

Call out your bias!

Embracing diversity through cross-border journalism
by Tabea Grzeszyk

ABSTRACT

This research argues that the dominant and still vivid tradition of journalism that places the reporter as a mere observer to events, power relations and global hierarchies is unfit as a working model for cross-border collaboration teams. By reversing the perspective of research, it investigates how the 'neutral' position of journalism itself has been shaped by historical context, storytelling traditions, iconic imageries and naturalized assumptions that have influenced its view of the world. With the goal of initiating a cross-sectorial knowledge transfer, this article explores key concepts from Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Theory in order to apply them to contemporary journalism practices.

KEYWORDS Cross-border journalism, unconscious bias, journalism norms and traditions, intercultural communication, De-Westernizing Journalism

Introduction

The historical, cultural, economic and even gendered context of journalism is often (mis-)taken as a universal norm. However, unconscious bias and the lack of self-reflection can jeopardize cross-border collaborations when reporters with diverse backgrounds and different points of view collaborate at eye level. This article suggests that diversity should be embraced rather than fought against, as different viewpoints that call out our bias as a reporter are indispensable for more accurate reporting across borders.

Methodology

This research looks at key concepts from Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies in order to apply insights to the domain of journalism. This cross-sectorial knowledge transfer focuses on three aspects:

1.) Journalism as a framework of thought:

The first part of the research applies Michel Foucault's concept of an "Archaeology of Knowledge"¹ to the sphere of journalism. Instead of taking journalism as a universal concept, it looks at the historical, cultural and societal roots that gave rise to the Anglo-American model that, with some variation in different schools, is still the global norm for journalism today².

2.) Journalism as an "Othering"-practice:

The second part of the research takes coverage of the Arab World as a case study in order to understand common bias and blind spots in Western journalism practices. Taking

¹ Foucault, Michel (1978) *Die Ordnung der Dinge. Eine Archäologie der Humanwissenschaften*. Frankfurt/Main and Foucault, Michel (1995). *Archäologie des Wissens*. Frankfurt/Main

² Cf. Gitte Meyer & Anker Brink Lund (2008) *International Language Monism and Homogenisation of Journalism*, *Javnost - The Public*, 15:4, 73-86

Edward Said's notion of "Orientalism"³ as a starting point, it investigates how journalism can claim objectivity and neutrality in theory, while often reproducing unconscious bias in practice. Since the Arab World has historically served as a primary example of representing "the Other" of Western culture, it makes it a particularly rich example for critical investigation.

3.) Embracing diversity through cross-border collaboration:

The third part of the research suggests practical recommendations for journalists with diverse backgrounds who wish to collaborate at eye level. It aims to initiate a discussion around topics, such as:

i) Know what you're excluding

To focus on one thing means to exclude another. Selection is a necessary editorial step in order to tell a story. However, keeping Michel Foucault in mind, we should be aware that there can be a powerful history behind exclusions until today (Said 2003, Goldberg 2018). Whether it's about gathering the right people for your cross-border investigation or choosing your particular story angle: It's always worth to take a step back and revisit the criteria you based your decision on.

ii) Be transparent about your mission

Journalists interested in cross-border collaborations should be aware that there's a history behind the journalistic ideal of objectivity, neutrality and impartiality. What emerged as a superior model in Britain and the United States in the 19th century (Chalaby 1996) might not be the only legitimate approach to describe the multi-centered, complex and border-crossing realities of today. Journalistic neutrality might not be available to all team members. In highly polarized environments, it's likely to encounter colleagues who feel committed towards driving social change more than just passing on information to the public (Pintak/Ginges 2009, c. Meyer/Lundt 1994).

iii) Expect to find more than two sides of a story

The concept of reporting „both sides“ of a story developed in the context of parliamentary bipartism in Britain and the United States (Chalaby 1996). What started with covering politics grew into a far-reaching dichotomic view of the world that no longer confined itself to parliamentary coverage, but turned into a general reporting standard. Expect reality to be more complex, wanting to investigate the good vs. the evil and the oppressor vs. the oppressed means the risk to represent only a partial reality to your audience.

iv) Embrace Diversity

It's key to acknowledge and embrace differences within the group with an open mind and collegial interest instead of judging and questioning each others professionalism whenever diverse journalism frameworks surface and collide. Expect and acknowledge that only a minority of journalists worldwide might fully comply with the objective-neutral-impartial-ideal of journalism simply because it doesn't match their working environments. It should be noted that journalism is always shaped by diverse influences (Reese 2007).

v) Be aware of Narratives

Diverse cross-border teams are a great way of finding out about our own blind spots and personal biases as a journalist (Pintak/Ginges 2009, c. Sambrook 2018). Maybe it's time to

³ Edward Said (2003). *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Penguin Modern Classics (first published in 1978)

accept that we are not the ideal objective observer that we would like to be. Growing up in a highly competitive world that has been marked by Western capitalism must have shaped us in one way or another. By digging deeper into our journalistic practice — but also towards a more honest understanding of ourselves as journalists — we can break with stereotypes and improve our reporting.

It should be noted that the author is a “participant observer.” Having an academic background in Cultural Studies and working as a journalist for the German National Radio since 2009, she co-founded the independent network hostwriter.org, which helps journalists to collaborate across borders. The notion of bias has frequently been reported by members of the platform, which increased her interest to investigate cultural differences among journalism practices around the globe.

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