

Neutrality and racism: What can journalists do?

BY PAUL BERGER

‘ALL writers are propagandists,’ wrote environmentalist Derrick Jensen — all have a position and a message. That might seem obvious for book authors, but don’t we expect more from journalists? Shouldn’t the media be unbiased? Neutral? Objective? Balanced?

I am a community member concerned about social justice, environmental degradation, and the fair treatment of aboriginal people. I’m interested in the media’s roles and responsibilities in these areas, since much of our knowledge comes through the media and our opinions are often informed by what we see, hear and read. I believe that journalists must be fair, but that “balance” and “neutrality” can be used to sell misinformation and racism, even though that might seem to go against common sense.

Don’t we want to hear all sides of the story? Don’t we hope everyone gets equal treatment?

A few examples can illustrate. A news story devoting half the time to the effects of climate change and half the time to climate change denial would be ridiculous and misleading. It



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Thunder Bay’s Anti-Racism Advisory Committee produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

would suggest uncertainty where it no longer exists.

An article devoting half the space to the Nazi Holocaust and half to Holocaust deniers would be repugnant. It would, rightly, be seen as racist.

Journalists clearly don’t have an obligation to give equal coverage to all points of view, or in fact any coverage at all. Balance — if by balance we mean equal coverage or an obligation to provide a platform for hateful ideas — can

be dangerous.

But what about neutrality? Should journalists make decisions as if they have no position themselves, looking only to consensus and societal norms to decide what to cover? In a perfectly just society that might work, but in a racist, sexist and homophobic society, it will perpetuate those injustices.

South African Desmond Tutu put it this way: “If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”

Canadians should expect more than neutral journalists. We need people who have an explicit commitment, at a minimum, to a society free of racial and other forms of discrimination. This should be reflected in the stories they choose to cover and the way they cover them, and also in what they refuse to cover. Particularly important is that coverage challenges stereotypes rather than reinforcing them.

Most journalists, I think, want to make a difference. They will need to choose sides. We should expect journalists to be fair, accurate and honest, but not to be robots. As British journalist and Middle East correspondent

Robert Fisk said recently at a speech in Vancouver: “We must be neutral and unbiased on the side of those who suffer.” The powerful already have many ways to get their message out, and it often bears little resemblance to reality.

Does an anti-oppressive stance mean reporters can distort or fabricate events, or that they should select only the parts of a story that support their view? Of course not. Loyalty to anti-racism and a better world does not require deception — we’re living in a time when systemic racism and abuse of power are rampant and need no embellishment to stun us in the telling. Anti-racism requires a focus on injustice and a commitment to combat it.

By choosing neutrality, by choosing balance, and by pretending objectivity, journalists can perpetuate racism by mistake or by design. We should celebrate those who are courageous enough to refuse this role and are instead working to make a better world.

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