack of text to time-line iconicity is another bi-product of the orbital principle. Chronological sequence is initially disrupted by the extraction of the 'newsworthy' crisis point from the sequence of events. Thus the 'aid worker's death' report starts, not with the convoy setting out for Chamchamal or with background information on the situation in Iraq but with the killing of the aid worker and the suspension of the Australian aid project. The typical 'hard news' item thus begins out of chronological sequence and remains out of sequence, so to speak, as it introduces specifications which variously elaborate, contextualise, explain and appraise that crisis point.

Notions of 'objectivity' and the rhetorical functionality of the modern news item

It is my contention that this orbital structure plays a key rhetorical role for media discourse. It is one element of a strategy by which the media is enabled to sustain its claim to 'objectivity' while producing texts which act, as we have seen, to construct an interpretative, evaluative and ideologically-determined picture of the world of public affairs.

Now, as previously mentioned, the notion that news reporting should, in principle, be 'objective' is a commonplace in everyday discussions of the media. The principle proclaimed by the media is, to a significant degree, endorsed by its audience of the general public, and the media are, of course, frequently criticised for failing to maintain the principle. The precise meaning of 'objectivity' as used in such contexts is seldom explicitly defined and is often contested. In general terms, however, we can say that it accords with the claims that the media makes for its texts already outlined in an earlier section – that news coverage should recount events without the intrusion

of value judgement, interpretation or point of view. As Schiller states, common-sense notions of objectivity involve the belief that news should provide a ‘map, a veridical representation, a report on reality, and hence not really a story at all, but merely the facts.’ (1981: 2).

Much effort in the media studies literature has been expended on establishing when this belief became operational in the media – that is, when media organisations began proclaiming that they were ‘objective’ in these terms and when media audiences began to believe this was what they could expect of news coverage, at least in ideal circumstances. The media historians typically indicate it began sometime in the late 19th century and was fully entrenched by the 1930s. Thus Siebert et al assert that this ‘theory of objectivity’ originated in the late 19th century and was ‘widely acclaimed’ during the first quarter of the 20th century (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1963: 60; for a full discussion, see Schiller 1981.)

A number of suggestions can be found in the literature as to what features of the news report support this communal belief in media ‘objectivity’. The extensive use of directly quoted material or of precise measurements/numbers/times, for example, are held to be influential. (For further discussion see, for example, McQuail 1987, van Dijk 1988, or Schiller 1981.) From this perspective, the journalistic practices outlined above can be seen as directly contributing to belief in ‘objectivity’. Specifically the requirement that all explicit evaluation be located in the quoted remarks of attributed sources would seem functional in this context.

I contend that what journalists term ‘neutrality’ (as discussed above) is also highly functional in this context. Under neutrality, the writer supposedly refrains from any explicitly subjective evaluation or interpretation in their own voice. What actually does constitute the ‘neutral’ voice of ‘hard news’ reportage is, in fact, a complex issue which cannot be explored in any detail here. We can say, however, that the conventions of news writing significantly curtail many linguistic resources by which authorial inter-subjectivity is foregrounded and by which the reader and the authorial voice are positioned interpersonally. As a consequence, the textual surface of much ‘hard news’ reporting can be said to be impersonalised, at least when compared, for example, with journalistic analysis and commentary. (For a full account, see Iedema et al. 1994 and White 1998.)

The orbital structure of the modern news item operates in the context of this impersonalisation to support the notion of ‘objectivity’. Specifically, this structure, in conjunction with the impersonalisation of the authorial voice, acts to background the inter-subjectivity of the various assumptions, evaluations, interpretations and expectations by which each news report is shaped and which it reflects. It acts to represent the values upon which the news report relies as unavoidable, communal and hence ‘natural’. Orbital textual structure and impersonalised authorial voice interact so that the ideological nature of the news story is obscured and the view of the social world it presents is more likely to be read as unmediated, anonymous and mechanically determined.

This rhetorical functionality is most directly targeted at the opening headline/lead since, as we have seen, it is through the headline/lead and the ‘angle’ that it provides that the news item most obviously acts to evaluate and thereby to convey a particular ideological perspective. This functionality operates in the following manner.

The organisation of the headline/lead provides the textual platform by which the crisis point – those elements interpreted by the author as having maximal social significance and impact– can be extracted from its context in a temporal or verbal sequence. This act of extraction of itself constructs the incident or statement as notable, as possessed of informational features which warrant its removal from its original context. But the incident or claim is not just extracted. It is also presented at the very beginning of the story, at the story's inception point. In this way the element chosen for this lead is cast into sharp textual relief. It is represented as not just informationally noteworthy but as so noteworthy that it requires that the introductory, orienting steps normally associated with so many other text types be abandoned. Thus the lead's abruptness, the fact that unlike traditional narratives it offers no introductory or orienting material, turns out to have rhetorical functionality.

Thus the text represents the incident or statement selected as 'angle' as inherently noteworthy, as having compelled itself upon the reporter as obvious subject matter for a report and an unavoidably appropriate starting point. Thus the functionality of this 'angle' as a building block in a subjective, ideologically determined theory of the social order is hidden from view.

The orbital structure of the body of the news story supports this representation of the reporter's selections as natural and inevitable. As we have seen, the satellites are organised to make constant reference to the headline/lead nucleus. The text throughout its length remains *about* the opening 'angle', as each satellite, regardless of distance, elaborates, contextualises, explains, justifies or appraises some element of that opening point of social crisis and significance. In this way, textual structure acts to keep the crisis point in focus, to construct it as pivotal and a natural point of informational prominence. In this way the structure of the body acts to represent the author's initial judgement about social value and as commonsensical, consensual and unavoidable.

This analysis applies generally to the contemporary English-language 'hard news' report as a text type. This rhetorical potential is one which attaches to all news items of this lead-dominated, orbital type⁴ irrespective of their subject matter and the particular set of social values they embody. It is nevertheless useful to observe, if only briefly, how it operates in the context of the 'aid worker's death' item. In the analysis set out below. I concentrate on two key elements of the item's evaluative 'angle' – the killing of the Australian aid worker and the blaming of the Kurds. I have marked in **bold** type those elements of the text which reference, support and hence maintain these elements as the text's focal point. Where possible, material which does not directly address this focal point has been abridged or removed so as to direct attention to the rhetorical functionality of the relationship between the satellites and the nucleus that they support.

[Headline/lead: crisis point and summary of core elements]

Kurds blamed for aid worker's death

CARE Australia's aid program in Iraq has been suspended indefinitely after **an attack in which an Australian worker was shot dead** and another wounded.

⁴ Though this headline/lead-dominated, orbital news item has a high frequency in the news pages of English-language newspapers (especially the broadsheets) around the world, it must be stressed that alternative types or genres of news item are to be found. Such items, of course, operate with a different rhetorical potential.

[specification 1: elaboration – more details in relation to ‘Kurds blamed’]

Iraq's charge d'affaires warned ... **that such an attack ... being blamed on local Kurd.**

[specification 2: elaboration – details of ‘worker shot dead and another wounded’]

victim...was killed .. on a road near the village of Chamchamal, in northern Iraq.

[specification 3: contextualisation – geographical and political setting]

The territory, in Sulaymaniyah province, is under the command of United Nations forces.

[specification 4: contextualisation – events surrounding/leading up to the attack]

[team] went to **resolve an argument among local Kurds about the distribution of kerosene.**

{acts to enhance the sense of moral outrage against the Kurds}

[specification 5: contextualisation – the context of the Australian aid program and the convoy which was attacked]

CARE Australia, ...distributing cooking kerosene.

[specification 6: contextualisation – sequence of events leading up to the attack]

... **Their vehicle was clearly marked with UN and CARE identification.** {acts to enhance the sense of moral outrage against the Kurds}

[specification 7: elaboration – details of the fatal attack]

"The vehicle was **riddled with bullets,**" he said.

Mr Cameron was killed, ...

At least three gunmen were reportedly involved in the attack, near the village of Takiya.

[specification 8: elaboration + justification – provides more details of the attack but also lends support to the blaming of the Kurds]

[spokesman], **said the attackers had been armed with Kalashnikov rifles.**

"It is the standard equipment of the Kurds," he said.

[specification 9: appraisal – moral judgements passed on the attack and the attackers]

Mr Issa visited senior Foreign Affairs officials yesterday and apologised for the shooting. A department spokesman said Mr Issa had promised Iraq would do everything possible to capture the gunmen and bring them to justice.

[specification 10: justification – further support for the claim that Kurds are to blame]

... **"He said Iraq had no police or other officials in the north and that the area was run by Kurdish factions."**

[specification 11: appraisal - United states and UN implicated in moral evaluation]

United States and the UN [blamed] for the lack of law and order.

[specification 12: counter-justification – challenge to the blaming of the Kurds]

[Kurdish representative] said .. it was still too early to determine who carried out the attack....

He blamed "Iraqi agents", and said the incident fitted a pattern of recent attacks and intimidation on Western relief efforts.

[specification 13: appraisal - the emotional meaning of the attack for members of the victim's family; positive evaluation of the victims in moral terms]

Both Mr Cameron's wife and mother were too upset to talk ... "The family has been shattered. Mr Cameron had two lovely daughters, aged 14 and 12."

... **"[He] was a dinky-di Aussie who knew what dangers he faced but he would have given everything for his cause.**

"He was a fantastic bloke and he knew life was always a risk He was prepared to put himself out." {acts to enhance the sense of moral outrage against the Kurds}

Mr Martinico's mother ...did not even know he had left Australia."

His mother, Betty, had not seen Joe for nine years: "I told her this afternoon - **she took it very hard.**" ...

[specification 14: contextualisation – events subsequent to the attack]

The Foreign Affairs spokesman said the department was waiting for a report, being prepared by UN officers, on the **shootings...**

We notice how the report returns repeatedly, almost rhythmically to these twin focal points as the text unfolds. Thus direct reference is made to the shooting and killing in specifications 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 12 and 14, and material which supports the directing of moral outrage towards the Kurds in 1, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 13.

This ‘blaming’ of the Kurds is of particular interest. Clearly the text supports this evaluative position and yet, in keeping with the journalistic strategy of impersonalisation, the authorial voice remains aloof. Support for the position is achieved through textual structure – the blaming of the Kurds is given maximal prominence through the choice of headline and then supported through repeated specifications of ‘justification’ and ‘elaboration’ as the text unfolds.

The rhetorical functionality of the concluding evaluative ‘wrap-up’ phase in specification 13 is of some interest in this regard. Iedema et al. 1994 and White 1998 have demonstrated that what they term the ‘wrap-up’ stage is a to be found commonly (though not universally) in ‘hard news’ reporting. In the wrap-up, outside sources are introduced to locate the events under consideration in a specific cultural or moral framework, most typically a framework which is represented as that of the media organisation’s own audience. This wrap up thus provides a more generalised moral meaning for the item and thereby supplies a sense of textual closure. Specification 13 clearly operates in this way for this item, as the event is interpreted in terms of the dead man’s stoic heroism and the terrible emotional loss his death entails for the family back home. The rhetorical qualities of this wrap-up are, in this case, enhanced by what comes earlier in the report. The detailing of the victim’s outstanding moral qualities and the emotional pain of his death here serves to strengthen the outrage invoked towards those responsible, and as the structure of the report has previously indicated, this must surely be the Kurds. Once again a structural feature common to the news item as text type operates to invest the individual report with a potential for conveying an evaluative position and for triggering an attitudinal response.

Conclusion: objectivity and the rhetoric of news

It is thus by such analyses of the news item, as a general text type, and of news reports as individual instances of this type, that we are able to reconcile the media’s claims of objectivity with the ultimately ideological nature of all news reporting. We are able to see the various practices by which orbital news items are constructed for what they are – elements of a rhetorical strategy. We are able to see the conventions of so-called ‘objectivity’ as producing a particular form of textuality by which the inter-subjective role of the author is obscured. We are able to understand that it is by this mode of textuality that the media has been able to maintain belief in the notion of news as an ‘objective’ mode of representation, while nevertheless producing texts which convey particular social evaluations and which convey particular world views.

The reconciliation proved to be essential in the context of the journalism training at SBS outlined above. By this mode of analysis, the trainees were able to understand precisely what it was that management required of them in its insistence that they produce ‘objective’ reports. At the same time, they also received support for their own strongly held views that so many supposedly ‘objective’ news reports from the

international wire services were interpretative, evaluative and ideologically slanted. They also acquired, it is hoped, a systemic and linguistically-motivated means of uncovering and accounting for the various ideological positions in the wire copy with which they work each day.

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