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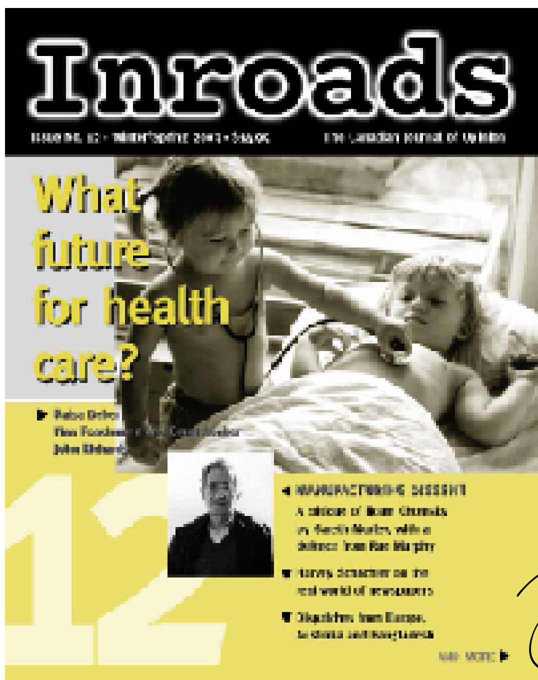


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JOURNAL Inroads 12

# Ideology and the media

## An insider's look at how newspapers work

by Harvey Schachter

THE CALL FROM THE TORONTO STAR NIGHT NEWS DESK CAME AS I was preparing for sleep. The final report of Ontario's Royal Commission on Declining Enrolment had arrived in the office, followed within moments by copies of the Globe and Mail with a front-page story on the report. The document looked too big and complicated for our rewrite desk to handle, and I was the Star's education reporter. Could I hightail it downtown and write a story?

Left unsaid was the most important fact: I had blown it. My relative youth – this was the mid-1970s – was no excuse. I had been cleanly beaten on a major story by the competition. Instead of getting the report early myself and scooping the other papers, I was playing catchup to prevent the Star from being embarrassed.

As I headed downtown, I reflected on the twist of fate that had sunk me. In fact, I had been the journalist writing most extensively on the issue of declining enrolment. It was a one-man commission and that individual, Professor Robert Jackson, had initially seen me as an ally because of my interest in the complications of the issue and my decision to fly up to Thunder Bay for his opening public session (something the now-favoured Globe had not bothered to do). But then the education minister of the time, Thomas Wells, resigned, setting in motion a series of events that changed everything.

Journalists make a story as exciting and as interesting as possible – strip out nuance, contradictions and boring bits – to gain the attention of the reader. NATIONAL POST PHOTO

I called Jackson for comment on Wells's resignation, and the next day he was irate at what he saw in the paper. In praising Wells, he made a very kind comparison to the gold standard for education ministers in Ontario at the time, Bill Davis, who had gone on to become premier. Davis, he noted, has been an excellent education minister, but Wells had really known education. It was catchy and I used the quote, viewing it as complimentary to both men and certainly not perceiving that it could be considered somewhat dismissive of Davis. But evidently others saw it that way, and Jackson claimed misquote.

I read him back his words from my notebook – exactly as I had put them in the paper – and suggested he was exaggerating the implications, but he kept insisting that it was a misquote, that he hadn't said it. The next day, I received a copy of a letter he sent the premier telling him that it was a misquote and I would be writing to confirm that fact. A week later, Jackson called to ask why I hadn't sent the letter. "I don't send letters to people I don't know apologizing for misquotes I didn't make," I replied.

And that ended our relationship. No more interviews. No more assistance from his commission on stories. And now this

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well-timed release of his report to the competition, in good time to prepare a story before we even received our copy.

I got into the office, read the Globe story, scanned the executive summary of the report, and then without really assimilating the information began calling key people for reaction before it became too late. I completed my interviews, and then settled back to read the report. I was groggy, but even so, I came to realize that the commissioner had erred on a key recommendation. He proposed that government funding be based not on education costs but more specifically on the average cost of education. As enrolment declined and the lowest-ranked (and lowest-paid) teachers were laid off in shrinking school boards, the average cost of education could rise significantly even if total costs might go down or rise only somewhat. And nothing in the report suggested that Jackson was asking for such a large increase in funding to ease school boards through the challenges of fluctuating enrolment.

I called back the people I had interviewed, verified that I was right in my interpretation and gave them a chance to change their comments, which some did. Then I had to wake up Jackson – something that didn't disturb me nearly as much as it might ordinarily – and obtain his reaction once he understood the mistake, which was to weakly pooh-pooh it.

Now came the tough part. What was my "lede"? Reporters and editors spend an inordinate amount of time on their first sentence, which has to be catchy and sum up the story. Did I lede with Jackson's recommendation or his mistake? It could be argued both ways and so I discussed it with the assistant city editor on duty, who opted for leding with the report. But by the time I filed the story, at about 4:15 a.m., a new assistant city editor was on shift, and he thought I had the wrong lede. "Everyone will have the main recommendations in the morning," he said. "We're the only people with the mistake." It didn't quite match the classic headline Star Man Finds Gerda Munsinger – the reporter who had found the German prostitute and alleged KGB spy in a juicy political scandal of the Diefenbaker era had inspired many lesser headlines extolling Star reporters' feats over the years. But Star Man Finds Mathematical Error in Dull Education Report would be the tack we took, even if, fortunately, not the headline.

All this happened a long time ago, but I bring it up now to situate readers in a newsroom – indeed, a particular newsroom, in Canada's biggest newspaper, and one then seen as among the country's most ideological. Politically partisan newspaper readers assume that newsrooms are very ideological places, with reporters sitting about talking politics all day, taking a break only to knife the people they hate. If they were in power in a newsroom, those partisans would expect to make their decisions based on their politics, so they assume that's how journalists operate. And they find daily evidence to support that instinct, in stories they don't like, bad headlines, atrocious news judgement, simplistic or one-sided stories and outright errors.

I start from a different assumption. Before I blame ideology, I consider the possibility that what irritates me or embarrasses the paper is the result of powerful journalistic norms, timing, stupidity or individual or organizational screw-ups. That's because I have worked in a newsroom, and I have seen all that happen, day after day after day.

## What's news?

Return with me to my education story at the Star for a moment; there are more lessons in it than might appear at first glance. The first lesson has to do with competition and ego. I had been beaten on the story. Nobody said it, but I knew. And that's one of the most powerful journalistic norms around.

In a newsroom, you are really only as good as yesterday. You are judged (and judge yourself) every day on what you produce: the quality and the play it gets and your ability to outdo your competitors. There is some tolerance for history – you can go for a week or so in a slump, but not much longer. Everybody reads or listens to or watches the product every day, and makes judgements.

This is an insidious (and probably insane) aspect of newsroom culture. But it's a fact of life, leading to a thirst for the so-called "good story." The public derides the news media for sensationalism, claiming it's intended to raise profits. Publishers do indeed seek profits, and we have seen some abysmal television shows driven by that obsession in recent years. But in a large newsroom, profit is not a daily or even monthly thought, as long as the economy is solid and there are no imminent threats of layoffs. The people in the thick of the action in a newspaper are driven by the fear of being beaten, the desire to beat someone else, and the hope of good play or a great story. Those are immediate hits – the crack cocaine of newsrooms. Readers or viewers are important, but as proof of the brilliance of your work and as somebody to share it with, not for the money they bring the owner.

At a large newspaper, there is no guarantee that a given story will even make the paper. You can work to produce something and see it consigned to "overmatter," never to see the light of day. It's a daily fight to get in the paper and the best way to win is to find a good story and "juice" it up a bit. Make it as exciting and as interesting as possible – strip out nuance, contradictions and boring bits – to gain the attention of your editor and the reader.

This isn't conscious. It's subconscious, drilled in as you learn the trade and see what it takes to write a good story or to produce a good clip on television. It also arises from the fact that journalists are the biggest consumers of their own products, reading and listening to news all the time, so they get bored before anyone else. In trying to excite the reader or viewer, they are taking their direction from what it takes to excite themselves, the most jaded of onlookers. Profit simply isn't part of the daily picture.

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The second lesson is that in carrying out their task, journalists have little agreement on what news really is. It can be something truly new, although that is rare outside science and medicine. It can be something interesting. It can be an event staged by somebody or something important. It can be something entertaining. It can be something the reporter likes. It can be something the

editor likes. It can be something the publisher likes.

The struggle over my lede in that story – which was the bigger news, the report or the mistake? – is an instructive example of an everyday process. Often there can be many differing interpretations of what news is. And so if something in the newspaper or on television doesn't seem like news to you or seems overplayed, you may well be right. News is not a science. It's guesswork, since ultimately news is in the eye of the beholder, not the shaper.

Working in a large newsroom quickly showed me how limited the scope of my supposedly wide interests were, as I met people obsessed with things that I had little time for. It taught me to be very broad-minded in making news judgements and to listen to others when I became a senior editor, because no one person can make good judgements for the vast audiences that the mass news media hope to serve, even though many editors delude themselves into thinking they can.

**A story that may seem ludicrous to you on the front page or even in the paper at all can be exactly right for someone else.**

If you ponder the classic (and sexist) picture of a newspaper arriving in a home, with the husband lunging for politics and business, the wife for the lifestyle section and local news, the son for sports and the daughter for entertainment, you realize that journalists are serving very wide interests. A story that may seem ludicrous to you on the front page or even in the paper at all can be exactly right for someone else. It's easy to call the editor a fool or the publisher money-hungry or the whole bunch of them ideological zealots when you see something you don't like. It's harder to acknowledge that the person opposite you at the breakfast table, or your neighbour or colleague at work, may approve of their judgement.

Too often we get upset when we find something we don't like in the newspaper, and we want to suppress it. Leftists don't want articles about how to make money in the stock market; the right doesn't want to hear about the deteriorating environment. And generally, they are drawn to the things they hate like moths to a light. Often without actually reading those articles, people mark them in their memory as a daily outrage and a sign of the bias or stupidity of the editors. When I was editor of the Kingston Whig-Standard, many people went out of their way to tell me they hated the humour-family columnist – for, among other things, his columns on his sweetheart making him cheesecake. "Don't read his column," I would tell them. "Lots of people love it but you can skip it. There's a lot of other stuff you'll like in the paper." But that just proved to them how dumb or blind I was.

## The tyranny of time

To understand the news media, it is necessary to realize just how quickly everything is put together. Again, think back to my story: I arrive at the newsroom about 10:15 p.m., tired, to read a thick report, phone contacts, call them again, and write a story for 4 a.m. The vast majority of the journalism you read or hear is done in one work shift, and sometimes much less.

Think back to the last significant report you wrote at work and then imagine that,

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like a journalist, you were given the assignment at 9 a.m. and expected to file at 5 p.m. Then imagine that the subject is something you know little about, as is the case for "general" reporters, those not regularly covering a specific subject.

Noam Chomsky talks about compression – how the media tighten and shorten everything, distorting reality. Indeed, but another key form of compression is that of the time within which journalists work. My example from the Star story is nearly prehistoric, since it was an era in which afternoon papers were common. Reporters could write until 4:15 a.m. or even later on a major story. Now that the Star is a morning paper, in that same situation today the Globe story would have had to be matched by 11:30 p.m. – somehow.

As someone who had always worked for afternoon papers, I can remember my own shock when I attended an all-candidates debate in Montreal for the 1989 NDP leadership race. Former British Columbia premier Dave Barrett had just entered the race, creating real competition for the front-runner, Audrey McLaughlin, and giving the evening some glitz. It would also be the first opportunity for the media to assess the candidates' ability under fire in French. The event started at 7 p.m. – after the candidates, in recognition of deadlines, were briefly scrummed by the reporters. When the second speaker had finished, my friend Ross Howard, covering it for the Globe, started tapping on his portable computer,

mystifying me. Then he whispered, "Do you have a lede?" I responded, "A lede? We've only heard two speakers and McLaughlin and Barrett are scheduled to speak fifth and sixth. It's too early for a lede!"

Wrong. "I have to file for the early edition in half an hour," he informed me. I had often seen radio reporters leave meetings to file and would often pity the Globe reporter at education board meetings when she had to sneak out to file at meetings that ran late. But the NDP incident made a special impact because it struck me that that story was going to be in an archive, stumbled upon by some researcher who would wonder how the Globe could cover a leadership debate and not quote the two main candidates. Obvious bias against the NDP by the corporate press, right? (True, Ross did file a later story – written, I would guess, in about half an hour – but that first story was read by some people and sits in some archive.)

**It's a daily fight to get in the paper and the best way to win is to find a good story and "juice" it up a bit.**

I didn't know how accurate those fears were until about five years later, when a fellowship at Queen's University gave me the opportunity to familiarize myself with the academic literature on the media. In the many supposedly learned studies on the news media, time was generally dismissed in a sentence or a phrase as a minor factor in explaining why the media did what they did, on those rare occasions when it was mentioned at all.

The academics were missing something important. When you see something dumb in newspapers, start with the premise that time could well have played a significant role. While I was editor of the Whig-Standard, it joined the North American shift to morning delivery of newspapers. This meant that I would come into the office about 8:30 a.m. as the early-bird reporters were receiving their assignments. I attended a news meeting at 11 a.m. in which we discussed evolving stories and identified new ones to be foisted on unlucky reporters. We were back at 5 p.m. to hear how those stories were faring, guess what might happen at meetings taking place that night, and decide what would go on page one.

It was rare that we would have read any stories at this point, although we might read some before going home. Most of them were still being written, and then there were the events yet to take place: the famed dinner speaker, whom we had to judge by his or her track record, or the council meeting, whose importance we would guess at by the agenda, leaving a hole to be filled on page one. (Council meetings are important to a small newspaper. Afternoon delivery allowed the reporter to stay until the end of the meeting and often write until dawn to get all the information to readers. Now the reporter had to leave the meeting at 10 p.m., while the councillors were still sparring, and return to the office to write whatever he or she could by 11:30 p.m., with one eye to the television set broadcasting the meeting.)

I'd leave the office somewhere between 6 and 7 p.m., with a second team – not privy to the full details of our early morning discussions, since they were asleep at the time – left to close the paper and handle any news that occurred that evening. There were many mornings when I would look at the front page over my breakfast to find things that astonished or depressed me – no doubt,

just as they did many readers. And, of course, much of the guts of the paper beyond the main stories would be unknown to me, put together by subeditors. News is a 24-hour-a-day operation, done hastily, and while it can be controlled in some aspects, in other aspects it is totally out of control of the editor or publisher.

The issue of time is becoming even more important as more newspaper and television outlets turn to the Web to deliver breaking news. Everything is getting faster and faster. The style of radio – quick bursts of updated information – is the only way to operate in such circumstances: more mistakes, fewer insights. In a Web future, that style could predominate.

Instead of time, the academics I studied focused on bias. Time can intertwine with bias, of course. In a rush you fall back on shortcuts, and that might be your own ideological predispositions or your publisher's, just as it might be the first usable quote you can find in your notebook as you scramble to file in 10 minutes. But time – the haste created by a daily and for some perhaps an hourly news cycle – is still the main factor.

## Keeping politics out of the newsroom

Return, yet again, to my incident at the Star. We never spoke about Star editorial policy – what the Star wanted from the Jackson commission. I had no idea, because I never read my paper's editorials as a matter of principle, so they couldn't influence me. And if either of the editors who handled the story knew what the Star wanted, they certainly didn't mention it. In four years at one of the country's most ideological papers, no editor ever told me directly to do a story to fit the editorial line. Only rarely would I discuss politics or ideology, as such, with my colleagues. We might grumble about the stupidity of a political figure – actually, being cynical, we did that a lot – and in discussing our lives or what was in the news our own different political sentiments might come out. But it was part of the newsroom culture – again, at one of the country's most ideological papers – not to talk about politics.

Jalene Jameson, assistant metro editor for features at the Bay City Times in Michigan, was reminded of the journalistic norm of separating working journalists from politics in July. She was told that she could not work at the paper and took an unpaid leave while a campaign sign in a local election – for her husband, running for office – was on their lawn. It eventually came down and she returned to work.

Managing Editor Rosemary Armao resigned from the Sarasota Herald-Tribune in June after it came out that she wrote an e-mail to a reader who complained about excessive coverage by the paper of Republican congressional candidate Katherine Harris, who as Florida secretary of state had played such a key role in the recount in the last U.S. presidential election. "Katherine Harris is an international figure, like it or not," Armao wrote. "I have no intentions of covering each of the Democratic candidates to the same extent." She added, "I do not intend to vote for Harris…. I blame the Democrats for not finding a better candidate… and I blame our culture for craving as its public figures, women like Katherine who are pretty, hard-working and without original ideas that I can find."

That turned out to be too candid and too political for her to remain as managing edi-

tor. But it's revealing about the complex reasoning in such decisions. Armao clearly doesn't like Harris but is giving her so much coverage – and coverage that is perceived as flattering – that the reader complained. Ironically, like any citizen, Armao has political views, but she got in trouble for expressing them, even when her news sense was clearly overriding her personal feelings.

We expect judges to place their personal and political feelings aside when they judge a case. We accept that some do this reasonably well, even though others don't. Journalistic norms call for the same attempt at objectivity and detachment.

That norm has been derided by many people as impossible, which it obviously is: nobody can set aside all his or her personal feelings and political predispositions. But its impossibility has become an excuse touted mostly by those on the political left or right for letting it all hang out and having no-holds-barred, highly political journalism. The fact that you can't put all those personal and political thoughts aside doesn't mean that you can't try to focus on – or also consider – other, more neutral factors that constitute news judgement, or that you can't surround yourself with people of differing views to achieve a balance. The fact that you can't be totally objective doesn't mean that you can't strive to be. It doesn't mean that you can't be fair.

**The academics were missing something important. When you see something dumb in newspapers, start with the premise that time could well have played a significant role.**

The academics I studied outlined the mirror theory of journalism, which argues that a news medium reflects its audience. To some extent, that is accurate, since journalists try to visualize their readers or viewers as they prepare their stories, even if their sense of what those readers or viewers want can be very vague. Who, after all, is the average reader or viewer? The theory also explains in part why the news media were perceived as liberal in the 1960s and 70s, and why in the 80s and 90s, as society shifted, they edged to the right.

Budget deficits, for example, were a minor story for the media in the seventies, a big story in the nineties. This was a reflection of the audience, which was becoming more conservative. Moreover, the politicians, who mirror society in courting votes, started to give more attention to deficits and other traditional right-wing issues.

## Where ideology does come in

All that is not an argument that the news media never have an ideology beyond a reflecting mirror and that editors and publishers (and working reporters) don't express an ideology in their decision-making. Newspapers started as partisan political efforts and continued that way until *some* started to shift and take on a more neutral cast in news space in recent times. That shifted yet again in Canada in the past decade, especially when Conrad Black took over the major Canadian chain, Southam, and propounded the right of a proprietor to have his own way. He denounced the soft liberal pap of the past – the reflecting mirror of a soft liberal country – and installed editors in some key papers who were noticeably to the right of their predecessors. He was followed by Izzy Asper, who, it is reported, is also quite eager to have some

Academics have outlined the mirror theory of journalism, which argues that a news medium reflects its audience. NATIONAL POST PHOTO

of his views reflected heavily in his newspapers and to have views he dislikes not appear.

I have no idea what Izzy Asper wants, although I find it significant that he has made no strong public effort to tell his staff to make sure to put in views contrary to his own – and that Southam has yet to show that such alternate voices are getting in. After the 1988 free trade debate, by contrast, John Honderich, then editor of the Toronto Star, presented an exhaustive study of his paper's coverage showing that all sides were heard in his paper and given prominent and fair attention. Honderich argued that the paper had followed journalistic norms: despite its strong editorial position, it gave prominence to differing views on the issue. Honderich did that under fire – but it's hotter in the Asper kitchen these days and the lack of a similar response only adds fuel to the blaze.

A publisher who wants to make his or her views predominate in a newspaper can clearly do so. When I was at the Star, the enthusiasms and the politics of the publisher were known to senior editors, and while they rarely talked about these openly in the newsroom, they often played a significant role in news judgement. I have no doubt that some people assume that the best way to get ahead – or stay employed – in an Asper outlet is to reflect the owner's views, and they act accordingly. I have no doubt

that a chill exists, and some people are staying away from stories that they figure might get them in trouble. But I also have no doubt that some people are trying to sabotage their owner, and sometimes succeeding.

It is important to put this all in perspective. *Media* is a plural word. There are many media outlets. If you had a continuum from highly ideological to not very ideological, different outlets would appear at different points on that continuum. The National Post, the Globe and Mail, the CBC and Maclean's would all be on different parts of the scale. Even within Asper publications you would find differences: the National Post and the Edmonton Journal, for example, are quite different in how ideological they seem to be. If you applied a second continuum – this time the traditional left-right political scale – those news outlets would again line up quite differently. Media are plural.

**News is a 24-hour-a-day operation, done hastily, and while it can be controlled in some aspects, in other aspects it is totally out of control of the editor or publisher.**

The National Post deserves special attention because it does have such a pronounced ideological cast. But many Post reporters don't like being treated as ideological shills, since they consider themselves to be doing the same kind of fair-minded job they did before joining the Post from other papers, weighing news the way they always did, whatever the ideological predispositions of the columnists and editors. To the extent that the National Post has drawn a right-wing audience, the reflecting mirror theory would suggest the paper should be right-wing in its interests and news play to meet its readers' needs (other than those readers who, like Playboy readers of old, insist that they read the paper not for the ideological pinups but for the fact that it's fun or different).

## Keeping from getting sucked in

Let me add another complication. There is an ideology common to all journalists today that is firmly supported by journalistic norms: oppositionalism. To avoid being suckers used by politicians, interest groups and fame seekers – and probably to reflect their own innate instincts and ego needs – journalists tend to challenge or oppose all ideas that come before them. Watch a press conference – any press conference – and you'll see the dynamic in action, as journalists ask every negative question they can think of, no matter how unreasonable or silly. The reporter who just challenged the prime minister's claim that we need the new program he is launching will a minute later challenge the opposition leader's claim that we don't need the program.

That's one of the factors the Aspers have been up against in trying to get a fairer shake for Jean Chrétien from their own employees. The journalists who work for them see their role as challenging the prime minister, not praising him. Like Canute, the waves of oppositionalism will roll over the Aspers, no matter how many publishers or senior columnists they fire.

But Chrétien is hardly the only victim. I was bemused this summer by the stories attacking Stephen Harper, the Alliance leader, for not being out flipping pancakes at the Calgary Stampede and pressing the flesh at barbecues. There is no proof that doing these things wins votes, rather than

Media are plural. If you had a continuum from highly ideological to not very ideological, different outlets would appear at different points on that continuum. NATIONAL POST PHOTO

turning off people who see the politician and view him as nothing but a publicity hound, interfering in their event. Jean Chrétien, when he came to power, tried to keep himself out of the public eye, figuring that being too visible had doomed Brian Mulroney. Stockwell Day was hurt by his photo ops. An argument can certainly be made in favour of Harper's strategy. But I didn't find it in the stories I read – or only near the bottom of the occasional story, where oppositional journalists now park the stuff that contradicts the main line of the piece. It used to be that such contradictions went higher up in stories – in the first few paragraphs. In today's oppositional era, where it is also assumed that readers want clear, juicy stories, that has changed, adding to the feeling of hopelessly biased news media (but in this case, biased against everyone they cover).

This weakens the fabric of politics in this country. But it doesn't worry most journalists. If I had understood the negative implications of that quote by Robert Jackson, I would still have put it in the story in exactly the same place. I had been trained not to consider the impact of my stories, just to do them. If nothing more, that outlook prevents journalists from going nuts trying to

figure out all the possible ways their stories could be interpreted. It also keeps them cleaner – if you don't worry about the political or societal implication, you are being more objective or neutral.

Most political partisans, of course, start to judge a story with its impact. They would make their judgements accordingly if running a newsroom. And certainly some editors and journalists working for ideologically inclined news media do the same, although probably not as aggressively as partisans because other factors enter their decision-making. But for many, many journalists, thinking about the impact of the story – or, at least, changing the story because of its potential impact – is not part of the equation.

**I have never seen a photographer or photo editor judge a picture by its political context. They look at what grabs people.**

## Quotes and misquotes

My anecdote from the Star has one final message I'd like to stress: I didn't misquote Robert Jackson. We are all so used to hearing cries of misquote that we accept them as true. Those of us who have been quoted in the media have also seen words that don't seem right attached to our name, and assume we have been misquoted.

To be honest, journalists are not clear on what a quote actually is. Is it the exact words somebody said? Or is it the exact words cleaned up for grammar? Or is it the exact words with perhaps a technical substitute for meaning? (The person said "it," and from the words before the quote, it's clear that means "the recent health study," so those words might be substituted for clarity.)

There are no real rules on that, oddly, even though quotes are the tools journalists use to shape stories. Some journalists are hard-line, using exact words, while others are willing to clean up a quote or substitute. There is also a difference of opinion on whether two phrases from different parts of an interview – or even different interviews – can be patched together and appear sequentially, as if said together, for clarity, punch and tightness of the story.

That being said, most journalists want to reproduce the words of the people they quote accurately. And the journalists are the ones taking the notes, not the people who are screaming misquote. There are unscrupulous journalists just as there are unscrupulous people in all trades, so no doubt some deliberate, mischievous misquotes occur. But in my experience, including when I have felt that I was misquoted, the journalists are generally – not always, but generally – getting it right.

## The New York Times's pro-Palestinian photos

Let's close with a test – another real-life incident. The New York Times recently came under attack for its coverage of two demonstrations on a Sunday, one pro-Palestinian and the other pro-Israeli. The page one picture of its Monday paper was of the Palestinian demonstration and the largest picture inside when the story continued was yet again of that same demonstration, rather than the pro-Israel group.

Obvious bias, from a paper that has taken to criticizing Israel's actions in its editorials?

Let me tell you how I interpret something like this. I immediately seize on the fact that it's Monday. Monday is the least important paper of the week. Editors, like most people, prefer to work Monday to Friday, but the Times also needs some strong people on Saturday, putting out the prize Sunday edition. Few senior editors are around late Sunday afternoon judging pictures – a competent team is present, but not in the same league as late afternoon during the week.

I have never seen a photographer or photo editor judge a picture by its political context. They look at what grabs people. Most editors act the same way. When all the possible pictures are laid out side by side on a photo desk, certain ones leap out at you. If another one leaps out at somebody else, there's an argument – but it's over which catches your attention, and why. Sometimes the place the picture appears will enter the discussion, because you don't want the direction the key person in the photo is looking to turn readers away from the story.

The fact that there were two demonstrations by opposing groups – and, in effect, opposing readers – would only insert itself in the decision-making if somebody, generally a senior editor, was thinking politically, aware of the howls of outrage that he or she would field unless each side got roughly equal coverage.

The New York Times apologized the day after. But the real questions are:

- Did it make a mistake?
- Did it make a political decision?
- Would playing one photo big from each demonstration, to reflect the outside politics, have actually have been a more political decision than what actually occurred?

I don't know. But I hope that you ask similar questions when you next encounter a journalistic outrage. Like all other organizations in society – think of where you work, for example – news operations are inhabited by less-than-perfect souls, can be blinkered, and can screw up. Yes, political ideology plays a role in journalism in editorials, columns and even news decisions and news writing. But other factors – notably time, journalistic norms, the ideology of oppositionalism and confusion about what is news – are often more important factors in giving us the media we love to hate and rarely understand. ■