

Becoming journalists: From engaged to balanced or from balanced to engaged?

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Abstract

This chapter aims at understanding the role of journalism education as journalism students become journalists. It employs norms and values related to global warming as a case to analyse how students of journalism understand and develop journalistic norms during and after the journalism programme at HiOA. The article builds mainly on a survey of 471 respondents drawn from a variety of disciplines to compare and discuss similarities and differences in norms and values in and between groups. It finds that first-year students tend to have similar norms and values to those of the journalism educators. However, as the students grow through more experience, they gradually begin to show increasing similarities with professional journalists and less with their teachers.

Keywords

Journalism education, norms, values, global warming

Introduction

In this article, I use global warming as an issue to probe the social production of norms and values among journalism students and journalists in general. How do journalists become journalists? What is and should be the role of education? These seem to be questions that journalists and educators everywhere have been pondering over in recent years. In many countries, for instance Norway, journalism was traditionally seen as a trade, something to be learnt through years of practising it (Deuze, 2005; Hjeltnes, 2010; Ottosen, 2010). Over the last decades, however, education has come to play an increasingly important role. More journalists now have university degrees – and a growing number hold a degree in journalism.

This process has met with some resistance. In Norway, this simmering conflict of views has sometimes had the added ingredient of traditional left-right politics: conservatives have repeatedly accused “radical” teachers within the journalism programmes of being “elitists” and “leftists”, and of influencing students, implying that education plays a vital role in the development of political views, professional ideology and journalistic norms (see for instance Hustad, 2009; Lavik, 2009).

I believe that global warming (climate change) is a particularly good case for investigating and analysing how students of journalism understand and develop journalistic norms as they progress through the journalism programme, begin practising journalism, and gradually become members of the community of journalists. In this article I am particularly interested in understanding how teachers of journalism, students and journalists understand and employ what Boykoff calls first- and second-order norms (Boykoff, 2007; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004, 2007). I focus on the norm Boykoff calls “balance”. Antilla explains the problem of mechanically employing this norm: “In order to provide balance while reporting on climate change, some journalists include rebuttals by experts who, often through think-tanks, are affiliated with the fossil fuel industry. (...). Regrettably, this creates the impression that scientific opinion is evenly divided or completely unsettled” (Antilla, 2005, p. 340).

Objectivity, often understood as “balance”, is criticized for being a myth that serves to further the power interests of the media itself (Schudson & Anderson, 2009). Today, however, most textbooks underline that reporting unavoidably involves the critical evaluation of sources, interests, consequences, power relations etc.

Such critical evaluation can seldom be executed within a framework of objectivity understood as “balance” (Harcup, 2009). However, there are nuances to the ways objectivity is understood as balance. It does not have to be “lazy” journalism, as Michael Ryan (2004) calls the practice of simply pitting two sources against each other without independent evaluation. The norm of balance can be an aid in, rather than an alternative to, truth-seeking (Oltedal & Ytterstad, 2012).

In order to further discuss these issues, I proceed by asking the following research questions:

What journalistic norms do journalism teachers express on global warming and climate change?

How do the journalistic norms of journalism students concerning global warming and climate change develop over time?

How do these developments relate to education, journalism practice and norms expressed by members of the community of journalists?

What role can education be said to play in the development of journalistic norms?

Finally, and most importantly, what does this imply for the role of journalism education in the construction of a precautionary public in order to respond to the challenge posed by global warming?

Literature review

A substantial and growing body of literature deals with Norwegian journalism and climate change from various perspectives (Eide & Kunelius, 2012; Hornmoen, 2011; Krøvel, 2011; Ytterstad, 2012). This study of culture, norms and values draws on this growing corpus of such studies within journalism research. The concern about and interest in cultures, norms and values of journalism are explored, for instance, in the Worlds of Journalism project (<http://www.worldsofjournalism.org/>). The Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS) was founded to “help journalism researchers and policy makers better understand worldviews and changes that are taking place in the professional orientations of journalists (...)”. Such research reflects a growing interest in the cultural aspects of journalism: being and working together, communicating, interacting, and practising journalism significantly affect how journalists think and feel about things. Journalism, of course, is to some extent a global discourse drawing on a shared set of ideas or perspectives. But there are also differences between “worlds” or cultures of journalism (Plaisance, Skewes, & Hanitzsch, 2012). Variations and differences are also likely to be found within a state, for instance Norway, and between different groups of journalists.

A number of authors have already discussed the role of education in journalism (for instance (Bjørnsen, Hovden, & Ottosen, 2009; Terzis, 2009)). In many places, journalism has historically been seen as something to be learnt by doing; one became a journalist by practising journalism. As Nygren notes in a different chapter, when students return to journalism schools after periods of internships they are “filled with tacit knowledge and values of the workplaces” (Nygren, 2014). In Norway, many are still not convinced that education at university level has a role to play in the development of journalists. I build on these debates in the analysis of the variations of norms among journalism educators and practising journalists, and how these differences are reflected in the development of norms among journalism students.

A particular concern is connected to the consequences of employing “balance”. Boykoff and others have shown that: “[A]dherence to the norm of balanced reporting leads to informationally biased coverage of global warming. This bias, hidden behind the veil of journalistic balance, creates both discursive and real political space for the US government to shirk responsibility and delay action regarding global warming” (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007).

A critical realist view of objectivity building on Bhaskar, Collier, Sawyer and Wright, in contrast, would reject conflating objectivity with balance. According to Wright, critical realism can be understood as a “way of describing the process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than

the knower (hence 'realism'), while also acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence 'critical')" (Wright quoted in Lynch, 2007, p. 6). From such a perspective, everything we say about the world is fallible, but not equally fallible. A norm of "objectivity" should therefore include aspects like truth-seeking and fairness, and can therefore not be reduced to upholding a notion of "balance".

Methodology

This article/chapter draws on an online survey study of norms and values related to global warming, including a total of 471 respondents. The respondents are drawn from a variety of disciplines and groups: journalism (145 respondents), teachers and researchers of journalism (22 respondents), students of journalism (98 respondents), members of Concerned Scientists (77 respondents) and of science in general (excluding those already counted as members of Concerned Scientists = 108). A colleague is writing a separate article comparing the norms of the scientists and journalists, while this paper focuses on the nexus of teachers, journalism students and journalists.ⁱ

The student respondents have been further divided into subgroups according to the number of years they have studied journalism. This allows us to compare between first-year students and those at a more advanced level. Such a comparison will guide us in the analysis of how norms change and develop as the education progresses over three years.

In addition, we have included a group of former students, most of whom now work as journalists on a more or less regular basis. They are therefore directly subjected to the influence of other journalists in the daily interaction at the newspaper or radio/television station where they work. We hope that comparing between students and former students will shed some light on the relationship between practising journalism and the process of "becoming a journalist". We will also compare the students' other relevant groups, primarily journalism educators, scientists and practising journalists.

The online survey included a total of 37 questions covering a broad range of topics in order to probe norms and values relevant to global warming and climate change issues. The survey also included ample space for comments relating to the questions. Most respondents used this space to provide detailed argumentation and background as to why they had answered as they had. For this paper, the key questions were the following:

The employment of the norm of objectivity or balance is probed in various questions from different perspectives, for instance (the respondents were given a number of different claims to agree or disagree with):

The term "objectivity" has traditionally played a significant role for both scientists and journalists. Which of the following claims do you agree most with?

Do you see any alternative to objectivity as an ideal?

Which of the following claims on the development over the past 50 to 100 years do you agree most with?

Given the uncertainties related to consequences of climate change, which of the following actions should be taken?

What ambitions should define politics related to climate issues?

In addition, we included questions on the outcome of the United Nations Climate Change Conferences – particularly COP 15, held in Copenhagen, which drew significant media coverage in Norway. Questions related to objectivity and balance also play a significant part in the survey. For instance (again, the respondents were asked to choose between a number of statements):

Would you consider participating or joining organizations or other activities dedicated to influencing politics on climate issues?

To what extent do you view political activity as compatible with your role as a scientist or journalist?
How should journalists cover the debate on climate change? Choose the statement which best represents your view.

There are a few methodological challenges that need to be mentioned: first, while we have many respondents from the group of journalists, the majority come from large corporations in the country's capital; there are relatively few respondents from the large segment of journalists living and working outside Oslo. Similarly, the group of teachers is small. However, the number of respondents constitutes 80% of the staff at the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Oslo and Akershus University College for Applied Sciences. The group of third-year students is also smaller than the other groups. These limitations must be considered when generalizations are made based on the results. Therefore, these smaller groups are used mainly for comparative purposes rather than generalization.

We also note a more general problem with probing and trying to measure norms and values in this manner: people often express norms and values as arguments or reflexions, employing an evaluative vocabulary which is impossible to translate directly and precisely into corresponding numbers along a scale. Comparison between groups of this type requires us to estimate averages, standard deviations and variations, employing statistical methodology. Evaluative statements must therefore be translated into numbers which can be handled with statistical methodologies. This process necessarily involves *reductionism*, as complex evaluations are reduced to a single expression in the form of a number on a scale.

Results

In this paper I will focus on a few particularly interesting and intriguing results.

First, I did find the norms expressed by journalism educators on global warming and climate change interesting. Of the educators, 55% agree that "it is difficult to be objective, but we should still uphold the ideal of objectivity". However, 35% agree that "objectivity" should not be seen as an ideal. Only one teacher, less than 5%, believes that climate change can be explained by natural causes alone. A great majority (86%) agree that journalists covering climate change should focus on "the most probable consequences of climate change". A small minority (9%) would rather focus on communicating "uncertainty related to the science" of climate change.

The educators are divided evenly on the issue of engaging in public debate or becoming members of political organizations. Of the teachers, 50% say no to such activity: "Our task is to inform, not to be involved in politics". The other half of the respondents, however, are already members of such organizations or otherwise engage in the public debate on climate change. As we will see later, here the journalism educators are found to be significantly more open to such activity than the journalists. Perhaps surprisingly, only one educator (5%) agrees that political activity of this type is unacceptable for a journalist. Another respondent prefers to distinguish between what a journalist does as a journalist and what he or she does "as a private citizen". The majority (57%) accept that political activity and journalism can be combined, but prefer that journalists avoid becoming leaders or "overly profiled" participants in the public debate. A third of educators see no problem with this: being a journalist is fully compatible with political activity.

As a group, the educators show some variations. While a minority seem to hold onto traditional norms like "detached" and "neutral", the majority appears to be open to more activist or advocacy understandings of journalism.

The journalists, in contrast, are much less inclined to accept such activist or advocacy understandings of journalism. Almost half of them have studied journalism, most of them more than seven years ago. Similar to the journalism educators, the majority of the journalists (also 55%) agree that objectivity is "difficult" but should still

be regarded as an ideal. But while a substantial minority among the educators do not see objectivity as a suitable ideal for journalism, this position has few followers among the journalists. Three times as many of them (52 of 144 respondents to this particular question) defend objectivity as a “fine ideal”, or say that objectivity “should be an absolute requirement” for all journalists. When it comes to climate change, however, the journalists in this study are even more convinced of the connection between climate change and human activity (at a total of 96%) than the educators are. The group of journalists is also very similar to the group of educators when it comes to what the focus should be in reporting on climate change in the media – 87% prefer to focus on “the most likely consequences”. The journalists and educators have almost identical evaluations of global warming and climate change issues. However, they differ when it comes to the role of journalists: an overwhelming majority of journalists (87%) say no to any activity aiming to influence climate change policies. “Our job is to inform”, according to this group. The majority also see being a journalist as incompatible with political activity (70%), although quite a few in this group (30%) distinguish between what a journalist does when working as a journalist and what he or she does “as a private person”.

Educators are significantly more likely than journalists to accept that journalists engage in political activity. The journalists use the comment field to make a number of interesting remarks. As I interpret them, many journalists see it as their task, as journalists, to make sure that all sides of the debate are represented; all views must be presented to the audience. This is sometimes followed by “so the audience can decide for themselves” or similar arguments. Implicitly, most of the respondents are saying that, yes, we do have an opinion on global warming and climate change; but also that showing this opinion would interfere with the obligation they feel to present the audience with “the full picture”. Journalists should therefore keep a certain distance, maintain a degree of neutrality, avoid becoming too involved or engaged, and make sure that a balanced view of the issue is presented.

It is reasonable to see this view as somehow related to the norm of objectivity found historically in the philosophy of science (Couvalis, 1997; Gillispie, 1960; Rosenberg, 2012). Robert K. Merton, for instance, proposed universalism and disinterestedness as ideals for science. According to Merton, universalism means that claims to truth are evaluated in terms of universal or impersonal criteria, and not on the basis of race, class, gender, religion, or nationality. Disinterestedness as an ideal means that scientists are rewarded for acting in ways that outwardly appear to be selfless (Merton, 1942). The norm of objectivity in journalism has its own history, of course, connected to technological advances (the telegraph), the development of a business and markets for journalism (the rise of news agencies and corporations, for instance) coupled with local developments, found for instance in the histories of the national broadcasting companies (Schudson, 2001). Still, we wanted to probe this possible link between norms in journalism and science, so we posed the same questions to an interdisciplinary group of scientists participating at the International Polar Year Science Conference in Oslo in 2010. This was part of a larger investigation on global warming and the role of science, which will be published in a separate article elsewhere. Here, we will only draw on a couple results in order to compare norms expressed by this group (scientists) and journalists.

Forty-two per cent regard objectivity as an absolute requirement for anyone working in their field of research. An additional 34% of the respondents see objectivity as “difficult”, but still consider it an important ideal. The group of scientists are even more convinced than journalists of the causal relationship between human activity and climate change – only four express varying degrees of scepticism. These results indicate that the journalists, journalism educators and scientists in this study express broadly the same views on global warming and climate change. However, and in stark contrast to the journalists, 60% of the scientists are already members of an organization that is engaged in politics. Only a minority (35%) agree that the scientist’s job is to inform rather than to be engaged in politics, while 63% say that political activity is fully compatible with being a scientist.

It therefore seems clear that the context and process that have produced the norms on objectivity in journalism are different from those in science. In journalism, the context and process have produced a view with substantial

influence that regards objectivity as balancing different views and allowing space for minority views. In the group of scientists here, in contrast, the majority argue for objectivity; but this is a form of objectivity that does not exclude political engagement. Merton proposed that “organized skepticism” should be included on the list of ideals in science. Organized skepticism means that all ideas must be tested and subjected to rigorous, structured community scrutiny (Merton, 1942). The scientists represented in this study use the comment field to underline the importance of constantly evaluating and making judgments concerning this process of scrutinizing existing knowledge. These judgments and evaluations will always have to build on what we know (horizon of knowledge (Gadamer & Palmer, 2007)) in order to understand new information and develop new knowledge; therefore, they will always be subjective and fallible. Here, the dominating view among the group of scientists seems to be that objectivity is an ideal that requires scientists to scrutinize all ideas employing necessarily subjective horizons of knowledge. Perhaps this is what Wright meant by a “process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (...) while also acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence ‘critical’)” (Wright quoted in Lynch, 2007, p. 6).

Journalism students from engaged to balanced

Ninety-eight students participated in the study, in addition to 64 former students. The students do express views on global warming and climate change that are very similar to those of the journalism educators, journalists and scientists. More than 96% of the respondents in the group of students agree that human activity is one of the causes of climate change, and the vast majority say that decisive action should be taken to stop climate change. Overall, all groups in this study seem to show a similar pattern: a substantial majority see climate change as something that is actually happening, as caused at least in part by human activity, and as a real danger that should be taken seriously. No significant, systematic differences between the groups have been found. However, when it comes to the understanding of the role of journalism, science and objectivity, significant differences appear.

The typical first-year student can be described as an idealist, according to the responses in this study. They are not particularly concerned with upholding an ideal of objectivity – only two of 25 agree that this is a “fine ideal” while the majority see it as “difficult but important” (72%) or reject it altogether (20%). These responses are not very different from the pattern found among journalism educators, but are quite different from the group of journalists. The first-year students are mostly negative towards journalists engaging in political activity – 62% say no: “Our task is to inform, not to be involved in politics”.

Thirty-nine students in their second year participated. Again, they see objectivity as “difficult but important” (77%), while slightly fewer were inclined to reject it altogether (down to 12% from 20% among the first-year students). More students in their second year also disapprove of journalists becoming involved in politics or being members of political organizations (rising from 62% among the first-year students to 77% of those in their second year). Only 21 students in their third year responded to the survey but the results indicate a continuing trend, with 80% saying that objectivity is difficult but important. In addition, 15% now say that objectivity should be a requirement for all journalists. Again, a great majority are convinced that human activity is contributing to climate change; but an even greater majority than in the group of second-year students reject political activity (83%).

A total of 64 former students took part in the study. Those answering that “objectivity is difficult but important” was smaller (60%) than for all groups of students. A larger percentage (30%) answered that objectivity is a “fine ideal” or should be an absolute requirement for all journalists. The responses from the former students indicate a trend that begins with the first-year students, continues throughout their journalism education, and remains after they have earned their Bachelor’s degree in journalism. This is particularly striking related to the question

about political activity: 86% of former students reject it. In journalism, in Norway at least, objectivity has become virtually synonymous with non-engagement.

Table 1: Percentage of respondents who would not consider becoming a member of an organization, or otherwise engaging in activities to influence politics Norway, 2011 (per cent).

Group	% negative
Scientists	35
Journalism educators	50
First-year students	62
Second-year students	77
Third-year students	83
Former students	86
Journalists	87

We have thus found indications of a gradual development in views and norms among students and former students of journalism. They gradually become less inclined to accept membership in political organizations, and they gradually become more inclined to see objectivity as balance.

Explanations and meanings

How do these developments relate to education, journalism practice and norms expressed by members of the community of journalists? From a critical realist perspective, phenomena in the real world always have multiple causes; we should thus carefully avoid mono-causal explanations. What I have found, however, indicates that the journalism educators intend to stimulate a critical attitude which should help develop an understanding of objectivity that is not necessarily either neutral, detached, non-engaged or distant. However, from the responses I received from the journalists, I believe that the community of journalists wields a strong influence based on the particular understanding of objectivity as *balance*. This understanding of objectivity is interesting because it is so different from the norms of objectivity expressed by the vast majority of scientists in this study. The scientists underline the need to make judgments and evaluations, while the journalists tend to understand making such judgments and evaluations as “not our business”. Instead, many endorse the myth of “objectivity as balance”. “Objectivity as balance”, however, presupposes that a journalist is able to objectively define where the fulcrum or equilibrium is to be found, which cannot be done without evaluations and judgments. There is no getting around the problem of having to make judgments and evaluations – the difference seems rather to be the willingness, or lack of willingness, to be open and transparent about the evaluations and judgments necessarily involved in reporting on complex issues like climate change.

The findings further indicate that the group of students become gradually more comparable to the group of journalists as they grow more experienced. The students in this study begin practising journalism in an organized way as part of their education, after completing their first year of study. Our experience is that most of the students continue working as journalists the following two years of the Bachelor programme. They therefore gradually become more exposed to journalism praxis as their studies progress. The results indicate that practising journalism has a strong impact on the norms and values being developed.

This does not mean that education plays no role in the development of journalistic norms on global warming and climate change. However, it indicates that the influence asserted by other journalists in the community of journalists is significantly stronger. These findings resonate well with those presented by Nygren, who found that professionals put more emphasis on neutrality and detachment while students give activist ideals more

importance (Nygren, 2014). However, while Nygren finds little evidence in his research to support the hypothesis that journalism education can contribute to creating more critical journalists (Phillips, 2005), this study could be interpreted as support for such a hypothesis. Professional experience seems to make students of journalism more critical towards hegemonic scientific views on global warming. However, agreement or engagement with hegemonic scientific views is not the same as views grounded in critical evaluations of current science. Instead, engagement with science seems to be replaced by a mechanical scepticism whereby journalist students often seek to employ “balance” to produce a non-criticizable and thus privileged position for themselves.

Conclusion: And most importantly, what does this imply for the construction of a precautionary public in relation to global warming?

The findings in this paper are caused by a number of processes, most of them found outside journalism education. One obvious, albeit perhaps slightly paradoxical and depressing, conclusion is that the schooling of the media industry seems to diminish the global warming pedagogy of teachers in journalism over time. On the face of it, it does not seem to matter much whether we do better as teachers in the construction of a precautionary approach amongst journalists.

Most of the aspiring journalists in this study are at a stage in their career at which they will have to cover a wide variety of news. They will be given little time to specialize or develop deep knowledge on any particular theme. I therefore believe they feel particularly vulnerable when they have to cover complex issues like global warming. Interviewing highly qualified “experts” is challenging for an inexperienced journalist. They are also more likely than more experienced journalists to be intimidated by the heated debate, and sometimes vicious attacks, they must endure from an organized and active group of Norwegian climate-change deniers. There are therefore many reasons why a young and inexperienced journalist should seek protection behind the norm of balance, employing a detached and distant language, avoiding openly making evaluations and judgments him- or herself. By criticizing a detached and distant language here, I am certainly not calling for journalists to let themselves be used as mouthpieces for either environmental groups or other interest groups. Instead, truth-seeking should be seen as a collective endeavour that must encompass transparency regarding the many necessary evaluations and choices inherently involved in producing journalism on complex issues such as climate change. Evaluating conflicting claims and making subjective judgments will always be an integral part of journalism. A detached and distant language works to cover up the many subjective judgments, and creates an illusion of balance.

Therefore, we must continue enquiring how journalism education can contribute to mitigate the negative effects of the development I have outlined here. Studies have shown that the employment of “objectivity as balance” has a detrimental effect on the media coverage of global warming and climate change (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004). It contributes to producing an unrealistic understanding of the uncertainty related to these issues. The norm of “balance” helps explain why so many climate-change deniers/skeptics continue to receive so much media attention despite producing so little reliable science.

From a philosophy of science perspective, the understanding of objectivity as “balance” is highly problematic, raising a number of problems related to the power relations between journalists and audience. For all these reasons, I believe that journalism education should engage students in critically reflecting on simplistic notions of objectivity.

If journalism education is to fulfil its obligation to produce future journalists capable of contributing to the production of valuable knowledge and an understanding of issues like global warming and climate change, it must give students enough confidence to be transparent and truthful about the evaluations and judgments necessarily involved in reporting on these issues. Schools of journalism would do well to educate at least a group of students with a deeper knowledge of nature, technology and science. They should also teach students enough

philosophy of science to understand that, for most scientists, objectivity does not exclude engagement, subjective evaluation or judgment.

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ⁱ The investigation was done in close collaboration with my colleague Andreas Ytterstad (Oslo and Akershus University College for Applied Sciences). I would like to draw attention to two articles published by Ytterstad which build, at least in part, on results from this investigation (Ytterstad, 2014).