

11th Cleraun Media Conference
(www.cleraun.com)

Saturday 21st and Sunday 22nd October 2006

Fairness and balance

Rachael English

Presenter, *The Constituencies*, RTÉ Radio One

I'd like to start with a quick word of thanks for the opportunity to address the conference and also the opportunity to think about the issues of fairness and balance.

I suppose like many people who have to grapple with notions of fairness on a day-to-day basis, I sometimes forget about the bigger picture.

Also in common with many people who have come to journalism over the past twenty years, I did a media studies-type course at college – in my particular case, Communication Studies in DCU. Now, you know the scenario - you spend three years overdosing on media and cultural theory. Then you get a job and you become so subsumed by the practicalities that all the theory is quickly forgotten. Indeed, there's a bit of a backlash, you dismiss the book-learning as irrelevant and blame all mistakes on either your own lack of resources or the perceived incompetence of others.

So, it's good every now and again to think about the job we do, and about its impact on others.

There can't be a reporter or a presenter in the land who hasn't at some stage been accused of being biased or unfair. It can be a badge of honour. When I was working on Five Seven Live there was one particular government press officer who rang regularly to complain, and we took it as something of a compliment when he did.

The fact is that such complaints go with the territory. There are some political press officers – thankfully not that many – who feel that balance simply means more airtime for their man or woman. However, if their man or woman is involved in a controversy then they believe balance means not covering the issue at all.

I don't mean to be blasé about complaints. Of course, almost all complaints should be taken seriously. But one person's idea of balance and fairness may not necessarily coincide with another's.

Also I do remember – as I'm sure many of you do - the first time I was summoned by my boss to be told that there was a complaint about something I'd said.

It was quite a while ago. I hadn't been working in journalism that long and I was covering a meeting of Clare County Council. There was a big controversy – so big

that I can't now remember what it was, but I think it was something to do with the Cliffs of Moher.

Anyway, with the diligence that only a new-comer possesses I duly reported what just about every single councillor had to say about the matter. And I said that a couple of councillors, who I named, weren't there for the debate despite the fact that they had dropped in earlier to sign the attendance book. Alas, in my innocence I didn't quite get the significance of this. It meant, of course, that they would be paid their expenses despite only being in the council chamber for a few minutes.

One of the councillors would have been a very well-known figure in the county and he was apoplectic. He believed I had deliberately smeared him, that we were anti his party and, he said, he would never talk to the local radio station again.

He calmed down quickly enough - and of course he was back talking to the radio station a few days later. Now, in the grand scheme of things this was a pretty trivial incident involving a pretty small story. But it was an early introduction to the fact that sometimes being fair to the listener means that there are others, especially politicians, who think that you're being unfair to them.

The themes of fairness and balance have sparked a multitude of books, theses and college courses. But I'll leave that area to somebody else and concentrate, in the main, on my own years of professional experience – and a few weeks of personal reflection.

I would like to say at this point that I would be quite slow to set my own work up as some sort of model of fairness, balance and even-handedness. Like most people sometimes I get it right and sometimes I get it wrong.

I do believe, that despite the popular stereotype of the malign hack, most journalists in this country do their very best to be fair and honest. It also seems to me that in recent times the reporter's job has lost some of its lustre. Columnists and colour writers are the stars of the media world. But I would argue that the people who go out, put in the graft and gather the facts are just as important as the people who ponder the significance of those facts.

I wouldn't claim either that we always get it right. We do get things wrong. All of us. We do interviews that are too soft. We do interviews that are too hard. Sometimes we interview the wrong people because it's too much work to find the right people.

I don't, however, believe that fairness and balance are necessarily the same thing. It would, I think, be hard to find too many people who would profess to be against fairness. But balance can be more problematic. It can be a vital part of a reliable, honest and trustworthy news service. But, in some cases, an artificial balance, a forced balance, can render a programme sterile and can result in flawed journalism. It can end up being unfair to the viewer or listener.

I'll come back to that point shortly. But before I do, I've mentioned programmes and listeners a couple of times because that's where my experience lies. My focus is on broadcasting because that's what I know, especially daily radio programmes.

Unlike newspapers – I suppose I should say unlike newspapers at the moment - broadcasting is governed by a raft of official statutes and guidelines. There have also been several High Court judgements which have implications for the way broadcasters go about their business – especially during election and referendum campaigns. And there’s the Broadcasting Complaints Commission to which viewers and listeners have recourse if they feel that a programme-maker has been in breach of their duty.

But the laws and the guidelines are only part of the picture. And, to be honest, I’ve never believed in making programmes with “Broadcasting Guidelines for RTE Personnel” in one hand and a microphone in the other. You have to ask yourself whether something feels right or sounds right, whether you’ve been fair in allowing a person to have their say or whether there’s another view that should also be heard.

We’ve seen in recent weeks, in the political arena, what can happen when all that matters is the current rule-book. There was something quite strange about hearing politician after politician saying “Well it wasn’t wrong at the time”.

The other reason that I would rather not spend too much time talking about the regulations is that this can lead to a perception of balance and fairness as being all about the stopwatch. The fact is that we all have our biases, our prejudices and our blind spots. We all can be guilty of relying on “received wisdom and not thinking beyond that.

Fairness isn’t just about one view being countered by another. It applies to how we frame debates, the stories we choose and the stories we don’t. It’s about more than how many minutes are allocated to politician A versus how many minutes are allocated to Politician B. It’s also about our own background assumptions.

As a quick example, I’m sure most of you remember the heat that was generated a few years ago when legislation was introduced which would force builders to provide a certain amount of social housing in any new development. It was a controversial idea. But what struck me forcibly at the time was not whether the relevant Minister, Noel Dempsey, was right or whether the building lobby was right, because their disagreement – like so many others - was purely about money. Instead what was really interesting was the way in which the debate tended to be framed.

Listening to that debate, both on and off air, it appeared to me that some journalists had a certain view of “social” housing. That view, at its most simplistic, is that social housing is for people who are “not like us”. It’s for people who are probably a bit feckless and probably have rowdy children - and a car up on blocks.

Now strictly speaking, such assumptions don’t really impinge upon the traditional concept of balance. They are, however, lazy and deeply unfair.

A related question is whether we as journalists always give an honest, fair picture of life throughout the country. I want to make it clear that in raising this issue I don’t intend to question the work of the regional correspondents who, in RTE and elsewhere, work incredibly hard. Again, the metro centric bias of national media everywhere is the sort of subject upon which books and theses get based.

So, just a couple of observations:

The fact is that events which occur in any capital city will always get a disproportionate amount of coverage. And such is the population concentration in Dublin that that it's not surprising that there is such a focus on Dublin's traffic, and housing, and hospitals, and schools, and waste collection and.....the list goes on.

But I wonder if we pay enough attention to the way life has changed and is changing outside the capital city or are we happy to stick with the same old assumptions. As more than one radio listener has e-mailed to say, "There's traffic beyond the M50, you know". In particular do we cling onto the belief that outside the pale is peopled by "gas characters" who are warm and witty but sheltered from 21st century life? Is Dublin, meanwhile, where the serious events occur and real life is lived?

Once again, such assumptions don't impinge upon the traditional concept of balance but, once again, they are lazy and unfair.

As I said at the outset, I'm not sure whether traditional views of balance are always helpful or appropriate. Sometimes it has to be pointed out that things are wrong. There may be another side to the story but it's a pretty flimsy one.

The Belfast-based journalist and film-maker, Michael Beattie, gave some powerful examples of this at the Cleraun conference in 2002. Referring to programmes he had made about the victims of violence, he spoke of the danger of programme-makers interviewing "so many pros and so many antis" and projecting themselves into "some kind of detached moral high ground". He argued that it was OK to be partial.

I think it's hard to argue with that. Sometimes journalists are right to adopt a standpoint. That doesn't mean they're being unfair. Think, for example, of one of the most potent pieces of broadcast journalism in recent years, the Prime Time Investigates programme on the Leas Cross nursing home. It was a programme firmly on the side of the home's residents and their families. Could it have been any other way?

A few years ago on Five Seven Live we did a series of reports and studio interviews on the shambolic state of the juvenile justice system. I know there have been some improvements since, but at the time it seemed to us that the system was riven with problems and injustices. If the state had intended to design a system that turned young offenders into adult offenders it couldn't have done a better job.

In particular, I'll never forget one woman who had had such difficulty trying to get help for her mentally disturbed son that she ended up going to the Gardai and pleading with them to charge him with something so that somebody would intervene.

Now the fact is that all of this was the fault of a series of administrations, not just the government of the day. The reports were not broadcast so that we could launch a personal attack on one particular Minister. However, the relevant Minister didn't see it like that. As I said earlier, a politician complaining about the media is not exactly

uncommon. But this particular episode stood out for me because of the Minister's fury.

I still believe that the reports and interviews were as balanced and fair as they could have been. To have diluted them would have been unfair to the listener and to the children and parents whose stories were covered.

Internationally, there are many examples of where trying too hard to force "balance" on to a story does nobody any favours, especially the viewer or listener. Noel Malcolm in his book, *Bosnia – A Short History*, analyses the way the media treated the Bosnian war of the early 1990s. He is highly critical of reports which suggested that it was a battle between equal forces, the Serbs on the one hand, the Muslims on the other.

In one passage, Malcolm says "The BBC referred constantly to all sides in the conflict as "warring factions"; otherwise it described the war as "a breakdown in law and order". He adds, "On one occasion in late April 1992 when six UN aid trucks were hijacked by Serbian paramilitary forces, the BBC reported that 'efforts to bring aid to the refugees are being hampered by a breakdown in law and order'." He remarks that "this must be the first recorded instance in history of a truck being driven away by a breakdown".

In saying all of this I'm not arguing that balance is unimportant. I'm just saying that it's not always the same thing as fairness, and that being fair should take precedence.

We're probably six or seven months away from a General Election which means that the pressure on journalists to "get it right" will be stepped up. (Talking of the election, I've just started doing a series of pre-election programmes and I met a Fianna Fail man in Cork last week who recommended that I put a bet on May the 17th being the election date, so I'm passing on the tip).

There's this old radio cliché that you should think of presenting a programme as talking to one person. I've always thought that, as clichés go, it's not a bad one. And when I was presenting *Five Seven Live* I always thought of that listener as being somebody driving home from a hard day's work in a factory in the Industrial Estate in Shannon.

What would they want to hear? Who would they want to hear? Are they getting the entire story?

As I said at the start, coming here today to do this made me do a bit of thinking about fairness and about balance. And I came to the conclusion that the best way to operate is the simplest – it's to think about the person who's going to be listening to or viewing or reading your work.

I think above all else they're the people we should try to treat fairly.

Ends.