

# Objectivity in Newspaper Journalism in Kerala

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## Abstract

This study on the level of objectivity in newspaper journalism in Kerala is anchored on a sample of 500 newspaper readers and 260 newspaper journalists. Among the several dailies available in Kerala, two most circulated newspapers each from both Malayalam and English were selected: *Malayala Manorama*, *Mathrubhoomi*, *The Hindu* and *The New Indian Express*. 125 respondents each from these four newspapers with their occupational status ranging from Government employees, teachers, college students to farmers, businessmen, homemakers, personnel in non-governmental and labourers in unorganized sectors were selected at random from the southern (Thiruvananthapuram), the central (Kottayam and Kochi) and the northern strata (Kozhikode and Kannur) within the State of Kerala. The findings are based on the responses received from both the readers and the journalists on the four parameters of objectivity elicited in the questionnaire survey centred on the 'Norms of Journalistic Conduct' prescribed for newspapers by the Press Council of India.

## Keywords

print journalism, readers' habits, media objectivity, journalistic norms

## Introduction

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, objectivity entails being "uninfluenced by emotion or personal prejudice" (Beauchamp, 1987). A newspaper is the mirror of the society. The reporter's task is to directly reflect the world to the reader, without any of the distortions or biases that would alter the "real" view. The traditional doctrine of objectivity entails six standards for professional journalism:

- a) *Standard of factuality*: Reports are based on verified facts.
- b) *Standard of balance and fairness*: Reports balance and fairly represent the main viewpoints on an issue.
- c) *Standard of non-bias*: The reporter's prejudices and interests do not distort reports.
- d) *Standard of independence*: Journalists are free to report without fear or favour.
- e) *Standard of non-interpretation*: Reporters do not put their interpretations into reports.
- f) *Standard of neutrality*: Reporters do not take sides in disputes. Journalists are neutral observers and not players ((Ed.), 2010).

### **Bias in news**

Human communication always takes place in a context, through a medium, and among individuals and groups situated historically, politically, economically, culturally, and socially and therefore, all forms of communication are subject to multiple biases: personal, psychological, political and cultural. According to Andrew Cline, the major structural biases of journalism are:

**a) Commercial bias:** The news media are today moneymaking businesses and therefore, they must deliver a good product to their customers to make a profit. The customers of the news media are the advertisers. The most important products the news media delivers to its customers are readers or viewers. The news media are biased toward news that draws readers and viewers.

**b) Temporal bias:** The news media are biased toward the immediate and the fresh. To be immediate and fresh, the news must be ever-changing even when there is little news to cover.

**c) Visual bias:** Television is biased toward visual depictions of news. Television is nothing without pictures. Legitimate news that has no visual angle is likely to get little attention. With the onslaught of 24-hour news channels, today newspapers compete also as a visual medium.

**d) Bad news bias:** Good news is considered boring and bad news is preferred. This bias makes the world look like a more dangerous place than it may actually be.

**e) Narrative bias:** The news media cover the news in terms of "stories" that must have a beginning, middle and end. There should be a plot with antagonists and protagonists. Good storytelling requires drama, and so this bias often leads journalists to add, or seek out, drama for the sake of drama. Controversy creates drama. Journalists often seek out the opinions of competing experts or officials to present conflict between the two sides of an issue.

**f) Status quo bias:** The news media believe that “the system works.” They do not question the structure of the political system normally.

**g) Fairness bias:** Ethical journalistic practice demands that reporters and editors be fair. Whenever one faction or politician does something or says something newsworthy, the press is compelled to get a reaction from an opposing camp. This creates the illusion that the game of politics is always contentious and never cooperative.

**h) Expediency bias:** Journalism is a competitive, deadline-driven profession. Reporters compete among themselves for prime space or airtime. News organizations compete for market share and reader/viewer attention. The 24-hour news cycle, driven by the immediacy of television and the Internet, creates a situation in which competition never comes to a rest. Everybody wants information quickly, easily, and inexpensively.

**i) Glory bias:** Journalists, especially television reporters, often assert themselves into the stories they cover. This happens most often in terms of proximity to the locus of unfolding events or within the orbit of powerful political and civic actors. This bias helps journalists establish and maintain a cultural identity as knowledgeable insiders. In television, news promos with stirring music and heroic pictures of individual reporters create the aura of omnipotence and omnipresence.

**j) Class bias:** News organizations are no more concerned about the working class and poor as they do not have the purchasing power. The corporate newspaper chains want to cut back circulation among the poorest citizens because advertisers do not care to reach people without discretionary income. The result is that journalists, for the most part, have become socially, economically, politically, and culturally separated from the poor and the working class.

Harold Evans, the internationally acclaimed former editor of ‘Sunday Times’ and ‘Times’ once said, “An objective and neutral newspaper exists only in one’s imagination”(http://quotes.dictionary.com/subject/journalism). Henry Luce, who founded *Time* magazine declared: "Show me a man who thinks he's objective and I'll show you a liar"(Baughman, 1987). He argued that events in a complex world needed to be explained and interpreted. According to Brent Cunningham, the principle of objectivity expects journalists to be not merely “passive recipients of the news” but “aggressive analyzers and explainers of it”(Powers, 2009). Nearly all the information a reporter gets from any official source has been carefully engineered to produce a desired effect (Andrew Cline, 2009).

### **Spin doctors in journalism**

Today public relations have come to dominate the public sphere by transforming it into a vehicle for the pursuit of vested interests, and the subordination of public

interest. As Brian McNair says, “Journalists have become dependent, or at the very least over-reliant, on the professional managers of information and image, to the detriment of the quality of their output, and of the citizens’ access to rational information”(McNair, 2000). Contemporary journalism exists primarily in commodity form, to be sold in a media marketplace alongside other cultural products. “They are inclined to prioritise the popular over the pertinent, the racy over the relevant, the weird over the worthy.”(McNair, 2000).

There is the ascendancy of subjective journalistic interpretation over objective fact reporting. A proliferating commentary industry, a plethora of pundits who drawing their cultural power from the privileged status of the journalist as licensed truth-teller, increasingly flood the public sphere with speculation and conjecture. Brian McNair speaks of three distinct types of such commentary:

1. The *polemical*, dispensing anger and outrage
2. The *analytical-advisory*, characterized by in-depth and considered exploration of current issues and events;
3. The *satirical*, founded on the use of irony and humour(McNair, 2000).

The polemical columnists persuade their readers by pandering to what are perceived as the prejudices of the readers. Through provocative and deliberately inflammatory expressions of opinion they hook the reader. The analytical-advisory columnists prefer more restrained rhetorical style, signalling their distinctiveness and individuality by intellectual, rather than polemical means. The satirists are ‘infotainers’, reviewing current events as performance rather than content (McNair, 2000).

Punditry now constitutes a fifth estate alongside Burke’s fourth. Columnists, leader writers, political editors and specialist correspondents comprise journalistic elite which has become too powerful and whose members are usurping the democratically mandated authority of the politicians with their own self-appointed authority. They constitute a source of opinion-formation and opinion-articulation, agenda-setting and agenda-evaluation, so vast to make it a ‘punditocracy.’ Punditry is a knowledge industry that has grown into a political force. They run and hunt with the pack, with a tendency towards homogenization of views. They are the unelected and unrepresented elite in a society (McNair, 2000).

The 1960s taught politicians and business barons, important lessons about media management. They realized that “the success of their careers and their causes depends upon a steady flow of media publicity”(Tunstall, 1996). Traditionally, a press officer was someone who performed the neutral function of supplying information to the media in an ‘undoctored’ manner. The press officer was mainly concerned with the provision of facts and background information. But the spin doctor goes beyond the facts, to outline to journalists exactly what he feels the thrust

of their story should be; they persuade journalists to accentuate the positive or at least play down the negative (McNair, 2000).

The concept of spin connotes aggressive advocacy, where the role of the spin doctor is “to extract the best possible outcome of any given situation for your client” (McNair, 2000). If the traditional press officer was a paid functionary, a technician blind to the client’s ideological bent, the spin doctor is part of the senior management team, in an era when presentation is perceived to be just as important to the achievement of organisational goals as the substance of policy (McNair, 2000).

PR professionals establish their position as powerful middle-men and brokers of stories. What they tell the journalist may not be true. Yet it will probably not be checked because of the strange authority of the source that arises not from truth but from his known centrality within the system (McNair, 2000).

From the early 1990s, since economic liberalization and the gradual elimination of license-permit raj, lobbying in India became relatively more visible and better organized. It began with the appearance of PR consulting firms who openly sought to ‘strategise’ their clients’ positions and communicate these through advertising and by influencing editorial content. One outcome of the extreme commercialization of lobbying had been the phenomenon of ‘paid news.’

Editors and journalists of the old school kept PR and advertising personnel strictly at arm’s length. But today the PR community is an integral part of journalism as a profession. The most glaring testimony to this reality was the 2G spectrum scam uncovered by ‘The Pioneer’ newspaper. In the 2G spectrum scam, Niira Radia expose had recordings that included her conversations with a number of journalists, among whom three are the most reputed – Prabhu Chawla (*India Today/Aaj Tak*), Vir Sanghvi (Columnist, *Hindustan Times*) and Barkha Dutt (*NDTV 24x7*) (Thakurta, 2012). Niira Radia was the head of Vishnavi Corporate Communications, catering to two of India’s largest corporate groups, headed by Ratan N. Tata and Mukesh Ambani. Two weeklies, ‘Open’ and ‘Outlook’ unearthed the lobbying tactics for business and corporate interests and in key appointments to high offices, including those of Union Cabinet Ministers. Radia’s objective was to secure media and political support in favour of her client, Mukesh Ambani’s Reliance Industries Limited. The pressure was on for the appointment of A. R. Raja as the Union Minister for Communications and Information Technology in the second United Progressive Alliance Government in June 2009. Radia lobbied extensively on behalf of the head of the Dravid Munetra Kazhagam (DMK), M. Karunanidhi’s daughter M. Kanimozhi, a member of Parliament and close associate of Raja, at a time when there seemed a possibility of another MP from the DMK Dayanidhi Maran, a former Telecom Minister in the first UPA government, was likely to get that post (Thakurta, 2012).

### Issues of manufacturing consent

The reality that journalism aspires to represent is, by necessity, mediated through various processes and technologies. There are three categories of the reality:

1. What 'actually' happened
2. What is 'perceived' to have happened by those present at an event
3. What is 'reported' as having happened, or journalism (Thakurta, 2012).

Journalism is not reality, but a version of mediated reality. It is always a manufactured account of the real, not the real itself. Brian McNair calls journalism "a cultural commodity, an art form, an entertainment medium and a mode of political action" (Thakurta, 2012). The unique selling proposition of journalism has always been objectivity – detachment and independence in newsgathering and reportage. But there is a growing recognition today that a certain degree of relativism and subjectivity is inevitable in journalism. As Ben Bradlee says, "Our goal in journalism is still truth, absolute truth. But truth today is harder and harder to define. Today's truth is all too often tomorrow's half-truth or even falsity" (Thakurta, 2012).

Journalism is any authored account of reality, bearing the imprint of its author's subjectivities and biases – implicit or explicit, conscious or unconscious. Journalism is selective because any account of reality has to sample from the chaos of events, and focus on some aspects rather than others. In doing so, journalism highlights and draws attention to some events, processes and accounts while ignoring or downplaying others. Therefore, it is a fertile ground for contestation and dispute (Thakurta, 2012).

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's internationally acclaimed book 'Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media' has traced the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public. According to his propaganda model of the media, democratic societies use subtle, non-violent means of control, unlike totalitarian systems, where physical force can readily be used to coerce journalists as well as the population at large. Chomsky has often quoted as stating: "Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state" (<http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/1992>).

According to Herman and Chomsky, there are five essential "news filters": concentrated ownership and profit orientation; advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; reliance on information provided by government, business and "experts" funded and approved by agents of power; "flak" as a tool to discipline the media; and "anticommunism" agenda (Chomsky, 1988).

### **Objectivity in the coverage of American invasion of Iraq**

The combined force of troops from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Poland invaded Iraq and toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein in 21 days from March 19 to May 1, 2003. George Bush administration had three justifications to generate public support for this invasion:

1. Iraq illegally possessed weapons of mass destruction and was poised to use them on the United States in the immediate future;
2. Iraq had been somehow connected to the attacks on 9/11; so pursuing Saddam Hussein was a rational next step in the campaign against Bin Laden;
3. Iraq was the leading terrorist state; so the War on Terror had to go through Baghdad.

The legal case the United States made for the invasion of Iraq was the issue of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction capable of being used against the United States. This case was made with considerable fanfare to generate both domestic and global support. It was established beyond any doubt later that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The Bush administration pushed its claims with little concern for evidence. The news media participated in this fraud to an appalling extent. According to McChesney, this is one of the darkest moments in the entire history of U.S. journalism (McChesney, 2008).

The 'Columbia Journalism Review' subsequently reviewed the editorial pages of the six top dailies that influence public opinion – including the 'New York Times', the 'Washington Post', the 'Wall Street Journal', and 'USA Today' – and determined that all of them failed to hold the Bush administration to an adequate standard of proof. The 'Editor & Publisher' found that of the top fifty daily newspapers in the U.S., not a single one was strongly "anti-war" on its editorial page (McChesney, 2008).

A comprehensive analysis of the sources used on TV news in the weeks leading to the U.S. invasion showed that 3 percent of the U.S. sources employed were antiwar, and over 70 percent were decidedly pro-war. A Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) of nightly news coverage on NBC, ABC, CBS, PBS, CNN, and FOX during the first three weeks after the invasion found that pro-war U.S. sources outnumbered antiwar sources by 25 to 1 (McChesney, 2008).

Unlike the Vietnam War, the invasion of Iraq was met by a massive anti-war movement in the United States. Hundreds of thousands of Americans took to the streets in February 2003 to protest the planned invasion of Iraq. But following the familiar pattern for dissident opinion, press coverage was minimal and dismissive. Award-winning Associated Press reporter Charles Hanley broke a story in U.S.

torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in 2003. But it was ignored by the major American newspapers (McChesney, 2008).

The powerful and immediate rebuttal to the U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's pro-war speech at the UN, by Glen Rangwala of Cambridge University, was bluntly ignored. The news media, on the other hand, turned to the celebrities who took a pro-war stand as strategically directed by the Bush administration, like country music singer Lee Greenwood, action movie star Chuck Norris and ex-football player Mike Ditka as if they were credible experts (McChesney, 2008).

The U.S. government wanted to minimize the public's awareness of the human cost of the war, both to the Iraqis and to U.S. soldiers. The Bush administration fought to keep this information strictly out of public view. Iraqi casualties were not recorded, and reporters could not get to the places where most of these casualties had occurred (McChesney, 2008).

In January 2008 a comprehensive study by the nonpartisan Centre for Public Integrity found that there were 935 lies – with several hundred coming from President Bush and Vice-President Cheney – told to the American people to generate popular support for a war in Iraq. The lies were part of an orchestrated campaign that effectively galvanized public opinion to justify the war in Iraq (McChesney, 2008).

### **The assessment of objectivity by readers and journalists in Kerala**

For this study, among the 16 prominent Malayalam dailies in Kerala, ('Malayala Manorama', 'Mathrubhumi', 'Madhyamam', 'Kerala Kaumudi', 'Deepika', 'Mangalam', 'Desabhimani', 'Chandrika', 'Veekshanam', 'Janmabhumi', 'Janayugom', 'Thejus', 'Metro Vaartha,' 'Siraj', 'Kerala Bhooshanam', and 'Varthamanam'), 'Malayala Manorama' and 'Mathrubhumi', the two newspapers with the highest circulation, were selected as the sample from Malayalam newspapers. 'The Hindu' and 'The New Indian Express' were chosen as the sample from the four prime English dailies ('The Hindu', 'The New Indian Express,' 'The Times of India' and 'Deccan Chronicle'), based on the criterion of their circulation in Kerala.

### **The readers' sample**

A multi-stage random sampling procedure was adopted to obtain a representative sample of the readers of these four newspapers in the state of Kerala. In the first stage, Kerala was categorized into three regions namely Southern Kerala (consisting of Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Pathanamthitta, Idukki and Kottayam districts), Central Kerala (Alleppy, Ernakulam, Thrissur and Palakkad districts) and Northern Kerala (Malappuram, Kozhikode, Wayanad, Kannur and Kasargode districts). Two districts each from each of the regions were randomly chosen: Thiruvananthapuram, Kottayam, Alappuzha, Ernakulam, Kozhikode and Kannur.



In the second stage, two locations each, one urban and the other rural, were randomly selected from each of these districts. The selected areas were Thiruvananthapuram city (urban) and Pala in Kottayam (rural) in Southern Kerala; Ernakulam city (urban) and Mannuthy in Thrissur (rural) in Central Kerala; and Kozhikode city (urban) and Angadikadavu in Kannur (rural) in Northern Kerala. In each of these six locations, 125 regular readers each of the four newspapers were purposively chosen so as to ensure a relatively even distribution of sample with respect to socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, education and profession. This procedure yielded a sample of 750 readers.

These 750 readers spread across six locations were administered a questionnaire in English/Malayalam in the months of December 2012 and January 2013. The respondents, not meeting the demographical requirements or inconsistent/ incomplete in their responses were removed to make it 500.

### **The journalists' sample**

A multistage random sampling again was applied in the selection of journalists working in the four newspapers in Kerala for the counter sample. Thiruvananthapuram and Kottayam in the Southern region, Ernakulam and Thrissur in the Central region, and Kozhikode and Kannur in the Northern region were the strata used in the choice of journalists. Among the 260 journalists in the sample, the highest representation from each of the dailies was from the newspaper's own headquarters: Kottayam ('Manorama':44), Kozhikode ('Mathrubhumi':56), Ernakulam ('The New Indian Express':24) and Thiruvananthapuram ('The Hindu':14). The segment from the English newspapers in the sample is few because of the number of journalists working in 'The Hindu' and 'The New Indian Express' is far less than those employed in 'Malayala Manorama' and 'Mathrubhumi.'

The findings are based on the responses received from both the readers and the journalists on the four parameters of objectivity elicited in the questionnaire survey centred on the 'Norms of Journalistic Conduct' prescribed for newspapers by the Press Council of India. The four yardsticks taken from the code of ethics to verify the level of objectivity were:

1. "The Press shall eschew publication of inaccurate, baseless, graceless, misleading or distorted news."
2. "All sides of the core issue or subject should be reported."
3. "Unjustified rumours and surmises should not be set forth as facts."
4. "Newspaper should not publish anything which is manifestly defamatory or libellous against any individual or organization unless there is sufficient reason or evidence to believe that it is true and its publication will be for public good."

Each of these statements was followed by 5-Point Likert-type answer choices: always, most of the time, sometimes, rarely and never. The five answer choices of these statements were given scores ranging from 1 to 5. The scores of these four parameters were summed to create an index of objectivity. The higher the index value, the higher the level of objectivity was perceived by journalists and readers.

Following this schema, the data was subjected to t-test to determine differences in the perception of objectivity among readers and journalists. As reported in Table 1, the objectivity mean of the readers was 12.2020, while that of the journalists was 14.5962. These means indicate that neither the readers nor the journalists considered news to be objective always. Instead the objectivity assessment of the readers hovered around 'sometimes' and that of the journalists was between 'sometimes' and 'most of the time'.

**Table 1: Assessment of objectivity by readers and journalists (t-test)**

Respondents	N	Objectivity Index Mean	Mean Difference	Standard Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Readers	500	12.2020	<b>2.3942</b>	2.12467	14.	75	.00
Journalists	260	14.5962		2.03312	95	8	0*
Total	760	13.0211					

\*Significant

The t-test clearly demonstrated that the differences in the mean objectivity index of the readers and the journalists were statistically significant. Thus it can be inferred that the journalists perceived the news presented in newspapers to be relatively more objective as compared to the perception of the readers which were on the lower side of objectivity. This gap in the objectivity perceptions deserves the attention of the journalists as well as of the management as it is likely to affect the newspaper's credibility and consequently, their circulation over a long period of time.

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics vis-à-vis newspapers**

Variable	Newspapers				Total
	Malayala Manorama Mean	Mathrubhumi Mean	The Hindu Mean	The New Indian Express Mean	Total Mean
Readers	12.2320	12.5440	12.0000	12.0320	12.2020
Journalists	14.8261	15.0000	14.8863	13.8958	14.5962

As presented in Table 2, the readers of 'Mathrubhumi' (mean: 12.5440) perceived news as more objective than those of 'Malayala Manorama' (mean: 12.2320), 'The New Indian Express' (mean: 12.0320) and 'The Hindu' (mean: 12.0000). Among the journalists too, those in 'Mathrubhumi' (mean: 15.0000) gave a slightly better rating than those in 'The Hindu' (14.8863), and 'Malayala Manorama' (mean: 14.8261), and 'The New Indian Express' (13.8958).

The ANOVA results shown in Table 3 revealed that there were no statistical differences in the objectivity mean scores of the readers. Irrespective of the newspapers read, the readers' assessment of the newspaper was only 'somewhat objective' and 'somewhat sensationalist.'

**Table 3: ANOVA results vis-à-vis newspapers**

Journalists						Readers				
Variable	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Objectivity Between Groups	59.400	3	19.800	5.013	.002	23.446	3	7.815	1.739	.158*
Objectivity Within Group	1011.197	256	3.950			2229.152	496	4.494		

But the differences in the objectivity mean scores of journalists were statistically significant, with the appraisal being between 'somewhat objective' and 'almost completely objective.'

## Conclusion

From the study we can conclude that the directives to journalists from the Press Council of India to bring in objectivity in news are violated frequently or

occasionally as perceived by the readers and the journalists respectively. There is an erosion of objectivity and consequently of credibility in newspapers in Kerala in the assessment of both the readers and the journalists because of blatant manifestations of inaccuracy, baseless allegations, misleading information, distortion in re-construction of realities, negligence in reporting all sides of issues, factualization of rumours and publication of defamatory news without valid reason and evidence. There were statistically significant differences between the perceptions of the readers and the journalists in all the four parameters of objectivity, with the former clearly showing conspicuous discontentment over the newspapers' failure to meet the ethical requirements. The findings of this study call for a re-examination of the existing mode of journalistic operations by the management and the journalists to make the newspapers more credible and objective.

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