

Be Your Own Investigative Journalist

by John Kuti

News in the age of information

We are often told that the age of the “information economy” has arrived. The idea is that intellectual work is becoming a more important source of wealth than manufacturing. There are already too many factories for the number of people who want to buy stuff, so the winners in the marketplace need to have a lead in terms of fashion, or technology to beat the competition. You can easily see this process at work in important industries like cars and clothing and computers where big companies prefer to concentrate on promoting their brand and let subcontractors do the less profitable work of manufacturing the products.

But there is a problem with information as an organising principle in society. It only counts if people pay attention to it. Together with inventors and designers, the information economy needs Public Relations executives to make sure customers are getting the right message. So, faced with the increasing claims on our attention, organisations in other spheres of life have to do more to get their share of it too. So PR people may work for politicians (then we call them “spin doctors”) or they may work for artists (then we call them “publicists” or “pluggers”). A lot of our news is actually compiled from press releases and reports of events deliberately staged for journalists. Journalists spend their time, not investigating, but passing on the words of a spokesperson, publicist or other professional propagandist.

Quoting from Evelyn Waugh

The manipulation of news is most clearly visible in times of war. A BBC journalist speaking about the present war in Iraq compared his situation with that of the reporters in *Scoop*, Waugh’s satirical novel on the press. In the book, everyone was sure that the real story was happening somewhere else...but they weren’t exactly sure how to get there. Nowadays, the journalist who arrives in the right place at the right time is almost guaranteed a world exclusive. Armed with digital cameras and satellite phones, they can file their story on the spot. Which is why the military control the movements of journalists ever more closely.

Don’t believe everything you read in the papers

The best joke in *Scoop* is about the newspaper’s owner, Lord Copper. The editors can never disagree with him. When he’s right about something they answer “definitely”, and when he’s wrong they say “up to a point, Lord Copper.” It seems reasonable to suppose that, in the real world, the opinions of such powerful tycoons still influence the journalists and editors who work for them.

Info-tainment

In countries where the news is not officially controlled, it is likely to be provided by commercial organisations who depend on advertising. The news has to attract viewers and maintain its audience ratings. I suspect that some stories get air-time just because there happen to be exciting pictures to show. In Britain, we have the tabloid newspapers which millions of people read simply for entertainment, without even expecting to get any important information from them. I think this is why politicians’ speeches nowadays have to include a “sound bite” the small segment that seems to give a powerful message. There is progressively less room for historical background, or statistics, which are harder to present as a sensational story. The arrival of CNN, the 24-hour all-news channel, has not increased the amount of real news reporting because the format of the channel is designed so that people who want to get the headlines will not have to wait long. It tends to concentrate on the main story and repeat it.

Alternative reporters

There is an argument that with spreading access to the internet and cheap technology for recording sound and images we will all be able to find exactly the information we want. People around the world will be able to publish their own eye-witness accounts and compete with the established news-gatherers on something like equal terms.

I think this is true, up to a point. But what it will mean also is that we’ll be subjected to a still greater amount of nonsense and lies. Any web log may contain the scoop of the year, or equally, a fabricated story that you will never be able to check.

Have you ever wished you were better informed?

Maybe the time has come to do something about it, and I don't just mean changing your choice of TV channel or newspaper. In a world where everyone wants you to listen to their version, you only have two choices: switch off altogether or start looking for sources you can trust. The investigative journalist of the future is everyone who wants to know the truth.

Glossary

armed with (adj): equipped with, carrying.

audience ratings (n): the measure of the number of people who watch or listen to a programme on TV or radio.

claim (n): demand, asking for something that you think you have a right to.

compile (v): to put together.

definitely (adv): certainly, of course.

eye-witness (n): a person who sees something happening with their own eyes.

fabricated (adj): invented, untrue, made-up.

news-gatherer (n): a person or organisation that collects news information.

scoop (n): an exclusive story that only one journalist knows about.

source (n): the origin, the place where something comes from.

subcontractors (n): people who carry out part of a job for the person who sells the finished product.

tycoon (n): a successful business person who owns a number of different companies.

web log (n): a diary which is regularly published on the internet. Often shortened to "blog".

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