



## Emotion aside or emotional side?

Crafting an 'experience of involvement' in the news

Peters, Chris

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# Emotion aside or emotional side? Crafting an ‘experience of involvement’ in the news

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**Chris Peters**

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

## Abstract

In relation to journalism, the concept of ‘emotion’ is consistently undertheorized. Employed with commonsensical discernment, it is conflated with tabloid practices, sensationalism, bias, commercialization, and the like. Consequently, when discussed, emotion is often treated dismissively; a marker of unprincipled and flawed journalism. Yet hard, self-styled objective, ‘just the facts’ journalism is not *unemotional*, just as soft, so-called tabloid news is not *irrational*. For authors who study the sociology of emotions note, emotion has a social component and can more broadly be conceptualized as the experience of involvement. This article utilizes this understanding to interrogate traditional news dichotomies before applying this perspective to consider non-valORIZED news alternatives. One significant change over the past few decades is not that the news *has become* emotional (indeed, it has always been); rather, the diversity of emotional styles, the acceptability of journalistic involvement, and attempts to involve the audience have become more explicit.

## Keywords

emotions, infotainment, journalism, objectivity, tabloidization, trust

The words stuck in my throat. A sob wanted to replace them. A gulp or two quashed the sob, which metamorphosed into tears forming in the corners of my eyes. I fought back the emotion and regained my professionalism, but it was touch and go there for a few seconds before I could continue ... (Cronkite, 1996: 105 – reflecting on announcing the Kennedy assassination, an iconic moment that throws into relief 20th-century professional journalism standards through their threatened momentary breach.)

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## Corresponding author:

Chris Peters, Groningen Centre for Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, Oude Kijk in't Jatstraat 26,  
9712 EK Groningen, The Netherlands  
Email: c.j.peters@rug.nl

No longer is the American public a captive audience, and no longer will the folks settle for an expressionless recitation of the news. ... They want to know how the journalists they trust feel about things that are important to their lives. The news consumer is almost desperate for someone to define the truth of the matter. Thus, the good old days when the Brinkleys, the Cronkites and even Tom, Dan and Peter could simply introduce stories in measured tones are coming to an end. The audience for dispassionate TV news is shrinking; the demand for passionate reporting and analysis is on the rise. (O'Reilly, 2003: 27 – explaining his journalistic demeanour and motivation for *The O'Reilly Factor*, the most popular show on US cable news since 2000.)<sup>1</sup>

We are divided between those who think with their heads, and those who *know* with their hearts. ... The 'truthiness' is, anyone can read the news to you, I promise to *feel* the news, *at you*. (Colbert, 2005 – conceptualizing what he feels is the American communicative zeitgeist in one word and Colbert accentuating the persona he will adopt during his inaugural faux cable newscast.)

When discussed in relation to the news industry, the concept of 'emotion' is often treated dismissively; a marker of unprincipled and flawed journalism. One could be forgiven for thinking this, for journalism is a profession whose practitioners, professional codes, and teaching manuals have historically claimed to put emotion aside. Yet this discourse, frequently reflected in studies and commentaries on the journalistic craft, is misguided. It rests on an undertheorized conceptualization of emotion that is employed with commonsensical discernment, conflated with tabloid practices, sensationalism, bias, commercialization, and the like. This article seeks to address this by introducing a sociological conception of emotion – which I describe more systematically as the experience of involvement (Barbalet, 1998) – into the literature on journalism studies.

This sort of approach provides further assistance as we move beyond the old paradigm of 'objective' journalism to study the news, a project which academics have undertaken in earnest over the past few decades. In recent years the dominance of objectivity as a fundamental paradigm in Anglo-American journalism has increasingly been called into question, not only by academics but within the industry itself (Frank, 2003; Rosen, 1999). Accordingly, this article is intimately linked with the observation that many of the traditional dichotomies associated with journalism, such as hard/soft, fact/opinion, and information/entertainment are becoming progressively blurred (Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 1999). This trend is easy enough to observe. Sampson (1999) notes that the frontier between the broadsheet and tabloid press in Britain began to virtually disappear in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> This is part of a broader social trend towards 'informalization' or 'conversationalization' in that, 'most forms of public discourse now work hard to avoid the formality and distance that were once important markers of its identity as "public"' (Cameron, 2004: 124; see also Fairclough, 1995).

Such developments witness a fairly striking consensus amongst academics about the meshing of news and entertainment in the 21st century (see the edited collections of Biressi and Nunn, 2008; Corner and Pels, 2003; and Sparks and Tulloch, 2000) and a questioning of the meta-narrative of objectivity (Hackett and Zhao, 1998; Schudson, 2001; Ward, 2005). Yet there remains a diversity of opinions about the seriousness of these developments, the purpose of news, and how to staunch decreasing levels of trust in mainstream media (Jones, 2004). Despite a greater academic appreciation for the

blurring of news and entertainment, which stretches back at least two decades (Dahlgren and Sparks, 1992; Jones, 2005), analyses of emerging forms of journalism still often fall back upon the Cartesian dualism of emotion and rationality when discussing ‘quality’ journalism. This article takes a closer look at ‘emotion’ in relation to journalism, finding that much can be gained when we broaden this conceptualization to go beyond a commonsense notion that treats emotion as an encompassing term for subjective bodily feelings, as when critics say that certain news outlets simply ‘play on people’s emotions’.

Another way to put this is that a broader understanding of journalism can be gleaned when we step away from the inherently unstable categorical dualisms that are often formed around the normative model of objectivity (Joseph, 2005). While comparing journalistic forms against idealized, static, time-honoured conventions of objectivity may provide vivid contrasts, this anachronistic approach often places media transformations in a vacuum, comparing emergent products against preceding expectations. This vastly oversimplifies the complexity of the 21st-century journalism field. A sociological conception of emotion not only offers the potential of more substantial analyses of emerging news products often described under the not very telling moniker, ‘infotainment’, it also helps readjust our understanding of historical archetypes. For instance, when we consider emotion in terms of an attempt to craft an experience of involvement, the delivery of the recently departed Walter Cronkite, which became prototypical in broadcast news, would not be viewed as *unemotional*, as is often assumed, but instead harnesses a specific type of ‘cool’ emotional posture in its presentation (cf. Stearns, 1994). Correspondingly, one of the most significant changes over the past few decades is not that the news *has become* emotional (indeed, it has always been); rather, the diversity of emotional styles, the acceptability of involvement on behalf of the journalist, and attempts to involve the audience have become more explicit.

This article investigates this by first examining how news standards are often conflated with a fairly rudimentary conceptualization of emotion and relates this to the more developed appreciation of objectivity and the ‘rational’ aspects of news. It then introduces a sociological conception of emotion and demonstrates some parallels between contemporary journalism and other traditionally rationalized fields such as medicine and law. The latter part of the article briefly introduces some examples of emergent forms of news where this more nuanced view of emotion can prove insightful.

## The conflation of news standards, objectivity and ‘emotion’

The opposite of *news* is not *entertainment*, as the news is often diversionary or amusing (the definition of entertainment) and what is called ‘entertainment’ is often neither. (Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001: 162 – arguing against an oversimplification of the entertainment function of news.)

Formulaic, unreflective objectivity is a *faux* objectivity. (Ward, 2005: 316 – commenting on the diverse historical manifestations of objectivity.)

In today’s mediascape, news products battle not only against each other, but against a swath of media outputs for each viewer’s attention. When we come to this realization, it seems fruitful not to lament the loss of a supposed halcyon age of serious journalism but

to look at how emerging forms go about making news in a manner that engages a progressively fragmented and time-strapped public. The urge to separate informational content out from style when considering the news neglects how content is shaped by entertainment values (Curran and Sparks, 1991). By trying to understand the elements of emerging forms that seem to provide legitimacy, I push towards evaluation of their complexity, in short, taking them seriously (cf. Zelizer, 2004) rather than following what seems a more frequently trodden, though less productive, avenue: briefly pointing out their flaws in broad strokes, or simply discounting them as alternatives altogether. In academia 'infotainment' has generally been ignored; being seen as improper news it is frequently dismissed (Carter et al., 1998).<sup>3</sup> And within the industry itself, 'emotional' is often conflated with 'sensational', thus subject to the sort of negative scrutiny which is part of a more general journalistic tendency to problematize emergent news forms that challenge the status quo (Tulloch, 2000). Television news is looked down upon by print as being infotainment, network news looks down upon cable for similar reasons, while the journalism community as a whole looks down upon internet bloggers (Zelizer, 2000).<sup>4</sup>

This article can be situated instead in an increasingly diverse stream of research that stresses the sociological significance and cultural importance of traditionally non-valorized news forms (see Atton and Hamilton, 2008; Gripsrud, 2000; Jones, 2005; Langer, 1998; MacDonald, 2003; Örnebring and Jönsson, 2004; Sparks, 2000; Tulloch, 2000). Despite this growing attention, decrying the erosion of news standards still seems a somewhat popular pastime among journalists and academics (Allan, 2004), and claims that journalism is widely debasing itself have garnered support from many academics despite an apparent lack of empirical evidence (Sparks, 2000; Van Zoonen, 2005). The thrust of this 'tabloidization' thesis, which states that the serious standards of yesteryear are seeing widespread disintegration, is offered by Franklin (1997: 4) who notes:

Entertainment has superseded the provision of information, human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgement has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationship of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged more 'newsworthy' than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. Traditional news values have been undermined by new values; 'infotainment' is rampant.

Yet some academics take issue with such sweeping statements. Bolin (2008: 4) says this passive view of journalism, where entertainment is the active component, is misguided, arguing instead that the journalistic field is becoming more autonomous and that 'far from having left journalism behind ... it would be more accurate to claim that we are in a hyperjournalism era'. Sparks (2000: 14) notes that a problem with this type of thinking is an oversimplified conceptualization of the news, which places hard news on one end of a spectrum, soft on the other. He notes that these sorts of ideal types, what he calls the 'Journal of Record' and the 'True Tabloid', often neglect the multidimensional nature of journalism. Bird (1990, 1992, 2002) observes that even supermarket tabloids share some affinity to serious journalism – a reliance on 'expert' sources, attention to accuracy, invoking objectivity – and more frequently than one would expect, coverage of similar stories. In addition, it is questionable to what extent fully reasoned reporting

has ever been realized (Schudson, 2001). When one considers that contentions of tabloidization can be traced back almost to the beginning of the mass media (Tulloch, 2000), what this illustrates is that trying to demonstrate empirically *entire shifts* in journalism is challenging.

This understanding encourages us to reconsider emergent news products which, while clearly departing from established conventions of ‘professionalism’, nonetheless carve out a place in the broader journalism field (Peters, 2010). Why this seems an especially relevant debate is that the journalism landscape has undergone a period of near unprecedented change over the past few decades. And amidst this rapid proliferation and digitalization, what one witnesses is many news products adopting a style that satirist Stephen Colbert terms ‘truthiness’, wherein tone and style become more central in attempting to generate certainty, fidelity, and trust. This dovetails not only with an upsurge in news alternatives but with an increased variety of ‘valid’ news styles (Atton and Hamilton, 2008). It seems that journalistic emotional involvement is increasingly evident; this easily observed transformation marking a change from the traditional 20th-century preoccupation with journalistic neutrality and detachment (see Ward, 2005). In fact, some emerging news products flip the valorization of detachment on its head: involvement by the journalist becomes actively embraced. As the quotes by O’Reilly and Colbert which lead this article suggest, emerging forms of journalism, especially in terms of American cable news, often try to ‘feel’ the news at you; pre-digesting facts, advocating the importance of issues explicitly rather than signalling this through placement and length, interacting with audiences, and relying on technological innovations to stylize presentation. This is probably most evident in television journalism, with the rise of cable news magazines such as *The O’Reilly Factor* on Fox News, the growing impact of satirical news products such as Comedy Central’s *Daily Show*, and the popularity of breakfast news; the emergence of personalized blogs by journalists, alternative media, reflexive journalism, and the rise of talk radio also reflect this shift in conduct (Peters, 2009).

In the context of the 20th-century mainstream press, news texts signalled professionalism through their ‘rational’ style of presentation, which eschewed political affiliation, decried bias and assumed neutrality (Schudson, 1990, 1995, 2001). Historical strands of ontological objectivity (the relation between appearance and reality), epistemic objectivity (the relation between well-supported and not well-supported beliefs), and procedural objectivity (the relation between the public and decisions made in its name by government) mingled to form a 20th-century hybrid – a ‘rhetorical strategy’ of objectivity – that protected journalism from critique (Ward, 2005).<sup>5</sup> In ideal form, objectivity was defined by seven components – factuality, fairness, non-bias, independence, non-interpretation, neutrality and detachment – which acted as industry-wide technical and discursive standards.

Extrapolating from this, one can assert that journalism has been somewhat beholden to this transpositional logic, in that a journalistic product that does not claim to be objective contradicts an essential rhetorical claim used to established ‘news’. Objectivity became so entrenched that it begat a commonsense approach still seen in popular analyses, frequently being utilized as the benchmark against which critiques of the media are based (Hackett and Zhao, 1998).<sup>6</sup> For instance, recent years have witnessed the rise of prominent internet media watchdogs, such as the left-leaning [mediamatters.org](http://mediamatters.org),

launched in 2004, or the right-leaning newsbusters.org, launched in 2005, which aggressively seek out 'biased' reporting. And despite being subject to widespread derision, cable news magazines<sup>7</sup> also claim to uphold objective standards, often claiming traditional network and print outlets have moved away from this ideal (Peters, 2010). For instance, Lou Dobbs (2006: 88), who hosted the patriotic – some might say xenophobic – *Lou Dobbs Tonight* on CNN asserted that, 'The standard of the craft as it should be is the energetic gathering of facts and the objective reporting of the news, without fear or favour.' Bill O'Reilly's nightly diatribes against the 'liberal media' are similarly grounded, and reflected in the slogan of the network, 'Fair and Balanced'. By employing what Clayman (2002) refers to as the 'Tribune-of-the-People' stance – legitimized aggressive questioning which invokes the fourth-estate notion of the public – such programmes play on the fact that journalists are expected to forcefully pursue objective reporting. Part of the legitimacy of emerging news forms comes from their assertion of traditional journalistic values (cf. Wall, 2005).

Within the academic literature on journalism, objectivity has been discussed as a set of strategic rituals (Tuchman, 1978), a regime (Hackett and Zhao, 1998), paradigm (Berkowitz, 2000), ideal (Schudson, 2001) or ethic (Ward, 2005). Despite this terminological variance, one can generally say that objectivity is utilized to explore how the rise of the professional journalist produces certain *rational* expectations of conduct, or 'rules of truth'. For instance, Tuchman (1978) considers techniques that form the 'web of facticity' that gives validity and the appearance of truth to the news. In a similar vein, Schlesinger (1987) looks at editorial control and institutional ideology at the BBC to see how they 'put reality together'. In such accounts, emotion is conflated with 'bad' journalistic practices, and is generally ignored.

When emotion in the news or political coverage is more systematically considered (see Jones, 2005; MacDonald, 2000, 2003; Van Zoonen, 2005) it can often be inadvertently preserved as rationality's opposite. For instance, MacDonald (2000: 260, 251) uses the idea of objectivity to argue against a journalistic paradigm that 'accentuates dispassionate analysis, rationality, and abstraction'. Adopting a position similar to some feminist critiques of the media, she notes the:

... recurring assumption is that a shift toward personalization or a growing reliance on human interest automatically substitutes emotion for analysis and impedes the insights into social and political agency that form the prerequisite for democratic intervention.

In similar opposition to the idea that objective methods are the answer to journalism's ills, Van Zoonen (2005) considers why it is necessary to *Entertain the Citizen*, focusing on the narrative elements of storytelling that potentially engage a busy, hectic, and apathetic public. Jones (2005: 24) considers how the rise of satirical news is part of a more general trend towards making political coverage pleasurable, as television is 'invited into our homes, and the pageantry of public life becomes intimidate and accessible'. Such explorations are critiques of detachment, hypothesized on the premise that passive news strips journalism of engagement and, by implication, public interest (Lichtenberg, 2000).

While such accounts attempt to get away from what Langer (1998) terms the 'lament' of infotainment, often they implicitly persist with a rational/emotional divide. For

instance, Langer's study of tabloid television employs a distinction between the 'hard' and what he terms 'other' news that recognizes one as more closely respecting the tenets of objectivity. Graber (1994: 486) classifies the treatment of routine stories by news directors as subject to four approaches, one of which she codes as 'populist/sensational', stories which are 'obviously structured to arouse emotions and empathy'. Another style is 'elitist/factual', so that stories are confined to 'an unemotional recounting of verifiable information told to an intellectually mature audience'. Örnebring and Jönsson's (2004: 290) discussion of the value of the penny press and yellow journalism notes: 'While it often was sensationalistic and emotional rather than measured and rational-intellectual, it can well be described as an alternative public sphere.' Highly sophisticated theoretical analyses, such as that offered by MacDonald (2000: 251), even slip into this dualism noting: 'We need a new evaluative vocabulary to take us out of the rut of assuming that every hint of the personal is a capitulation to trivialization and emotional indulgence.'

These authors, who investigate the complexity of the 'tabloidization' of the press, whether in favour of emotion or against it, seem to tacitly equate objectivity to rationality despite rejecting the Cartesian valorization of reason. Objectivity is thus either employed to advocate a return to a rationalized, responsible press (a position effectively argued by Bourdieu, 1996, and Hackett and Zhao, 1998) or is illustrated as the problem with an elite-oriented press that disengages its public (well-articulated by Jones, 2005; MacDonald, 2003; Van Zoonen, 2005; Ward, 2005). Yet hard, self-styled objective, 'just the facts' journalism is not *unemotional*, just as soft, so-called tabloid news is not *irrational*. By rejecting this oppositional dichotomy from the outset, analysis shifts towards considering each news text in terms what rules of truth it employs (rational elements of news) and how these rules are manifested through a particular presentational style attuned to an intended experience of involvement (emotional side of news). When we consider a more social, less physiological conception of emotion<sup>8</sup> – the experience of involvement – we begin to see that emotion is always present.

## The social side of emotion

A person may be negatively or positively involved with something, profoundly involved or only slightly involved, but however or to what degree they are involved with an event, condition, or person it necessarily matters to them, proportionately. That it matters, that a person cares about something, registers in their physical and dispositional being. It is this experience that is emotion, not the subject's thoughts about the experience, or the language of self-explanation arising from the experience, but that immediate contact with the world the self has through involvement. (Barbalet, 2002 – outlining a sociological conception of emotion.)

What is often neglected in analyses, no matter how comprehensive or sophisticated, is that the 20th-century objectivity regime attempted to craft a very specific experience of involvement, corresponding to what Stearns (1994) dubs 'American Cool'.<sup>9</sup> To be 'cool' is not to be emotionless, nor is it to be unfeeling. Rather, this emotional posture demands finding the right balance of disengagement and nonchalance, without appearing disinterested.

When we look back at the 20th century, what we can witness is a general social tendency in the West towards a muting or constraining of perceived overly involved, extreme, or inappropriate emotive displays (Elias, 1982). For instance, ‘gentlemanly anger’, viewed as a proper emotive posture during the Victorian era, became infantilized. More generally, we can say that ‘the emotions’ gradually became subject to scientific management, with the resultant rise of ‘emotive control’ in multiple spheres. One significant emergence was the introduction of industrial psychology in the 1920s, which focused on organizational culture. In the bureaucratic culture, it became commonplace to dampen emotional affect, displaying stable and predictable emotional reactions rather than wavering and unchecked feelings (Flam, 2002; Weber, 1946). What is significant about these attempts to ‘manage’ emotions is that it indicates that the cognitive and social are inseparable from them. In fact, this is something we expect from a very early age, as any parent who has tried to control a toddler’s tantrums will likely attest. As Tudor (2003) perceptively notes, the fear most would feel encountering a lion in the wild turns to pleasure and excitement when the situation is mediated through the environment of a safari. Yet somehow the misleading binary of emotion/reason remains despite the fact that once we try to govern emotion, at a micro- or broader macro-level, we acknowledge it can be manipulated and is indivisible from rational thought.

When we extend these types of observations to journalism, we begin to see some evident parallels. As the craft developed over the 19th and 20th centuries, intense displays, under even the most shocking circumstance, became antithetical to the craft. Objectivity, in this sense, demanded a calm demeanour as the journalist aimed to reflect ‘reality’. In this regard, the Cronkite quote that opens this article is exemplary of the ‘cool’ journalist. Fulford (1999) notes that over the course of the 20th century, newspaper articles also became increasingly calcified and predictable. To put this in terms of emotion, ‘over given time periods and in particular socio-cultural contexts, specific *modes of emotionality* are widely practised, actively traded upon, and routinely expected by members of a social collectivity’ (Tudor, 2003: 243).

As such, it is a fallacy to suggest that the 20th-century brand of ‘just the facts’ journalism was *unemotional*. Such an assumption rests on a troublesome distinction between emotion and rationality that equates passivity to the absence of emotion rather than as an identifiable posture (Barbalet, 1998). This helps partially explain why emergent journalistic forms are so often judged negatively or dismissed – divergences from the customary ‘cool’ style are viewed as ‘emotional’ and thus ‘bad journalism’ as opposed to a derivative that accepts many of the same rules of truth but presents and performs them differently. The news has always attempted to construct an experience of involvement, whether in terms of the cool professional journalist of the 20th century, or the demagoguery practised by the 19th-century partisan press. Even before the advent of the mass media, the news ballad was an early form of journalism that endeavoured to transmit information in a lively and engaging manner.

Yet this is not at all surprising. An historical epistemology of the term ‘emotion’ uncovers that it is a potent discursive invention of late 19th-century psychology, which often subsumes the diversity of meanings previously described as feelings, passions, postures, drives, motives, moods, calculations and so forth (Dixon, 2003).<sup>10</sup> Unpacking emotion more systematically thus demands rejecting what has become indurate common

sense. And a relatively simple first step is available if we begin to speak instead of the experience of involvement, and think in terms of how journalistic outlets consciously attempt to craft this for their audience. Such an approach can generate more meticulous studies of the intended affect and effect of news presentation.

As Ward (2005) instructively notes, formulaic objectivity is a myth within journalism, as the manner and manifestations of objectivity vary tremendously over time and place. Many of the emerging forms of journalism witnessed over the past few decades, from cable magazines, to breakfast news, talk radio, blogs and alternative journalism, claim certain practices we can identify as ‘traditional’ journalism – relying on expert sources, aiming for balance, claiming to report facts, and so forth – yet have either ignored or outright rejected the industry dictates that for the past century have acknowledged that a key element of being professional is to control one’s degree of engagement. Much like other vocations that claim to follow an ‘objective’ method, journalism is a field where practitioners are traditionally allowed to be interested, but must simultaneously maintain distance to be considered professional. This thinking has evident roots in Enlightenment perceptions surrounding the proper exercise of reason and emotion. Whereas discourses around reason locate it in the mind, emotions are located discursively in the body (Barbalet, 1998). This rationale leads to a historical distrust of the body, the site of passions, lust, drives, and desire. Williams and Bendelow (1998: xv) argue that this assumption stretches back to Plato, such ‘that emotions need to be “tamed”, “harnessed” or “driven out” by the steady (male) hand of reason’. A distrust of emotion can accordingly be seen to stem from this misgiving (Dixon, 2003; Elias, 1982; Shilling, 2002). While the subject matter of journalism can be such – and it must be said that journalism has always relied on attempting to induce some sort of experience in its audiences, through a dependence on common narratives to portray heroes, villains, and tragedies (Lule, 2001) – the trusted journalist (like the scientist, judge, or doctor) is encouraged to display distance.

In this sense, journalism can be seen to be treading a path similar to that recently observed by organizational theory, medical, and legal scholars. Du Gay (1994) remarks that the business world began experiencing a shift away from a bureaucratic organizational model to one of managerial enterprise in the 1980s. This culture is not a full-blown switch away from the rationalization of bureaucracy. Rather, it is hostile towards its ‘impersonal’ style. Similarly, Laster and O’Malley (1996) look to recent changes in the legal system that allow for the ‘reassertion’ of emotion into the law. They look to ‘sensitive’ legal developments, such as victim-impact statements and restorative justice as examples of legal variations that fall outside the traditional rationalistic framework of the law, based on a perceived dissatisfaction with the over-application of rationality. Lupton (1997) considers the medical profession’s move towards a model of consumer empowerment and involvement in medical decisions. In all these examples, it is not that rationality and ratiocination have been rejected – unlike the charge seemingly implicit in charges of tabloidization – rather that the emotive posture of the profession has become varied; the experiences of involvement have become more diverse.

Extending this logic to journalism, we could posit that the impersonal style that characterizes objective journalism can result in journalists who appear uncaring or uninvolved when performed carelessly (cf. Frank, 2003). Connor (2007) observes that the increasing use of ‘emoticons’ in digital encounters is indicative of a desire to personalize

the impersonal; to replicate 'authentic' emotional interactions when separated by media. In terms of communication, the 'emotional climate' seems to have shifted (cf. Barbalet, 1998). Some authors seem to implicitly reflect this position, asserting that personalized news can result in a more engaged public (see Jones, 2005; MacDonald, 2000; Van Zoonen, 2005; Zelizer, 2000).

While the forms and techniques of journalism vary tremendously, for the bulk of the 20th century being and becoming a type of person, the 'professional journalist', demanded emotional control (cf. Hacking, 1986). This means that journalists traditionally attempt to manage their emotions; indeed, emotion management could be considered one of the crucial foundations of the job (cf. Hochschild, 1983). An assumption behind this is that trust can only be experienced if reporters adopt a posture of being subjectively restrained. As the Associated Press's *Broadcast News Handbook* (2001: 27) notes:

By definition, the act of informing the members of such a society is the act of separating fact from opinion. People want to make up their own minds, and a reporter who seems to be trying to do it for them quickly loses credibility.

While this sort of thinking embraces that the experience of involvement – the moment of contact between an audience and a news text – matters, it ignores that assumptions underlie the crafting of news. Unpacking emotion means considering how inducements, with limitless configurations and strengths, are brought into every encounter (Katz, 1988; Lyng, 1990).

Building on this, conceptualizing emotion socially allows us to potentially make inferences and also explore the disincentives we may have to engage with certain news products. To cite one example, even though Al-Jazeera follows most of the standard rules of truth of traditional western journalism,<sup>11</sup> the disquiet many Americans feel watching its coverage can be understood by this negative involvement. The symbols and elements of presentation relied upon by Al-Jazeera are not crafted with an American audience in mind and thus the experience of involvement for many American viewers is understandably 'foreign'. Similarly, belief-driven cable magazines are the staple of US cable news networks while more congenial panel discussions and one-on interviews seem to be the norm on their Canadian and European equivalents. All these programmes are 'emotional' but the styles are markedly different. The point of this is that such tones are not accidental – they are crafted with a certain experience of involvement in mind that is designed for a specific audience. Whether we are part of that intended audience (as I likely am when I watch *The Daily Show*) or deviate from the imagined audience (something I frequently feel when I watch *The O'Reilly Factor*) the calculations behind presentational style are not accidental, nor is this separate from how one cognitively interacts with each text.

The broader point is that much is lost when we think of emotion 'in terms of quantity or substance as opposed to *patterns of relationship*' (Burkitt, 2002: 151). Without this, we neglect to recognize that emotion only has context and meaning when we place it in relation to things like humans, materials, ideas, or structures. This is not to say that emotions are not personally embodied, rather it emphasizes that they are relationally generated (Sheller, 2004). For instance, the recent collapse of many banks is associated with a lack of trust in the financial sector. Anger is meaningless unless one directs it at a

person or object. Shame only manifests itself when we acknowledge social expectations of conduct. The standard discourse of sensationalism fails to adequately capture such relationships. Unless we explore the relations newsmakers envision with their audience, it is difficult to go beyond analysing news as a product that, almost like a recipe, occasionally pours in 'emotion' to improve its flavour. Just as 'objectivity' has been unpacked by academics who wish to understand how the rules of truth are formed and enacted within professional journalism, reconfiguring 'emotion' allows a more complete picture of the relationship between news production and presentation to emerge. In essence, a sociological conception of emotion helps fill the gap between the structure of news production and the assumptions about audience reception (cf. Barbalet, 2002).

In terms of recent developments in journalism, perhaps we can gain insight into the success of divergent emotive styles from the observation that intense emotive display, while infantilized in terms of day-to-day interaction during the 20th century, also witnessed a concomitant rise in outlets where 'being emotional' was not considered childish. Quite obviously, one can look to sporting events (Dunning, 1999), film (Elias, 1982), and psychiatry as fields where being involved is not only acceptable, but encouraged. Campbell (1987) considers how the idea of restraint in the Protestant Ethic is increasingly rebelled against by consumerism and a Romantic Ethic. Lyng (1990) examines the rise of 'edgework' in the late 20th century; the appearance of activities that embrace risk. Mennell (2001) investigates how the rise of the 'sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll' culture can be traced to discontentment with the formality of post-war America. Pratt (2002) explores the re-emergence of 'ostentatious' punishment over the past few decades in the United States and how this corresponds to a growing dissatisfaction with correctional practices perceived to rob the public of an experience of involvement.

If we apply these observations to journalism, perhaps it becomes less surprising that the staple of cable news has become highly involved, personalized, hour-long shows, such as *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Hannity* on Fox News or *Larry King Live* and *Lou Dobbs Tonight* on CNN, which reject dispassionate journalism. Their attempts to craft an emotive connection – an experience of involvement – are advocated by media consultants such as Frank Magid Associates (2007):

To thrive in an increasingly competitive environment, a brand needs to be nurtured. Magid will help grow, shape, and strengthen your brand to create the emotional connection with consumers that is essential in building a loyalty that transcends the generic.

As Sheller (2004: 230) notes of the automobile culture, 'When cars become associated with feelings of protection, security and safety (as emphasized in advertising of the "family car"), their use may provide parents with a sense of empowerment in the face of a generalized feeling of insecurity.' And if we consider the marketing of many cable news programmes, it appears they often attempt to generate a similar experience. The tag lines that accompany advertisements for *The O'Reilly Factor* are 'No Spin', 'No Free Pass', and 'Looking Out for You'. The producer of *Lou Dobbs Tonight* calls recurring segments such as 'Exporting America', 'War on the Middle Class', and 'Broken Borders' the 'brands' of the programme (Auletta, 2006). The directive to alter the intended experience of involvement in such shows is embraced at the top. The President of CNN, Jonathan

Klein, notes that the inclusion of personality sees ‘the passions of our journalists show up on television rather than being left on the newsroom floor’ (Swarns, 2006). The CEO of Fox News, Roger Ailes, remarks, ‘Cable is an edge business ... Brian Williams [anchor of the *NBC Nightly News*] has no edge, so he sits there and mumbles in his nice shirts and can’t get through’ (Auletta, 2003). More generally, we can say that within these statements, there is at least an implied cultivation of a relationship between the host and a unique approach to the intended audience.

While charges of fabrication (usually accompanied by accusations of ratings-focus) often accompany the performance of cable news anchors, such critiques seem misguided, based on an oversimplified view of performance and emotion. As Hochschild (1983: 35) perceptively notes, unless there is an inner acceptance of the rules of performance, jobs which involve an interaction that conveys feeling will come across as staged. As she notes, surface acting, the ‘body language, the put-on sneer, the posed shrug, the controlled sigh’ will eventually come across as inauthentic if it is not developed into deep acting where ‘display is a natural result of working on feeling; the actor does not try to *seem* happy or sad but rather expresses spontaneously, as the Russian director Constantin Stanislavski urged, a real feeling that has been self-induced’. Dismissed as infotainment, or as emotional reportage, the effectiveness of this alternative approach to news is often ignored. Yet surveys by CNN consistently rate Lou Dobbs, its most evidently ‘involved’ host, as its ‘most trusted’ anchor (Burman, 2007).

By considering this experience of involvement we gain insight into the cues for the mood, feeling, and trust which may drive interest in emerging forms of news. Such experiences can be ‘crafted’, as when we plan out a dialogue before a conversation, or when a sports team selects music and chants for key moments of a game, or when a journalistic product goes about setting its presentation and broader tone. For instance, Colbert feels the active display of satirical news has the effect of reducing distance:

One of the unintentional puns of our show is that it’s called *The Colbert Report* [pronounced Cole-Bare Rah-Pore] and it unintentionally plays on the word ‘rapport’ ... which is a sense of understanding between the speaker and the listener. You know? We’re the same people, you and me. We get it. The rest of those people out there, they don’t understand things the way we understand. The show is like an invitation to the audience to be part of the club. (Gross, 2005)

And it is not only on cable where an intended experience of involvement is considered. When CBS commissioned James Horner, a Hollywood composer best known for creating the score for *Titanic*, to create a new theme song to accompany Karie Couric’s debut as anchor, Horner noted that he did not want to replicate the Romanesque fanfares of NBC and ABC and wanted to respect Couric’s desire to have music that invoked ‘wheat fields blowing rather than Manhattan skyline’ (Barnes, 2006). Furthermore, he created slight variations on the theme which could reflect the type of news day it was – more drums to reflect anxiety-producing stories leading the news cycle or a more notable trumpet solo to set the tone for introspective news days. Music was considered by network executives to be an important element in remodelling the tone of the show. Another consideration with an eye to inclusion was altering the colours in the studio to be ‘warmer’ on camera (Barnes, 2006).

Reconceptualizing emotion socially seems to dovetail with other research streams increasingly marshalled in communication studies, such as visual rhetoric or sensorial communication. Visual rhetoric analyses ‘photographs, drawings, graphs and tables, and motion pictures’, allowing scholars to explore ‘the many ways in which visual elements are used to influence people’s attitudes, opinions, and beliefs’ (Helmets and Hill, 2004: 2). Such awareness would seem critical when one looks to the increasingly sophisticated presentation of journalism on television and the internet. More generally, studies of journalism should be buffeted by an attention to the idea of sensorial communication, the observation that journalism relies not only on meaning creation but on the sensory expectations, metaphors, and experience of consuming news texts (cf. Howes, 2006). CBS’s focus on music, as with the ubiquitous Fox News ‘Alert’, both seem attuned to the idea that sound can set tone, as mood is frequently linked to auditory experience (cf. Bull, 2001). This conceptualization understands the aesthetics of news texts not merely in terms of personal taste but as a disposition to sense acutely (cf. Bull et al., 2006). Admittedly, the use of the senses may not be as evident for watching news as it is for activities like clubbing, culinary experiences in foreign countries, or strolling through a botanical garden. Yet rumination on the senses and their relation to emotion helps shed light on the somewhat crude interpretation of sensationalism – news content that capitulates to the trivial – to broaden our appreciation of the perceptual experience that comes from watching news.

## Closing thoughts

Making clear how emergent forms of journalism configure their rules of truth though an intended experience of involvement can provide an understanding of how novel forms craft a product that, while evidently deviating from traditional journalism, is nonetheless widely considered ‘news’. Some may bristle at this suggestion, for it is fair to say that the journalistic value of programmes such as *The O’Reilly Factor*, *Hardball*, or *Lou Dobbs Tonight* has not been widely espoused by academics and journalists. And while it is important to keep in mind the journalistic responsibility ‘to take what’s important and make it interesting’, as opposed to ‘merely taking what’s interesting and making it more interesting’ (Jurkowitz, 2000: 110), it seems comparably misguided to neglect the impact of such programmes when, for example, we consider that a 2005 Annenberg poll found that 40 percent of Americans polled identified Bill O’Reilly as a journalist, versus 30 percent for Watergate journalist Bob Woodward (Lester, 2005). Similarly, Anderson (2006) recounts that Washington insiders now speak of ‘the Lou Dobbs factor’, which has become:

... routine shorthand when calculating the potential for grassroots political backlash to particular policies. Two weeks ago ... [Bill] Clinton singled him out for praise: ‘I disagree with a lot of what Lou Dobbs says, but I still watch every night—and I learn something every time.’

Six of the top 10 programmes on US cable news are highly involved magazines, and these programmes generated an average combined viewership of 13 million viewers per evening during the first quarter of 2009 (Shea, 2009). If academics or journalists claim

that viewers who watch such programmes, which unequivocally declare themselves to be first-rate news products, are confused or misguided about what news 'really is', it seems we are dangerously close to a sort of false consciousness critique which is theoretically tenuous, at best.

Derided though Bill O'Reilly may be in journalistic circles and disregarded in their academic equivalent, it is reasonable to assert that *O'Reilly Factor* viewers *feel* he is providing news. The same could be said for alternative forms of journalism, blogs, breakfast news, panel and debate shows, and even for satirical newscasts which, though ironically declaring themselves to be faux news, have received more academic attention than cable news programmes which make no such claim. What should be obvious, but is often neglected, as Curran (2005: 139) points out, is that 'different media should be viewed as having different functions within the democratic system, calling for different kinds of structures and styles of journalism'.

This article builds on this idea to avoid treating journalism as a homogenous industry with a uniform purpose. The correlate that derives from this is that by considering how 'the news' attempts to craft an experience of involvement, we are in a better position to advance research that attempts to understand the success and epistemological ramifications of the aforementioned emerging news alternatives. I come back to this point, brought up in the introduction and emphasized throughout this article, because the content of programming such as *Oprah*, *The View*, *The Daily Show*, *Today*, or *The O'Reilly Factor*, is not especially novel; tabloid, human interest, current affairs, satire, and political punditry have a history closely intertwined with the development of journalism (Gripsrud, 2000; Sampson, 1999; Tulloch, 2000). Rather, it is the tone of such programmes, shaped and made explicit though their style and presentation, which appears to have struck a chord. As such, researching this aspect of news can take us beyond decrying its emergence as the death knell for journalism to instead view how its emotional style potentially resurrects audience interest in 'the news'.

If one were to closely examine the rise in popularity of the morning news shows, for instance, one might find that an aspect of their success hinges on crafting a stereotypically 'feminine' style of involvement – more sensitive, jovial, and conversational – precisely because this genre of news is temporally aligned with the private maternal sphere of the home. Entering the household during the familial routines of the morning probably demands a far more intimate form of emotionalism than prime time news. Unpacking emotion in this manner can help us to understand why network anchors perform a solemn role versus weatherpeople, who are expected to be cheerful types.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, cable news hosts are belief driven. The point is that diverse emotional styles have *the potential* to engage disparate audiences.

Kovach and Rosenstiel (1999: 8) have a fairly negative view of many of these developments in journalism, noting, 'These new characteristics of the Mixed Media Culture are creating what we call a new journalism of assertion, which is less interested in substantiating whether something is true and more interested in getting it into the public discussion.' While this criticism has merit, we should not be so quick to dismiss novel forms of journalism that have the capability to generate public interest. Not all discussions will be valuable, as when cable news offers saturated coverage of the death

of Anna Nicole Smith, nor will some developments be without ethical dilemma, as was witnessed with the embedding of reporters in the second Iraq War. However, the manner in which recent coverage on Fox News of health care reform seems linked to right-wing political action, or the awakening of political interest in young adults who watch *The Daily Show*, are both examples of the type of public engagement for which professional journalism longs. Whether this engagement fits with our personal political outlook (and in the case of Fox News, whether the political awareness engendered seems only vaguely linked to demonstrable fact), what this nonetheless illustrates is that when we consider the past 25 years, a period which has witnessed traditional print and broadcast outlets haemorrhaging their audiences, there is much to be gained from an academic standpoint in terms of more comprehensive examinations of news alternatives.

In recent years, the journalistic mandate to uncover truth as it grapples with falsehood, through distant analysis, is superseded in many news products by a more involved reportage that focuses on the feeling of truth (see Zelizer, 2009). Accordingly, journalism may be following in the path of other traditionally 'rationalized' fields, such as medicine or law, becoming more amenable to discourses which stress emotional involvement rather than objective dispassion. This parallels the observation in some political science literature, that politics has become a sphere where style now often stands in for substance (see Corner and Pels, 2003). However, one has to be careful about over-applying this idea, something which often seems to occur when emerging news products are dismissed with sweeping charges of tabloidization. 'Truthiness' can be viewed more generally as a figurative description of many emerging forms of news, and was quoted at the beginning of this article, precisely because it implies that 'truth' has currency. The problem, rightly pointed out by many critics, is that journalism suffers when presentation comes to be accentuated more forcefully than information in its pursuit. And belief-driven 'reality' in journalism, as in politics, can have measurably harmful effects, as the post-9/11 culture reminds us time and again. Nonetheless, it is important to consider what allows novel forms of news to appear, Janus-faced, both new and familiar; simultaneously reinventing while staying true to enough of the foundational techniques of journalism to be considered valid news by audiences. When we dismiss emotion, or undertheorize it, we miss these realizations. By considering journalism's emotional side, even when it claims to put emotion aside, we can focus on the subtleties of style that provide the tone, feel, and potential success of the news in an increasingly fragmented, sceptical, and commercialized era.

## Notes

- 1 According to mediabistro.com (Ariens, 2009), which tracks TV ratings, *The O'Reilly Factor* was the top-rated program on cable news in the third quarter of 2009, a position it had held for 106 consecutive months.
- 2 It would be misleading to paint all English-speaking countries with the same brush. As Sampson notes (1999), the British writing style has traditionally been more 'lively' than its American journalistic counterpart. The blurring of boundaries thus takes different forms in the two nations. The commonality is a breaking of the traditional binaries that distinguished hard from soft, quality from populist, or broadsheet from tabloid journalism.
- 3 An exception to this is Baum's (2005) *Soft News Goes to War*.

- 4 This, of course, has changed in recent years with the mainstream media now widely embracing blogs by its reporters.
- 5 ‘Objectivity’ is a useful shorthand, akin to Weber’s analytical construct of ideal types, that captures the historical development of the modernist ideals of journalism – truth, factuality, balance and reality.
- 6 Within academic analyses, the notion of framing increasingly supplants the notion of bias (Josephi, 2005).
- 7 The relative novelty and difficulty of categorizing such programmes is evidenced by the fact that there does not appear to be an established term to describe them. My terminology, ‘cable magazine’, suggests an affinity with news magazines such as *60 Minutes* and *20/20* which have been around for decades; quasi-investigative journalism, typically an hour in length, that consider events in greater detail than the network newscasts. These shows also have a semblance of the Sunday-morning talk show, like *Meet the Press*, with prominent political interviewees and roundtable discussions on politics. A hint of the traditional newscast is found in these broadcasts via reports that are virtually indiscernible from stories that would be filed on the *CBS Evening News*. Political debate shows like *The McLaughlin Group* or *Crossfire* lend their embrace of conflict and volume. There is an occasional flavour of tabloid news magazines such as *A Current Affair* or *Entertainment Tonight*; salacious stories of sex, celebrity, crime, and violence. A more accurate description might be ‘cable political talk-show news magazines’, but this noun-train is an awkward construction. As such, I have conceptualized them quite literally as the print news magazine adapted by the cable networks: short news briefs, longer social stories, interviews, and opinion pieces brought together in a predictable and consistent format.
- 8 It should be noted that a diversity of approaches towards ‘emotion’ exists under the umbrella of the ‘sociology of emotions’ and there is a lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the term (Connor, 2007). While influential accounts like those of Kemper (1978) and Collins (1984) focus more closely on the emotional interaction of the actor within a social system, this article focuses on broader macro-sociological trends.
- 9 Schudson (2001) notes that the dominant objectivity regime practised by the US media, which assumes an emotionally detached posture, is different from the various European styles of journalism.
- 10 A helpful query by a reviewer whether I meant ‘etymology’ rather than ‘epistemology’ indicates that there is potential for terminological confusion. The idea of ‘historical epistemology’, while not widely discussed, has been increasingly addressed by historians of science in recent years.  
 ‘... [It] may be viewed as a branch of the *history of science*, namely one that looks at (a) the histories of epistemic *concepts* (e.g., observation, rationality, probability) or (b) the histories of the objects of scientific inquiry (e.g., heredity, life, gravity) or (c) the *dynamics* of scientific developments, as they can be extracted from an analysis of scientific texts or practices. Typically, proponents of such an approach favor a strong contextualization of scientific knowledge and its development. (Max Plank Institute, 2008)
- 11 The 2004 documentary, *Control Room*, looks at precisely this relationship. What is striking is that although the techniques and feel of the channel is similar to American media, the way they conceptualize their audience’s involvement accounts for vastly different choices in terms of coverage.
- 12 As Auletta (2005) notes in his discussion of the morning news genre, the purpose of *Today’s* ‘Al Roker is not to provide weather reports but to play a character – friendly, jokey – called Al Roker. The weather is beside the point. [*Good Morning America* executive producer Ben] Sherwood says that it is important for the audience to get the feeling “that good things are possible today”.’

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### Biographical note

Chris Peters is Assistant Professor in the Department of Journalism Studies and Media at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. His research specializes in the shifting status of journalistic norms, with a focus on how the distinctions between journalism, politics and entertainment often intermingle and blur. He is currently editing two collections which derive from an expert workshop he hosted: 'Trust, truth and performance: Diverse journalisms in the 21st century'. His most recent project considers the shifting spatial patterns of news consumption.