

JOURNALISTIC NARRATIVE, OBJECTIVITY AND TRUTH

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Abstract

Studies on journalistic objectivity usually focus on the content of a news report to gauge the fairness quotient. However, the way a news report is structured thereby privileging a person, the source or event over others can be an equally interesting way of looking at the objectivity debate. Through a close textual analysis of reports considering the death of a militant belonging to the banned United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in four major newspapers published in Assam, this article tries to find inherent biases that are apparent in objectively-constructed journalistic narratives. A comparative reading of the reports make it clear that however hard, one tries to provide a balanced, objective narrative by weaving together different strands and voices, one cannot ensure the presentation of a holistic truth of an event, where accountability is distributed equally to the participating actors.

Key Words: Conflict Reporting; Journalistic Narrative; Journalistic Objectivity; News Structure; Newspapers from Assam; ULFA Insurgency

Introduction

Objectivity is a much-debated value that makes journalism distinct from advertisement, public relations, and propaganda. Studies on journalistic objectivity usually focus on the content of a news report to gauge the fairness quotient. However, the way a news report is structured—through space (in terms of word counts/paragraphs) and position (upfront, middle or bottom of the report) given

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to different aspects of an event or an issue as well as to the voices representing different stakeholders—can equally be an interesting way of looking at the objectivity debate. Taking Sandrine Boudana's (2009) definition of narrative "voices" as a starting point, this article looks at the structural treatment as well as the treatment of actors and voices in the news reports of the death of a militant leader, belonging to the banned United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), by four daily newspapers published from the Northeast Indian state of Assam.

ULFA Insurgency in Assam and the Role of Media

Arguing that Assam was an independent territory before its annexation to the British Empire in 1826, separatist group ULFA has involved in an armed struggle with the Indian state since 1979. The state has responded to the insurgency situation with military actions. Over 12,000 people have lost their lives in this protracted conflict, but a solution is yet to be found (Khanikar, 2018; Mahanta, 2013).

The government launched a military operation against ULFA for the first time in November 1990 for four months and again in the summer of the next year. As the intensity of army operations increased, a section of the outfit expressed willingness to begin negotiations with the government while its military wing, led by Commander-in-Chief Paresh Baruah and his deputy Officer Hirakjyoti Mahanta, refused to budge. By the end of the year 1991, the government succeeded in arresting several top ULFA leaders and killed Mahanta. The outfit split into two factions following Mahanta's death and the orgy of violence continued in the state until several top ULFA leaders, including the chairman, were apprehended in Bangladesh and handed over to the Indian authorities in 2009. These leaders have been holding talks with the government of India officials since then, while a small group led by Baruah continued to indulge in criminal activities like kidnapping and extortion in the state.

ULFA reportedly killed nearly 100 people during 1985-1990, but only the high-profile assassinations of businessmen, politicians and police officers got publicity (Bhaumik, 2009). However, in the initial stage, ULFA's 'reformist' agenda of punishing corrupt officers, eve teasers, country liquor vendors, petty criminals etc, had garnered public support. It also used the government's agriculture-related projects to secure its base in the villages. Local reporters of Assamese newspapers happily reported these events (Dutta, 2008). ULFA's criminal activities were reported, often the official versions, but hardly commented upon. In July 1991, the outfit

issued a diktat banning publication of any news about it without its written permission, warning that violation would attract death penalty. The gag order effectively ended the free publicity it was enjoying. ULFA's relationship with the press deteriorated further after it killed journalist Kamala Saikia soon after. But a section of the press continued to give tacit support to the ULFA's ideology and actions while highlighting alleged state atrocities during the army operations. However, as more and more innocents started losing lives in mindless violence, the public's and the media's sympathy towards the outfit dwindled too.

The Notion of Objectivity in Journalistic Practices

The origin of objectivity as a journalistic value can be traced to the idea of non-partisanship, or avoidance of leaning towards any particular political force, practiced by the American Penny Press in the 1830s. But the exercise of objectivity through a conscious effort of representing both sides of a story and keeping the editorial opinion out of a news report was adopted widely in America only a century later following the mushrooming of public relations agents. Reliance on fact and striving for balanced representation became the hallmark of news. Major British news organisations including Reuters and BBC too started following these practices, though newspapers in Britain and France were not shy of showing their political inclinations or literary ambitions (Hampton, 2008; Schudson, 2001). However, when confronted with ethical dilemmas created by situations like the Vietnam war and the Watergate scandal—when the version or justification put by one side of the story is blatantly against the obvious truth—some journalists started expressing their frustration at having to place both sides of the story and even advocated a subjective interpretation of events (O'Neill, 1992).

The first Assamese newspaper *Arunodoi* was published by the American Baptist missionaries in 1846 and modern Assamese journalism post-Independence has been following the western journalistic values of objectivity, though there have been occasional allegations against them of displaying chauvinistic biases (Dutta, 2008; Hussain, 1993). But in the light of growing accusations of rape and murder of innocent civilians against army soldiers in the early 1990s, many Assamese journalists started experimenting with interpretative and subjective forms of journalism, especially in newly-launched weeklies like *Sadin* and *Boodhbar*.

Objectivity is not just a journalistic value, it is also a tool employed

to avoid biasness. Robert Entman (2007) considers three types of biases: ‘distortion bias’, referring to ‘news that purportedly distorts or falsifies reality’; ‘content bias’, constituted by ‘news that favor one side rather than providing equivalent treatment to both sides in a political conflict’, and ‘decision-making bias’ which considers ‘the motivations and mindsets of journalists who allegedly produce the biased content’ (163). Sometimes even an attempt to achieve balance may end up in the bias. The history of its evolution shows that objectivity cannot be achieved from a position of neutrality or by the artificial balancing of actions of all the players or their voices constituting a narrative. If an event and its actors have more negative elements, artificial balancing leads to unfair reporting, leaving status quo unchallenged.

In fact, the so-called impartiality or neutrality has been denounced as a mere strategic ritual deployed by journalists to reduce occupational hazards. Boudana (2016) notes that “by showing impartiality and by referring to credible sources, journalists can produce unobjectionable news and can meet deadlines, thus coping with what are essentially economic constraints: expenses entailed by delays and costs of lawsuits in cases of offensive journalistic stories” (8).

Journalists and newspapers claim to give fair treatment to all actors or “voices” that constitutes a narrative. “Voices”, according to Boudana (2009), are the direct participants in a story, or external observers expressing their opinion and engaging in the construction of the journalistic account. The voices animate the story by expressing their feelings or ideological positions, in reaction to a given event reported by the journalist. Fair treatment of a narrative and its constitutive actors require pitting their actions and voices against some universal moral benchmarks, not artificial balancing of their positions. The present study investigates to what extent newspapers in Assam followed the principle of fair treatment of all actors and voices in the formation of a narrative.

Research Questions and Methodology:

The following research questions have been framed for the study:

1. To what extent can the principles of objectivity be seen in the treatment of actors and voices involved in the construction of a narrative?

2. To what extent can the principles of objectivity be seen in the construction of a news report in terms of space (number of words /

paragraphs) and position (upfront, middle or bottom of the report) given to different aspects of an event or an issue as well as to the voices representing different stakeholders?

The method of this analysis is modelled on the one adopted by Boudana (2016) who in turn relied on participatory analysis model developed by William Labov. According to Labov (1997), “[I]n accounts of conflict between human actors, or the struggle of human actors against natural forces, the narrator and the audience inevitably assign praise and blame to the actors for the actions involved” (401). Narrative may thus be ‘polarising’ when some protagonists are blamed and others are supported, or ‘integrating’ when blame is passed over. Whether a news report is polarising or fair in its treatment can be ascertained from the words used to describe the actors and their actions. The fairness quotient can also be evaluated by considering factors such as criteria for voice selection, any distortion of arguments of a voice, bias towards any voice, etc.

All narratives have certain structural elements that are integral to the building of the story. News reports too are no exception to this rule. Usually, the inverted pyramid structure of a news report has the most important news elements or the significance of the event in the beginning, the supporting information or the details of how the event unfolded in the middle, and the important background information to make sense of the event in the end. Thus the politics of a news report or a newspaper can be ascertained by the selection and placement of details of an event into structural blocks. The structural treatment of a news event offers insight into the application of objectivity as a journalistic norm.

For the present study, news reports published in four leading newspapers of Assam—two in Assamese language (*Dainik Asam*, *Ajir Asam*) and two in English (*The Assam Tribune*, *The Sentinel*)—have been considered for analysis. I have started with the assumption that each report will have a beginning, middle, and an end. Such a structural categorisation can be observed through an examination of the organisation of information as well as a shift in tones within the narrative.

Analysis of Journalistic Narratives

ULFA’s deputy Commander in Chief Hirakjyoti Mahanta was believed to be against any kind of negotiations with the government except on the issue of the sovereignty of Assam. He was picked up from a

house in Guwahati, where he was taking shelter along with two other ULFA members, and was killed on the night of December 31, 1991. Two other top ULFA leaders Siddhartha Phukan and Sailen Dutta Konwar were also arrested earlier in the day. All the newspapers of Assam carried the news prominently as their lead story on the front page on January 2, 1992.

Structural Treatment

While the news gets prominent display in all the newspapers, they differed from each other in the arrangement of information into structural blocks. While most newspapers started with the developments of December 31—the arrest of ULFA leaders followed by Mahanta’s death— *The Sentinel* report began with details of his last rites on January 1. The length and placement of other details too varied. *The Assam Tribune* and *Dainik Asom* published at length the eyewitness accounts while *The Sentinel* relied on the comments of the deceased’s relatives. All the newspapers carried the official version of the event, but their placements in the story structure vary. *The Assam Tribune* positioned the official version ahead of the accounts of relatives and eyewitnesses, but *The Sentinel* and *Dainik Asom* placed the official version towards the second half of the report. *Ajir Asom* reported only the official account. *Dainik Asom* skipped the unlawful activities that Mahanta was allegedly involved in, *The Assam Tribune* published these towards the end of the report while *The Sentinel* and *Ajir Asom* situated them in the middle along with other details that the government spokesperson provided.

Table 1: Arrangement of information into structural blocks

	<i>Assam Tribune</i>	<i>The Sentinel</i>	<i>Dainik Asom</i>	<i>Ajir Asom</i>
First block	13 paragraphs Topics: death of Mahanta and arrests of other ULFA leaders; accounts of the government spokesperson and the deceased’s close relatives	6 paragraphs Topics: the last rites of the deceased	3 paragraphs Topics: “custodial” death of Mahanta and arrest of other ULFA leaders	7 paragraphs Topics: death of Mahanta and arrests of other ULFA leaders, citing government sources

Middle block	10 paragraphs Topics: Circumstances leading to Mahanta's death using eyewitness account	5 paragraphs Topics: On Mahanta's past, with details drawn from an unidentified relative	7 paragraphs Topics: Events leading to Mahanta's death using eyewitness accounts	2 paragraphs Topics: On Mahanta and other militants' involvement in various unlawful activities
Closing block	4 paragraphs Topics: Describes Mahanta's life as a student and a militant.	6 paragraphs Topics: Events leading to Mahanta's death quoting official sources, his academic records and condemnation of the killing by AJYCP	7 paragraphs Topics: Official version of the events and details on Mahanta's life as an 'ULFA activist' and a student.	7 paragraphs Topics: Last rites of the deceased, his father's comment, Mahanta's academic background and wound marks on the dead body.

It can be argued that *The Assam Tribune* gave the least importance to the ULFA leader's involvement in several crimes by placing these details at the bottom of the report. But it may also be argued that these details are well-known to the public and, therefore, do not deserve a place upfront in the story. What the reader looked forward to — in an age of no 24x7 electronic media in Assam— was the information on the latest development of an event and details on how it unfolded. The structure of *The Assam Tribune* report can be defended from such a perspective.

The Sentinel, on the other hand, used the traditional inverted pyramid structure of news by placing the developments of January 1— details on the last rites of the deceased and the comments of his father and relative—ahead of what had happened on the night of December 31. The relegation of the preceding night's development — what it chooses to call “yesterday's drama”—to the second half of the copy, however, turns the spotlight away from the circumstances under which the custodial death happened. The comments from the deceased's relative enriched the narrative, but denial of adequate space to eyewitness accounts and absence of counter-versions of the official narrative disturbed the balance of the report.

In contrast, *Dainik Asam's* report foregrounded the dramatic

elements by giving a detailed eyewitness account of the events leading to Mahanta's arrest, followed by the official version. It gave the details of the last rites and Mahanta's alleged unlawful activities a miss. However, the report incorporated a statement from a leading students' body in the state, AJYCP (Asam Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad), criticising the killing amid initiatives for peace talks. This is the only report under the study that brought to notice the issue of violence amid a peace initiative. *Dainik Asam's* report is flawed in terms of its failure to record the negative traits of the protagonist as well as counter-versions, but it also brought a unique perspective to the story, which is, the threat to peace efforts.

The *Ajir Asam* report appears to be the least structurally balanced narrative as maximum space is allotted to the official version of the event. Though it is deficient in terms of the context and character sketches in its report.

Treatment of Content

1. *Treatment of Actors:*

The most important actors in this event are Hirakjyoti Mahanta and his two companions, the lady in whose house they took shelter and the army personnel. Mahanta is undoubtedly the protagonist around which *The Assam Tribune's* narrative takes its shape. ULFA has been defined in relation to him and the jolt it received—"a crushing blow"—has also been linked with the leader's "tryst with destiny". ULFA has been described as "extremist", and by implication, Mahanta too is an extremist, or a militant, but nowhere in the copy has he been called so though he was "allegedly involved in the murders" of several people. The first paragraph introduces him as deputy Commander-in-Chief of ULFA, while the second last paragraph of this report, comprising 26 paragraphs, says that he was "considered to be a hardliner" and had opposed to talks. The report lists a number of cases in which he was said to have been involved, but before that, it describes Mahanta as an "academically brilliant" student who had studied Chemistry in a Guwahati college.

Apart from the staff reporter's interventions, the characterization is achieved also through the description of Mahanta's actions by other actors and voices. There are two major voices — of a government spokesperson and an eyewitness—in the copy. The spokesperson presents Mahanta as a hardcore militant who, when untied by the army personnel to allow him to reveal the area with suspected arms,

ordered the men in the hideout to open fire on the army. He was claimed to have been injured in the exchange of fire that followed and died on the way to the hospital.

The eyewitness, in whose house Mahanta took shelter, portrays him not as a dreaded militant, but as a responsible leader “who took out weapons but did not fire”, thus avoiding any potential injury to innocent civilians. She continued with her routine work and watched TV, which implied that she did not feel unsafe or threatened by the presence of the militants, and probably even enjoyed the “relaxed atmosphere”—in the reporter’s words—till the army personnel entered the premises. In contrast, the soldiers fired through the window despite being told that there were children inside.

Unlike *The Assam Tribune* report, *The Sentinel* is silent on the impact of Mahanta’s death on ULFA. The fact that he was a top leader, and probably a popular one, is indicated by the presence of a “sizable crowd” both at the hospital (where the body was kept) and the crematorium ground. *The Sentinel* too refrains from calling Mahanta a militant or an extremist, and instead lists two instances when he was “involved in unlawful activities”, including the killing of a bank manager. This is however overshadowed by the positive sketches of other supporting voices.

The report incorporates details given by a relative who said that Mahanta, “a no-compromise man”, was proficient in martial arts and took training in guerilla warfare in Myanmar. He had missed the first division in his higher secondary examinations by a few marks and later graduated with an Honours in Chemistry, according to the relative. Mahanta did not take part in Assam Agitation—a six-year-long, student-led movement demanding the deportation of foreigners from the state—saying, such “agitations achieved nothing and that something else had to be done”, the relative added. His father said that when he tried to dissuade Mahanta from joining the movement, the latter told him that he should consider one of his three sons as given over to the “cause of Assam”.

These details portray the image of a young man who was reasonably good at studies and therefore could have settled for a secure life. He was probably disillusioned by the failure of a six-year-long mass movement in fulfilling the aspirations of the people, and therefore opted for an armed struggle. On the fateful day, when cornered by army personnel, Mahanta and his colleagues refrained from shooting in self-defense due to the presence of unarmed civilians in the vicinity. What is remarkable in this portrait of a young man as an armed rebel is the absence of any direct comment on the action

of the protagonist by the reporter-narrator. Instead, the character sketched has been achieved through the other voices' description of the militant leader.

Dainik Asam relied mostly on the eyewitness account of the lady in whose house the ULFA members were hiding. A sister publication of *The Assam Tribune*, it is not surprising that the narration of the details of the circumstances under which Mahanta was arrested and killed is similar in both the newspapers, so is the image of the slain man manifested in those details. Of the four newspapers, only *Dainik Asam* notes the physical feature of Mahanta. He was "tall and handsome, with a sharp nose", recounted the eyewitness. The report notes his academic achievements but ignores the list of crimes in which he was allegedly involved. It says that he was one of the topmost ULFA leaders killed in army operations and was earlier released from the prison in exchange for a kidnapped official of the Guwahati oil refinery.

Ajir Asam is the only newspaper to rely completely on the government version of the events. In this version, Mahanta is a hardened criminal involved in several cases of murder and dacoity. It reported that Mahanta was apprehended by the army from a house in Guwahati and was later wounded in firing when he tried to run away. The report also quoted his father, who reportedly tried to persuade him several times to leave the path of violence.

2. Selection and Treatment of Voices:

The Assam Tribune's narrative has voices covering both sides of the story. The official version of the event comes ahead of the other versions (of Mahanta's relatives and the host), but what sets the tone of the narrative is the reporter-narrator's evaluation of the event and the main protagonist through the use of adjectives—a "crushing blow to ULFA" and the "biggest success for Army". According to the government spokesperson, Mahanta got injured in the exchange of fire between the security personnel and ULFA in a hideout, and died on the way to the hospital. There was no explanation of how and why professional soldiers could allow an unarmed militant in their custody to come in the line of fire. The reporter-narrator saw through this weak defense and said that Mahanta's death "took place under tragic circumstances after he had surrendered to the Army". This observation was placed ahead of the government spokesperson's description of the event as to prepare the reader to take the official version with a pinch of salt.

The official version was countered by the deceased's father RP

Mahanta, who alleged that the army killed his son after he had surrendered. It was followed by a detailed version from the deceased's uncle and a member of the state legislative assembly, Chittaranjan Patowary, who alleged that Mahanta was "brutally killed in the Army camp after his surrender". Patowary said that he saw about six bullet marks and innumerable bayonet wounds in the leg of the dead body besides gunshot marks on the forehead and the back of the head.

The other important voice in *The Assam Tribune* report is that of the young lady in whose house the militants were hiding. Unlike the other voices mentioned above, she had no reason to fill her account with prejudice as she was in no way related to the deceased or to the government, nor was she aware of Mahanta's complete identity apart from probably the fact that he was part of a banned militant outfit. And therefore, the voice of this eyewitness is most crucial to establishing the credibility of the report. Her account shows that the three men who forced their way into her house around noon, had a meal there, but maintained a "relaxed atmosphere" till the army personnel started knocking at the door at around 7 pm. The ULFA members put off the lights and took out their weapons but did not engage in firing, she said. They were tied and blindfolded by the army personnel immediately after their surrender and were taken away. Mahanta, a prized catch, was found dead in custody a few hours later, thus raising a question on the functioning of the security apparatus. The reporter, through the use of eyewitness account, offers a version that is contrary to the one sought to be reinforced by the official establishment. It conveys to the readers that the militants were intruders, but not irresponsible and that the violence was initiated by the army personnel. The details of atrocities given by Mahanta's uncle too reinforce the reporter-narrator's message.

The other three newspapers also gave varied importance to different voices. *Ajir Asam* gives almost the entire space to the official version and only a paragraph each towards the end of the story for the deceased's father and a witness who saw bullet marks in Mahanta's body. *Dainik Asam* gives the least prominence to the official version, relying instead on eyewitness accounts. *The Sentinel* skips the eyewitness account and instead, extensively uses the voices of the deceased's kin and relative throughout the report.

Conclusion

The headlines and layouts of the newspapers under study at first glance, fail to give the impression of any obvious bias towards any particular actor involved in the event. Newspapers cater to a large

base of readers from diverse backgrounds and hence would not hazard displeasing any constituent by showing obvious partisanship. However, a comparative analysis of coverage of a single event in different newspapers shows interesting variations in the treatment of actors and voices while constructing a narrative. While most newspapers look for more voices apart from the official one to form a narrative, the choices of the voices and their location in the story shape the details that are made available to the readers.

The Assam Tribune report appears to be the most balanced as the voices it selects offer both sides of the story. But behind this “balanced” narrative is a reporter-narrator who prepares the readers for the “tragic circumstances” under which the militant is killed and highlights the significance of the “crushing blow” to the ULFA. *The Sentinel’s* treatment of the voices on the other hand, does not offer any direct comment on the “drama” or the main actor, but through the juxtaposition of different voices, it helps the readers form their own opinion. The inherent biases in the reports in *Ajir Asom* (only the official version) and *Dainik Asom* (passing mention of the government version at the bottom of the copy) becomes obvious when the reports of all the newspapers are read together and compared with each other. A close scrutiny of the construction of these narratives makes it clear that however hard one tries to provide a balanced, objective narrative by weaving together different strands and voices, one cannot ensure the presentation/presence of the complete truth of an event, where accountability is distributed equally to the participant actors. In the absence of complete objectivity in the record of an event, it is for the readers to exercise caution and understand that there may be nuances and contours of an incident that one newspaper may not be able to or will not capture.

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