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## News, Documentary and Advocacy Journalism

*Mathew Charles*

“When objective journalism decays into a cowardly neutrality between truth and lies, we need advocacy journalism to lift our profession... back to credibility.”

Niles (2011)

When a story becomes more than just news

This chapter examines how alternative models of journalism are emerging to counter the news values associated with the so-called mainstream media - news values, which are increasingly criticised for serving only the interests of the political and economic elite. In particular, this chapter looks at advocacy journalism, which focuses on a shift away from objectivity towards the arguably more ethical practice of attachment. The neutral and detached reporter, who remains outside of events and reports only facts, becomes a campaigner immersed in a story to call for and foster real social change.

From Journalist to Advocate

Every journalist has different reasons for entering the profession. As Harcup (2004) explains, they also have ‘their own beliefs about what they do’ and ‘their own reasons for pursuing a career in whatever field of journalism they work in’ (Harcup, 2004:5). It can be a very exciting career too, but it would be hard to find a journalist who chose their job for the financial rewards. In fact most journalists and journalism students

are motivated by idealism, by a desire to make the world we live in a better place. The challenge is that many professional journalists are finding that the mainstream media of today unfortunately no longer affords this opportunity, so what are the alternatives?

The majority of journalists are motivated by a deep sense of professionalism. They are guided and abide by news values, which are an intangible, almost unconscious (if very rigid) set of criteria used to steer editorial judgment through the day's agenda (Brighton and Foy, 2007). Though these values have been the focus of enduring academic debate since the 1950s, they have only recently been brought into question in the newsroom itself. Individual journalists are becoming increasingly frustrated at an apparent narrowing of the news agenda and as a result, growing numbers of journalists are beginning to question their own professional purpose and even the future direction of journalism altogether (Lee-Wright, 2010a; Hummel, Kirchhoff and Prandner, 2012). Increasingly, journalists are leaving traditional media not because they are turning their back on the profession, but precisely because of their profession and the "passionate intensity" they feel "to right wrongs and to get the greedy bastards" (Lewis, 2011). In other words they no longer feel able (within the constraints of mainstream media) to pursue those who are determined to keep power and wealth for themselves and control the news agenda.

Lee-Wright (2010a) paints a disturbing picture of this existential-type crisis for journalism within the BBC newsroom. He describes how a once great journalist culture has been cut to the bone, spread impossibly thin and reduced to the 'churnalism' that Davies (2008) first reported. Lee-Wright (2010a) describes how technological changes and ongoing budget constraints in a world of increased competition are leading to radical changes in the journalism profession, which are ultimately forcing many journalists to re-think their position. Growing numbers are seeking voluntary redundancy or giving up a secure position to go freelance and invent 'new narratives of work' (Lee-Wright, 2010a: 39).

Former American news anchor, Nick Clooney, faced a similar dilemma after his visit to Darfur in 2006 with his son George (the Hollywood actor) to document the genocide there.<sup>1</sup> "I went

as a reporter, came back as an advocate,” he said . Not only did he want to tell people of the atrocities taking place in Darfur, but he wanted to encourage his audience to actually do something about it. He chose documentary over television news (which was the format most familiar to him) because he felt it gave him more freedom to be “honest” about what was happening in Darfur. He unashamedly took a stance, along with his actor-son George, to inspire change in the world. He was able to free himself from the constraints of traditional television news where the notion of balance prevails, and produce a film that uses creative and unconventional storytelling techniques that enable him to not only engage, but also to arouse his audience. ‘A Journey to Darfur’ gave Clooney the chance to “really bring the story home.” Deeply affected by the atrocities and suffering he witnessed in Sudan, Clooney felt compelled to take action and his documentary is a result of this devotion to the story; a story that, for him, became much more than just news.

According to Canadian journalist Sue Careless, advocacy journalism ‘openly speaks for or pleads on behalf of another, giving the other a face and a voice’ (Careless, 2000). This is what Clooney achieves in his film by openly and shamelessly taking sides with the victims of genocide. The documentary is a personal story of his visit with his son to Darfur. Together they engage their audience in a ‘personal point of view’ that by its very nature is more ‘persuasive’ than traditional TV news storytelling techniques where ‘subjects and subject matter are mediated by the impersonal director, who hides behind the voice of commentary’ (Chanan, 2007: 6). This major difference in style does not detach the film from journalism - on the contrary. Whilst the motivation for the work is advocacy and the directors’ desire to inspire change, the documentary remains fundamentally anchored within the sphere of professional television journalism. Indeed there has been an explosion of advocacy documentary - making in recent years such as *An Inconvenient Truth*, *The End of the Line* and *The Killing Fields* but these films must be distinguished from pure activism through their use of professional storytelling and maintenance of professional journalistic standards. In other words, they are not and must not be considered as pure polemics.

## Beyond Partiality

The main difference between mainstream and advocacy journalism is not just about taking sides, it is about what actually constitutes news and how it should be reported. For advocacy journalists, it is no longer sufficient to report the news as mere facts. Advocacy journalists find a story, engage in the story and want their audience to act. To achieve this, advocacy journalists must embark upon radically different forms of storytelling and documentary provides a perfect vehicle for this type of reporting.

In his book *Human Rights Journalism*, Ibrahim Seaga Shaw (2012) writes of an urgent need to deconstruct news and provide more in-depth analysis of a story in order to fully engage the audience. There needs to be a bigger shift away from the familiar to the unfamiliar. This, according to Shaw, 'will then promote a better understanding of the undercurrents of the events and issues at stake,' (Shaw, 2012:38) which will in turn provoke a more adequate response from the audience and live up to the expectations that journalism can influence the future direction of society. Advocacy journalism can therefore act as a potential jolt for the audience; extracting them from their comfort zone to provoke some form of action for change. For Shaw (2012), journalism is not just about information and providing balanced viewpoints, it is about reporting a story in ways the story becomes a catalyst for change. In other words, advocacy journalism transforms a journalist from a mere communicator of information into a motivator for action. Furthermore, in this period of crisis for journalism, when we are told of audience 'compassion fatigue', (McLuhan, 1965 cited in Shaw, 2012:38) advocacy journalism has the potential to turn this 'fatigue' into engagement by reporting news not just as a neutral list of facts but through a real 'attachment' (Shaw, 2012:69) to the story and through a 'critical sense of empathy' (Shaw, 2012:102).

Instead of merely acting as neutral witnesses to events, advocacy journalists get involved. They are increasingly working with campaigns – or with campaigning ends at least – to diversify the voices we hear, the people we meet and the images we see to procure real social change. Whether defending human rights abroad or civil liberties at home, supporting the struggles of the poor to improve their lives, explaining climate

change or denying a call to war, advocacy journalism can speak up and speak back to the powers that be. However, this model of mission-driven advocacy journalism poses a central question that for some is problematic: should journalists be taking sides, getting involved in what they see and hear, and encouraging active change as a result?

The journalism of today's mainstream television news focuses on the ideal of objectivity, which stresses factual reporting over commentary, the balancing of opposing viewpoints, and maintaining a neutral observer role for the journalist (Schudson, 2001). The emphasis is solely on providing information and not on provoking action, but for advocacy journalists information alone is not enough to inspire change and fulfill the role journalism should be playing in society. This social responsibility model of journalism, which has objectivity and impartiality at its heart, is arguably too restrictive and serves only to maintain the interests of the consumer and not those of the community (Allan, 1997: 319). The crisis faced by journalism today is not best confronted with traditional forms of objective reporting, since it has arisen precisely because of mainstream journalism's seemingly unwavering bond to the ideal of objectivity. However, it is important to reiterate once more that to assume advocacy journalism is just about taking sides is an over-simplification. Instead advocacy journalism is a proactive approach that does not just report facts as they are, it seeks ways of improvement, solution and resolution.

Critics and traditionalists believe that advocacy journalism simply morphs into opinion media and leads to institutional bias like that of Fox News in the USA. This ignores the main issue with Fox News, which is the broadcaster's complete denial of and attempts to conceal its bias. In contrast, quality advocacy journalism makes clear its position from the outset and is open in its attempts to search for possible answers and solutions. Good advocacy journalism builds on a critical self-awareness that is constantly held up to scrutiny. It does not hide or conceal its messages through the presentation of false truths (Careless, 2000).

The former BBC war correspondent, Martin Bell, famously said at a News of the World conference in 1996, "I do not believe that we should stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, aggressor and victim." He has consistently

called for “a journalism of attachment, a journalism which cares as well as knows” (Bell, 1997 and 1998).

### New Media: A Way Out for the Alternative

Advocacy journalism is often criticised for a lack of credibility, but whilst advocacy journalists may work closely with NGOs and other campaign groups, professional journalism remains the essence of their work:

*“If you are only a polemicist, you won’t educate or persuade anyone, and those “on side” will find you boring and repetitious... A good journalist must play devil’s advocate. You must argue against your own convictions. In an interview, you still have to ask the hard questions of possible heroes, the tough questions, even of the people you admire. You are not writing public relations for them and they will not be vetting your piece.”* (Careless, 2000).

As news corporations and broadcasters continue their course of decline with drastic downsizing, including the closing of international bureaux and specialist beats, advocacy journalism can tell the stories that financially strapped traditional media outlets are unable or unwilling to report. As journalist numbers are cut from the mainstream, charities have availed themselves of the skills of experienced reporters who are committing themselves to a cause they feel passionately about. Andrew Hogg is a former investigative journalist at the Sunday Times, now news editor of Christian Aid. He recently worked on the charity’s Death and Taxes report which showed global companies were cheating the developing world out of huge amounts of unpaid taxes. He told the Independent, “The subjects you are looking at are really deeply important subjects for the people on this planet who don’t have anyone to speak up for them.” (cited in Burrell, 2012). Emma Daly, the Communications Director of Human Rights Watch is also a journalist. She told the Independent, “We’re doing investigative reporting, coming up with facts and writing about it. We have been in print for a long time, but now we are broadcasters.” (cited in Burrell, 2012). NGOs are therefore increasingly using professional journalists and journalistic techniques to help them with

their advocacy work; work which goes beyond pure activism.

Ongoing breakthroughs in digital technology mean advocacy journalists also have increasing opportunities to work alone. Social media are driving this change: whether it is Facebook or Twitter to broadcast the final piece of work, or the use of crowdsourcing sites to raise funds for a particular filming project, for example. Furthermore, technological advances mean advocacy journalists can link to audiences who, like them, have also deserted the mainstream. Increasing numbers of us now turn to NGOs and other groups directly for our news stories and especially for international coverage (Beckett, 2009).

The website [snagfilms.com](http://snagfilms.com) was founded by Ted Leonsis to develop a concept he calls 'filmanthropy'. He links filmmakers, philanthropists, NGOs and documentary fans on his site. The site says "we tie every documentary in our library to a related charitable effort and make it easy to learn more and get involved." Users can watch film, see related NGO campaigns and 'snag' the film, which creates links to it through an individual's social media accounts. Other projects like [linktv.org](http://linktv.org) and [viewchange.org](http://viewchange.org) in the USA and the Community Channel in the UK also allow advocacy journalists to reach larger audiences and provide real opportunities for sustained issue awareness and action campaigns. You Tube, Vimeo and other video based websites offer outlets for documentary journalism, as well as the booming film festival circuit. Funding can come from advocacy groups as we have seen or from charitable foundations and even directly from the public and individual activists or philanthropists through crowdsourcing. Indeed the possibilities provided by the digital age have led to such an explosion of independently made films that some are referring to a documentary renaissance (Lee-Wright, 2010b; Lees, 2012).

We are constantly told journalism is in crisis and increasingly individual journalists are re-assessing what it means to be a reporter in today's media landscape. Many want to save their profession and regain the trust it appears to have so tragically lost. Journalism and news are undoubtedly in a state of flux. Advocacy journalism through documentary is just one option available for individual reporters and filmmakers who still believe passionately in making the world a better place.

## Notes

1. In an interview with the author in 2006.

### Challenging Questions

- To what extent can advocacy journalism provide an effective alternative to the mainstream media?
- What is meant by 'alternative journalism' and how does it differ from the mainstream?
- Can advocacy journalism be a trusted source of news?
- If journalism is in crisis, is advocacy journalism its saviour?

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