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Interpretative Reporting

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Interpretive Reporting 1

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SINGAPORE EDITORIAL MANAGEMENT WORKSHOP
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1400-1530 Friday, April 22: INTERPRETIVE REPORTING

Interpretive reporting is one of the most misunderstood and wrongly interpreted terms in English language journalism today -- at least it is in Australia, Britain and North America. Reporters too often define "interpretative" to mean "my interpretation" -- in other words "my opinion" -- and sub-editors and editors are often too busy or too ineffective to stop them.

To begin with, interpretive reporting is best left to experienced reporters who, by their constant presentation of uncontested facts have earned the respect of their editors as reporters who are reliable and mature. Such people are invited by their editors to interpret the facts they reveal in their reports, in the knowledge that the interpretation will help explain what the report is about, not persuade the readers (or listeners) to the reporter's personal opinion on what s/he thinks they should mean.

By this -- which I admit is an expression of my own opinion -- it should be clear that "interpretive" reporting is supposed to do just that, interpret.

Wise editors only ask reporters who are experienced enough to be specialists to become interpretive reporters. This means that they are not only specialists in their own reporting area, whether that area is parliament or local government, police reporting, education, health or anything else, but are also experts as reporters. In other words, they recognise the need to deliver the facts and keep their own opinions out of what they write.

In reality this is probably impossible. When a reporter is asked to "interpret", it may be impossible for even the best of them to write the required interpretation without it including some of their own opinions. It is even more difficult in broadcasting than in print, since broadcast reporting on tape or videotape is conducted more openly and personally than writing for a newspaper, even with a by-line. It is accepted by editors in broadcasting that in a report of more than 90 seconds (about 270 words) the report will begin to show the reporter's personal inclinations, no matter how determined the reporter is to be "objective". Realistic print editors probably think the same, so wise ones ask only reporters with proven "objectivity" to offer an interpretation.

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This is not the place to argue the realistic position of objectivity in journalism. In this part of this seminar it does not matter whether objectivity is achievable or not, only that it is accepted as the aim of all who expect to report with credibility.

So "interpretive reporting" is a report of facts with explanations, expansion, background or forecasts by a reporter with sufficient credibility for the interpretations to be acceptable to the newspaper's readers.

There are two accepted approaches to interpretive reporting, inclusive and sequential. Before looking at what those terms mean, consider why there should be "interpretive" reports at all.

Is it just another newspaper reaction to the intrusion of television as an information medium? In some cases, maybe it is. This may well be the case where television, with its more public, perhaps more personable but often less-skilled reporters, is depriving the newspaper of circulation. Editors who look on those television reports and hear the expression of personal viewpoints -- intended or otherwise -- believe their reporters can do just as well and encourage them to interpret the news.

In other cases it is a case of reporters in smaller newspapers following the lead of reporters on major newspapers and trying to explain, with or without reporter intrusion, what the news means to the readers. This is as it should be, as long as the reporters have the experience and ability to interpret effectively and honestly.

There is no doubt that interpretive reporting is needed in today's journalism. The affairs of the world have become so varied and so complex that no newspaper can cover them all, or even try to do so. Nor can readers expect to understand all that they read in the newspaper columns unless an intelligent reporter can make the significance of the facts more clear.

So interpretation is needed, but is it being done in the best way possible? Now we come to the two ways in which it is done.

Inclusive interpretation means that the interpretation is written in with the facts. There is no "here-are-the-facts" report as such, though the facts included must all be untainted by the reporter's interpretation or opinion. This type of report is usually quicker and easier to produce than the facts first-interpretation follows report, but it is also more open to the inclusion of opinion.

In reality, many major reporting undertakings -- like Parliamentary reporting or the rounds-person who covers government departments, or almost any regular round or beat -- are reports which include some interpretation. It is very difficult to write a substantial report and leave it out, no matter how hard the reporter tries. It has become accepted that a reliable reporter telling about what happened in Parliament today will give more than the facts. Good journalism demands that facts be understandable to the readers and this means that some explanation is almost always necessary.

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It seems to be a paradox in good journalism: the report must be absolutely clear to all who read it, yet it must not include the reporter's opinion -- a good trick, if you can get away with it. Technically it is possible to write interpretive journalism without your opinion intruding, but it is a slow operation.

Take an example, fictitious in this case: The long-debated Trans-migration Bill was approved in Parliament yesterday by a narrow majority and only because the Opposition alliance which set out to oppose it failed to hold together. What does this mean to your readers? There are two areas where some interpretation is needed, the social and the political;

- a) what does the Bill mean to the average citizen?
 - who will be affected by the new law?
 - how will it affect people's right and opportunity to travel?
 - how will it affect people moving from one place to another to live?
 - what will be the effects on the nation's economy?

- b) why did the Opposition alliance fail to hold together?
 - what does this mean for the parties or individuals involved?
 - what does this mean for the stability of the government in future?

A good reporter will already know and will be able to state as fact what the Bill is about, what it does and who will be affected by it. There appears to be no interpretation involved here. But there is when the reporter begins to explain how rights, privileges and opportunities will be affected. By asking civil lawyers, social scientists and transport experts the reporter can gather attributable opinions on the effects of the Bill, but it is quicker and easier to write from personal knowledge. While that knowledge is certainly -- what the reporter knows is provable fact -- it is true interpretation. Explaining how rights and opportunity will be affected could be a collection of factual statements, but it is likely it will not. Somewhere along the line there will be room for someone to challenge the statement. If this can happen, what has been written is opinion.

It is certainly in the region of opinion when the reporter, no matter how knowledgeable, tries to explain what will happen in the political arena. What happened is easy. That's fact. Why it happened is not too difficult, since most of this is fact also. But what will happen as a result is speculation, and political speculation has a reliability factor somewhere below forecasting the weather or a horse race -- at least this is the case in Australia.

This does not mean the reporter has to seek out political experts and report what they think. You may choose to do this, and it is correct that you do so until you have gained the reputation and political knowledge for your editor to allow you to interpret your own reporting. This means the editor considers you a political expert, one who is knowledgeable enough to be quoted by others, and he probably hopes your newspaper reports will be so quoted.

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When you start writing this type of interpretation, only history can determine whether what you write is fact or opinion. The problem is that since the interpretation is in no way separated from the facts what is written is considered by the readers to be the newspaper's opinion, even when the item appears under a by-line. That by-line usually reads something like: By John Smith, HERALD Parliamentary reporter.

The same interpretation occurs when reporting in most other areas. Local government reporting differs from parliamentary reporting only in the scale of its impact on the community; and sports reporting can seem almost as immense in its effect as any other area but in reality it is just huge audience interest. Any area of reporting that requires the reporter to write about what will or might happen as well as what has happened, is calling for interpretive reporting.

If this is done at the request of your editor, or your superior in the newsroom, then you have already attained the level of an expert, as far as your newspaper is concerned. If you choose to interpret without such a request, perhaps you are exceeding your recognised abilities, so be careful.

There is more latitude granted by newspaper managements with the second type of interpretive reporting, sequential interpretation. This is because the interpretation is separated deliberately and clearly from the statement of facts, and it carries the reporter's name. Consequently, should the interpretation turn out to be nothing but reporter opinion, the editor can disown it as entirely that of the reporter and not the opinion of the newspaper.

In the Western Press -- which means in the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand and to a lesser extent in Europe -- the normal practice is to head the story with a by-line, which seldom claims that the reporter is considered an expert in the field, even when he or she is, and to write a factually clean report of what happened, meaning it is opinion-free. Then there is a break in the story, evidenced by a 3-em rule or some similar break, and the interpretation/explanation/background/forecast follows. In the Washington Post this portion is sometimes introduced by the word "opinion" or "interpretation", no doubt according to the editorial status granted to the reporter in question.

This is a deliberate attempt by the newspaper to make the separation of fact and opinion, or possible opinion, abundantly clear.

The problem is that neither system can work if the reporters and their editors are not dedicated to making them work. It calls for ability and extra work on the part of the reporter and confidence and trust on the part of the newspaper management if interpretive reporting of any kind is to be worthwhile.

Are there any rules for "interpretation"?

There certainly are, as long as you are serious enough about it to recognise that "interpretation" means much more than an expression of reporter "opinion". There was a statement earlier in this session that if what the reporter writes can be challenged it may not be probable fact.

Facts should be provable -- that seems to be a definition of a factual statement -- but because it is now accepted that there are many truths, according to upbringing, education and many other social or societal reasons, the veracity of what reporters consider to be facts is under increasing challenge. I don't believe this is the problem with interpretive reporting, or any reporting for that matter. If the reporter's factual statement can be supported by verifiable evidence, that should be good enough. This means you may have to attribute any "facts" in which the information has come from other people or some other source; e.g. Police say ..., Health Department statistics make clear that ..., and so on. In the ultimate, a reporter might even go as far as to protect the reporting by including "The Parliamentary record for the day shows...", or "The minutes of the meeting read..." . This is carrying factual reporting to what seems ridiculous lengths, but it may be necessary if you are to follow this with interpretation, or include some interpretation in your news item.

So much for the factual part, which should be comparatively easy for any reporter. What about the interpretation? The important aspect for reporters is not to confuse the two. Anyone who sets out to write an interpretive report must ask two questions of everything that goes onto paper, or perhaps onto tape in the case of broadcasting:

- 1) is this a provable fact which I can include in the report as "what happened", or does it need some form of attribution to support it as fact. In other words, is it a fact I can prove to be right or do I have to rely on someone else?
- 2) if it is not provable fact is it **interpretation** or is it **opinion**? There is a difference.

Your task as an interpretive reporter is to interpret, which means to explain to your audience what the facts in question mean or will mean to them, not to persuade them to your opinion on what might happen. In theory this requires that you should be able to support every statement or projection by reference to facts -- equally provable to those in the original report. There are instances in which this is possible, but like "objectivity" this remains the goal of anyone who attempts interpretive journalism. If the job is done perfectly, no member of your audience can challenge anything you say.

This is, and must remain, the aim of anyone who is asked to interpret the news they write, but managements and interpreters alike acknowledge that there is a risk of opinion sneaking in in the guise of factual interpretation. Both know it will happen, even though neither intends this to be so.

For all that, interpretation means just that -- explaining what things mean or will mean to your readers (or listeners/viewers) without influencing them with your own opinions. It is not easy, but then only reporters who are considered reliable enough and experienced enough are asked to provide such reports. Everyone learning the fundamentals of journalism is expected to appreciate the difference between fact and opinion, though surprisingly many do not. If you aspire to becoming an interpretive reporter, think again about this supposedly elementary differentiation. What is fact and what is opinion? Knowing is the difference between interpretation and opinion, which is not necessarily interpretation at all.