

## **The Neutral Journalist Theory- Does It Work? A Study of Journalists' Perceptions about Influences on Media Content**

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### **Introduction**

A journalist is required to be neutral. Thousands of books on mass media have elaborated the qualities and duties of reporters and sub editors. Almost all the authors of these books are agreed that the journalist should be neutral and the news should be objective and accurate. For example, according to Earl English and Clarence Hach, "News is the factual report of an event, not the event as a prejudiced person might see it or as the reporter or sponsor might wish it to have been. A reporter should report news impartially and honestly."<sup>i</sup>

News is the factual report of an event. What the reporter sees it supposed to be report. Objectivity means to report the facts exactly the same way as they occurred. It goes against objectivity if the reporter adds something from his own imagination. It will not be an objective reporting if the reporter wants to angle, slant or shade the news.<sup>ii</sup>

"We don't make the news, we report it", said Richard Salant of C.B.S. News. He further said, "Our reporters don't cover stories from their point of view. They are presenting them from nobody's point of view."<sup>iii</sup>

Hence almost each and every expert of the field of journalism and mass communication is of the view that the journalist should be neutral, the news should be objective and the media content should be free of all types of

influences. But whether it is possible or not; whether the neutral journalist theory works or not, is the basic theme of this research. The present research "The Neutral Journalist Theory-Does it work"? is an attempt to study whether it is possible for a journalist to remain neutral and impartial during his duties or not. This study is based on the opinions of the journalists working in different media organizations in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. This study would help to understand the journalists' own perception about the nature of their job and whether they are agreed that they should be neutral or not. The study would also find out the reasons that have become hurdles in the way of the neutral journalist theory. The idea behind the selection of the journalists for survey is that they are the only people who themselves can tell better about their nature of job. No one can tell better than working journalists about the validity of the Neutral Journalist theory.

### **Literature Review**

There is deficiency of the relevant literature on the topic of the research. Thousands of the authors has elaborated the qualities of a journalist by saying that he or she should be neutral during his job but very few has raised the question whether it is practically possible for a journalist to be neutral or not. The most important and the globally recognized research work in this regard is that of Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese. Their work has been published in the shape of a popular book, "Mediating The Message." The authors presented and discussed different theories of influences on mass media content. They concluded on the basis of their research that the media content is influenced by a number of factors including personal attitudes and orientations of media workers; professionalism; corporate policies; corporate ownership patterns; the economic environment; advertisers and ideological influences.<sup>iv</sup>

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This theory is supported by the "Null Effects model" by Young (1981). According to this theory media content is free of distortion. The Null Effects model claims that mass media provide a fair representation of reality with little or no distortion.<sup>viii</sup>

In contrast to the passive role, the active role of media, as mentioned by Shoemaker and Reese, describes, "media content may be based on what happens in the physical world but it singles out and highlights certain elements over others. Reality is necessarily manipulated when events and people are relocated into news or prime- time stories. People can be portrayed with different labels (the same person as freedom fighter or terrorist). One of the most obvious ways media content structures a symbolic environment is simply by giving greater attention (in the form of more time, greater prominence, and so on) to certain events, people, groups and places than others. Pictures can also be distorted, by cropping, angles and shot selection. Camera perspectives can also manipulate perception. It was possible to depict a subject favorably or unfavorably by choosing different camera perspectives.<sup>ix</sup>

In the neutral image, news are seen to emerge naturally from the events and occurrences from the real world with the journalist as a spectator, faithfully and accurately reporting what he or she observes. The journalist's relationship to the information is thus one of detachment and neutrality.<sup>x</sup>

### **Research Questions**

To study and evaluate "The Neutral Journalist Theory- Does it work?" following research questions are addressed.

- 1- Is it possible for a journalist to remain neutral during the production of news content?



- 2- If not, then what are the major hurdles in the way of the Neutral Journalist theory?

## Hypotheses

The following hypotheses have been made to study this research.

- 1- This is not possible for a journalist to remain 'neutral' during the production of news content.
- 2- A number of factors like government, advertisers, owners, media routines are big hurdle in the way of the Neutral Journalist theory.

## Methodology

The employed methodology of the study is survey research.<sup>xi</sup> The universe of the study are the journalists (both reporters and sub-editors) working in the newspapers and the news agencies in the federal capital of the country Islamabad and its adjunctant city of Rawalpindi. Due to the limitations of time and resources, the journalists of the other cities are not included in this research. Hundreds of newspapers and magazines are being published from Rawalpindi and Islamabad but the most prominent and widely circulated English newspapers are daily Dawn, The News, and The Nation while the widely circulated Urdu newspapers are daily Jang, Nawa-I-Waqt, Khabrain, Ousaf, Pakistan, Al-Akhbar, Asas and Din.<sup>xii</sup> We have selected a sample of 60 journalists from these newspapers and from three of the well reputed news agencies A.P.P., SANA News and N.N.I. A comprehensive questionnaire was prepared and circulated amongst the sample universe of these sixty journalists.

## **Findings**

Following are the results of the survey research.

- 1- Respondents were asked, do you think Journalists are neutral? 88% of the respondents answered "No" while 12 percent said that they were not clear about the answer. Even not a single person said, "Yes."
- 2- The respondents were asked, Is it possible for a journalist to remain neutral during his duties of reporting/editing? Again 82% of the respondents replied "No." They were of the view that this is not possible for a journalist to remain neutral during his duties of reporting or editing. However 12% respondents replied that this was possible while six percent respondents told that they were not clear about the answer.
- 3- In third question, respondents were asked, "In your opinion, what are the most important factors that influence media content?" There accumulative answer was that the owners of the media organizations, government, advertisers and personal interests and attitudes of the journalists were the biggest factors that influenced media content.
- 4- In fourth question, it was asked, "To what extent, media content is influenced by the government?" 67% said, very greatly, 14% said, greatly, 11% replied, to some extent, four percent said, not at all while the remaining four percent said, they don't know.
- 5- The fifth question was, "To what extent, in your view, media content is influenced by the owners. 52% responded, very greatly, 23% greatly, 10% to some extent, nine percent not at all and six percent don't know.
- 6- It was the sixth question, "To what extent, in your opinion, media content is influenced by advertisers?"

66% responded, very greatly, 22% greatly, 5 percent to some extent, four percent not at all and four percent don't know.

- 7- In seventh question, it was asked, "To what extent, in your opinion, media content is influenced by media routines (like reliance on news sources, deadlines etc.)?"
- 8- 49% replied, very greatly, 27 % greatly, 12% to some extent, eight percent not at all and four percent don't know.
- 9- In the eighth question it was asked, "To what extent, in your opinion, media content is influenced by the personal attitudes and interests of journalists themselves. The response was: 42% very greatly, 21% greatly, 19% to some extent, 15% not at all and 3% don't know.

### **Conclusion**

Keeping in view all the discussion about the research study, the researcher is now able to test the hypotheses of the study. First hypothesis seems to be proved because the 90% of the respondents replied that the journalists are not neutral. Even not a single person responded its against. Hence the first hypothesis is proved that the journalists are not neutral and this is not possible for a journalist to remain neutral during the performance of his professional duties. Hence we can say on the basis of the findings of our research that the neutral journalist theory does not work.

Second hypothesis also seems to be proved because the respondents were of the view that a number of factors like the government, advertisers, owners and media routines influence media content

and hence these are a big hurdle in the way of the neutral journalist theory.

On the basis of the research findings we can say that the media content is not actual and accurate picture of the real world rather this content is influenced by a number of factors. This is a matter of great concern for the society, in general, and for the media industry, in particular. The notion of Shoemaker and Reese has been proved that reality is necessarily manipulated when events and personalities are relocated in news. The recommendation on the basis of this research is that every possible effort should be done to minimize the influences on media content and the journalists should be facilitated to work in an independent and neutral atmosphere. The government and the media organizations should take some positive steps in this regard.

**Table**  
**Journalists' perceptions about influences on media content**

Influencing Factors	Very greatly	Greatly	To some Extent	Not at all	Don't know
Government	67%	14%	11%	4%	4%
Advertisers	66%	22%	5%	4%	4%
Media Owners	52%	23%	10%	9%	6%
Media Routines	49%	27%	12%	8%	4%
Personal attitudes & Interests of Journalists	42%	21%	19%	15%	3%



## **References**

<sup>1</sup> English, E. & Hach, C.(2002) Scholastic Journalism, IOWA: IOWA State University Press. P.4

<sup>2</sup> Siraj, S.A. (1997) Print Media, Islamabad: AIOU. p.4

<sup>3</sup> Altheide,D. (1976) Creating Reality: How TV News distorts events. Bevely Hills, CA: Sage

<sup>4</sup> Shoemaker, P. & Reese, S. (1991) Mediating The Message, New York: Longman.p.1

<sup>5</sup> Paracha, S.A. (1999) Pakistan's Print Media Policy: A historical perspective, Lahore: Punjab University.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Shoemaker, P. & Reese, S. (1991) Mediating The Message, New York: Longman. p. 30

<sup>8</sup> Young, J. (1981) The Manufacturer of News, Bevely Hills, CA: Sage. p.393.

<sup>9</sup> Shoemaker, P. & Reese, S. (1991) Mediating The Message, New York: Longman.pp.33-34.

<sup>10</sup>- Sultana,I. (2003, January) Reflection of Editorial Policy on News Content, Journal of Research , Lahore: Punjab University, p.39.

<sup>11</sup> Kerlinger, F. (1986) Foundations of Behavioral Research, New York: H.B.C. Publishers. p. 377.

<sup>12</sup>Gallup Survey of Newspaper Readership (2002-03)

