

## **Project to Reduce Sensationalism in the Media**

### **Impact of the Media**

Michael Moore in his documentary “Bowling for Columbine” explored the issues on why the United States has a high level of murder from guns – socio-economics, unemployment, the extent of gun ownership, youth education of guns, easy access to guns and the media attention and portrayal of incidences with guns. He concluded that the only significant factor was the media, which actively sought out gun incidences especially focussing on young, black men. He noted that there was a vicious cycle of raised fear and retaliation that lead to changes in reality. While his account was unscientific and biased, it gave pause for thought.

The media claims that it follows the news or investigates irregularities. However in many case the media leads the news or contorts the news, and in so doing changes the culture. It can manipulate its reporting of information to create a culture of fear, anger, prejudice, nationalism – and occasionally some of the finer human emotions of sympathy, understanding and kindness.

### **Sources of Bias**

There is an ongoing trend for news to be more sensational, and the news media to create news on shallow and biased information. In particular the treatment of politicians is unprofessional – they are asked leading questions which often focus on loss of face, are denied the opportunity to present their point of view, are cut off in mid sentence, and spoken to with a rudeness that would be unacceptable in any other forum. Is it any wonder that the perceived integrity of politicians has fallen?

The media influences cultures through its choice of news articles, how these are presented, the headlines and the priority given to certain types of news.

Often the news is presented but the headlines and opening sentences present a lopsided view of the news. These are skills that are trained into journalists to find an angle and present human interest, however used excessively this is an abuse of the power of the media.

This proposal seeks to improve accuracy in the media, and to reduce its negative impact on society. It focuses on measures of the headlines and opening sentences as a measure of accuracy.

### **The Power of Measures**

You get what you measure! When measures are introduced resources, effort and focus invisibly swing to improve the measure. When the iron curtain lifted, the Russians sought the advice of the American Environmental Protection Agency on how to reduce Russia’s serious pollution. The advice was simple. “Require emission standards to be kept and published monthly in the local newspaper. Encourage active, non governmental organisation watchdogs. Then stand back – such is the power of measurement that a remarkable dynamic will occur.”

The Qantas Media Awards is a powerful form of measurement recognising investigative journalism amongst other qualities. I am suggesting that the media also needs a publicly available measure that will influence it to become a more responsible fourth estate.

## **Measures of Accuracy**

A colleague of mine completed his PhD in linguistics. His thesis was on the inaccuracies that were introduced into the media through bias. He assumed that all information that came “down the wire” was accurate and then edited. Clearly this is not a correct assumption however it gave him a base line to measure the editorial changes that were made to the article. Using linguistic tools he demonstrated that articles that came from the UK, USA and Australia were little changed, those from the Soviet Union were distorted and those from third world countries were so twisted they contorted the original meaning of the writing.

I have thought for many years about a measure that could be readily applied that would measure the accuracy of the media, and which could be released as a league table. I understand that 80% of people only read the first two lines of an article. A similar percentage only hears the radio news headlines, and not the radio interviews that gave rise to those headlines.

What if a measure was developed that compared the bulk of the article with the key ideas expressed in the headline and first two sentences? A similar process can be used to compare the radio interview with the radio headlines.

The comparison could be made using linguistic tools or a Delphi process with a group of experts. The process would be done on a random date and repeated every six months.

This measure would not take account of many other editorial decisions such as whom to interview, the quality of the interview, or what to publish. But it would tackle the abuse of media power to sensationalise and manipulate.

## **Our Project**

We are working on creating a viable evaluation of the accuracy of the media to produce a league table. We expect the high performing media to publish the results.