



TOK

Some people refer to the media as the ‘fourth estate’. This view draws on the traditional way of dividing power in countries into three main groups – the church and religious groups (the first estate), the nobility (the second estate) and the rest of the population (the third estate). When the term fourth estate is applied to the media, it usually means the press (i.e. newspapers).

The film *Wag the Dog* draws our attention to this phenomenon. In this film, the US president wants to distract the nation’s attention away from his personal affairs so that he can win an election. To do this, he invents a war in a Balkan country and hires a studio to stage the war, film it and broadcast it. The title of the film alludes to the expression *the tail wagging the dog*. Normally it is the dog that uses its tail to reflect a feeling, or state, of contentment (by wagging its tail). Similarly, a nation normally uses the media to reflect the state of that nation. But what happens when the media become an entity that does not *reflect* the state of a nation but *determines* it, as in the film? If the tail is wagging the dog, then the roles have been reversed and the dog is being controlled by the situation. Do you think that the media can both reflect and determine public opinion? Can the media shape the future of a nation?

No journalist likes to be accused of being biased: a journalist’s job is to present the news in the most objective and unbiased way possible. There are reasons, however, why this can be difficult to achieve.

- First of all, journalists are under pressure to be the first to break a story.
- Secondly, journalists are under pressure to write stories that sell.
- Finally, it can be tempting to tell the public what it is thought they want to hear instead of telling them just the facts, or what they need to hear.

Activity 3.2

In October 2010, two candidates from the state of Delaware for the American Senate, Chris Coons and Christine O’Donnell, held a debate. As the candidates discussed the role of religion in state education, O’Donnell questioned whether the US Constitution separates church and state, an issue which is addressed by the First Amendment of the US Constitution.

Below are five headlines (a–e) from newspapers and news networks that reported the debate.

- Christine O’Donnell stumbles on First Amendment, *San Francisco Chronicle*.
- In debate, O’Donnell gets a lesson on First Amendment, *The Seattle Times*.
- ABC News exclusive: Christine O’Donnell stands her ground on First Amendment statement, blames media for distortions, ABC News.
- O’Donnell questions separation of Church, State in Senate debate, Fox News.
- Christine O’Donnell blanks on First Amendment, CNN.

- 1 Rate each headline for bias from 1 to 5, where 1 = ‘hardly biased’ and 5 = ‘extremely biased’.
- 2 Explain your ratings to the rest of your class by referring to specific use of language from the headlines.
- 3 You could then view the debate online in order to see the difference between reality and the portrayal of reality through the headlines.

Newsworthiness

As you study the issue of journalism you will discover how difficult it can be to report on events without putting someone in a good or bad light. The problem of bias does not always lie in the language used to report an event; it can also lie in the initial decision of whether to report the event at all. How do journalists and editors select the news?

There are three criteria for determining whether a story or event is newsworthy, or worthy of being covered in the media. For a story to be newsworthy, it has to be sensational, it has to be relevant, or it has to be extraordinary, or a combination of all three. We will apply all three criteria to several stories released by the WikiLeaks organisation in 2010.

In 2006, several journalists, dissidents and technologists launched the WikiLeaks website, offering diplomats, soldiers or anyone else a place to submit sensitive and secret documents anonymously. While the website’s fame grew over the years, exposing corporate scandals and US military plans, it was not until the website published the US diplomatic cables leak in November 2010 that it really made headlines round the world. Among the documents released was evidence that the US government

had allegedly spied on the Secretary General of the United Nations, and there were other stories too that caused embarrassment, anger and damage to governments in many countries. What was the value of telling these secrets to the world? What made them newsworthy?

Sensationalism

First of all, **sensationalism** sells. There is an expression in the media world, *If it bleeds it leads*. This is to say, if there is murder, blood or controversy in a particular news story, then that story is put on the front page of the newspaper, the most prominent place for a story to attract attention. Bad news is good for circulation, as many readers tend to enjoy a story full of intrigue, plot and sensation (a 'juicy story', in other words).

Advertisers want a high circulation of the newspapers that they advertise in and advertising space in the most popular papers comes at a high price. Similarly, in television, if a programme is popular and has high ratings, the adjacent advertisement slots are very expensive. Advertisers provide much of the income for newspapers and other media networks, so journalists have to do a balancing act between reporting the truth on the one hand and considering both advertisers and sales on the other. In fact, many newspapers and broadcasting networks receive government subsidies in order to help them maintain high standards of fair and balanced journalism.

WikiLeaks, however, is not a conventional news provider, as its website is free of ads. It is run by volunteers, supported by sponsors and protected by fans. The website claims to be built on the ideals of freedom of speech and transparency and its supporters believe that US citizens have a right to know how their taxes are spent. If the leaks have embarrassed US officials, then the supporters claim it was not done with a profit motive in mind but in the interest of upholding ideals.

Nevertheless, the negative news of these leaks generated income for commercial newspapers and magazines around the world. Viewers, readers and listeners were intrigued by the US government's secrets and how they were leaked. The stories were as sensational as a James Bond film.

Relevance

Whenever we open a newspaper, watch the daily television news or browse news-providing websites, one question we often end up asking ourselves is *Why should I care?* In other words, what makes a particular story relevant to us and, from there, why is it newsworthy?

For example, not every plane crash will be reported in your national newspapers. Usually the story has to be relevant to a particular country, perhaps involving citizens of that country, for it to be reported there. If you browse through the documents on WikiLeaks, not all of them turn out to be sensational or relevant. This is not to say, however, that they are irrelevant for everyone. For a parent whose soldier son is killed in a war, details of the fighting in that war would be relevant.

Extraordinariness

Some stories simply lend themselves to sensational coverage because they are extraordinary. The story of a dog biting a man is rarely deemed newsworthy. However if a man were to bite a dog, you would read about it. This common phrase in the world of journalism, *Man bites dog*, explains how the extraordinary is newsworthy. In the case of WikiLeaks, little was disclosed that was not already suspected but what made it extraordinary was how it gave everyone with an Internet connection access to top-secret documents.

'Early in life I had noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper.'

George Orwell (1903–50)

'In journalism, there has always been a tension between getting it first and getting it right'

Ellen Goodman (1941–)



Figure 3.3 Julian Assange, the co-founder of the WikiLeaks website.

'It's all storytelling, you know. That's what journalism is all about.'

Tom Brokaw (1940–)



**Key
term**

Sensationalism refers to a style of writing that is exaggerated, emotive or controversial.

'The news media are, for the most part, the bringers of bad news ... and it's not entirely the media's fault, bad news gets higher ratings and sells more papers than good news.'

Peter McWilliams (1950–2000)