PERSONALISATION IN CURRENT AFFAIRS JOURNALISM

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Abstract

This article investigates the use of personalisation in British current affairs programming. Arguing that criticism of personalisation in television journalism has tended to take its cue from problems with the human interest *story* in the popular press, it proposes that finer discrimination is required to evaluate degrees of compatibility between modes of personalisation and the knowledge-forming objectives of current affairs journalism. Querying assumptions that knowledge formation inevitably necessitates abstraction, universality, and avoidance of the personal, it explores instead how the personal can be variously deployed in ways that enable as well as impede logical analysis. Examples from programmes are provided to demonstrate both the drawbacks and the potential advantages of specific forms of integrating personalisation. Through a discussion of testimony, the use of case studies, and a human interest approach to investigative journalism, evidence is provided that personalisation can, under particular circumstances, be successfully allied with breadth of exploration of the issues, openness of perspective, and attention to the politically provocative aspects of the personal.

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Immediately you have analysis, you lose audience.

(unidentified British television current affairs producer, cited in Tunstall 1993, 62)

In October 1993, Alan Yentob, then controller of BBC1, declared "it's a tricky area, this area of marrying issues with human interest, human stories, the stories of people's lives, . . . but . . . if you do it properly and effectively it makes for good journalism." He was responding, on a BBC *Biteback* programme, to claims that a recent edition of *Panorama* had been guilty of shoddy journalism by generalising unfairly from particular cases[1]. Yentob's "tricky area" was soon to attract charges of "tabloidisation" and "dumbing down," neologisms which in their very discordancy evoke the intensity of the British chattering classes' disdain. Much of the anxiety around these has centred on a belief that "human interest" and informational journalism are incompatible. Yet, as Yentob's own sliding scale of terms suggests, critics are often unsure what precisely they mean by "human interest," especially in television journalistic practice. Arguably, the legacy of critical thinking about the human interest *story* in British tabloid newspapers has inhibited a fuller review of what human interest might mean, particularly in the move from newspapers to television. By focusing on forms of personalisation in mainstream current affairs programmes on British television, this article attempts to explore the variety of its modes of articulation and integration into the structure of programming, in order to assess the conditions under which it might, or might not, be reconciled with "good journalism."

A Genealogy of Critical Concern

In 1980s' Britain, worries about a loss of quality in media output mainly bypassed current affairs programming, and attached themselves to the tabloid press. The human interest story drew much of the criticism for being trivial, de-contextualised and incapable of producing knowledge about the operation of social or political structures. Although its ideological operation as an entertaining narrative form attracted more ambivalent commentary (see, for example, Curran *et al.* 1980; Curran and Sparks 1991), it fell foul of the Habermasian ideal of rational critical debate established in academic literature as the necessary foundation for knowledge-forming journalism. Judgement of the particular genre of the tabloid human interest story infected broader evaluation of forms of personalisation in journalism. Critics argued that public affairs coverage in the popular press was not merely in decline; it was changing in character by becoming "more personalised and less contextualised ... . This process of personalisation — with all the distortion and trivialisation that it implies — has become a recognised and approved strategy for building circulation. The result is that coverage of public affairs has increasingly been reduced to the level of human-interest stories" (Curran *et al.* 1980, 303). Even this early, personalisation was being seen as ineluctably drawn into the mould of the human interest story.

Similar forms of criticism continue into the 1990s in relation to the popular press, and subsequently spread to worries about "tabloidisation" in the broadsheet papers and in television journalism. Colin Sparks echoes earlier concerns in commenting on the depoliticisation of the popular press: "the popular conception of the personal becomes the explanatory framework within which the social order is presented as transparent" (1992, 39). This discourse of personalisation slotted neatly into a wider

paradigm of residual Enlightenment thinking with its valorisation of rationality over emotion; of abstraction over experience; and of public over private. The lineage can also be traced through the Habermasian idealisation of the public sphere. This genealogy has shaped thinking about informational journalism, gaining apparent support from the structure of a British press that — until recently — could be argued to fit neatly into the contrasting value structure:

(broadsheet papers)	*(tabloid papers)*
abstract	experiential
rational	emotional
analytical	intuitive
universal	contingent

Current affairs journalism in Britain was assumed, too, to belong unquestionably to the left-hand column. The human-interest story in the tabloid press, by contrast, epitomised the analytical limitations of the personal, despite Arthur Christiansen's alleged claim[2] that "there is no subject, no abstract thing, that cannot be translated into terms of people" (Williams 1957, 221). Colin Sparks argues that since "the nature of the social totality is neither constituted through immediate individual experience nor entirely comprehensible in its terms … . Critical thought must … necessarily involve the processes of abstraction even if the critical impulse itself is ultimately grounded in immediate experience" (1992, 41). Jostein Gripsrud similarly observes that the popular press's "melodramatic understanding" is inadequate to deal with the "abstract phenomenon" that is modern society (Gripsrud 1992, 91).

These criticisms make evident sense in relation to the human interest story, but their appropriateness as more general evaluations of personalisation in informational journalism in all its manifestations cannot be assumed. Neither Sparks nor Gripsrud advances such generalised claims, but the conceptual framework of this discourse has informed the anxiety now seeping into the analysis of perceived changes in orientation and presentational style in both broadsheet journalism and current affairs programming on television (see, for example, Sampson 1996; Franklin 1997). Downmarket drift in the broadsheet papers is, these critics allege, visible both in a decline in investigative, parliamentary and foreign reporting, and in the development of a more fragmentary and conversational style. The contingent and the experiential are replacing analysis and rational exposition, as the spectre of the human interest story appears once more: "foreign correspondents — those that remain — are discouraged from serious analysis … . They are continually encouraged to write human interest stories, like novelists manqué, which may be quite entertaining, but which assume that there is more serious explanation of critical events somewhere else — which there usually isn't" (Sampson 1996, 45-6). Evoking the human interest *story*, as generically shaped by the tabloid press, is misplaced in this context, but leads inevitably to a conclusion that "serious explanation" and analysis cannot be combined with any emphasis on the personal. What needs to be asked, however, is whether there are *ever* circumstances where the movement towards the personal can *enable* analysis and evaluation. Although Franklin, like Sampson, focuses primarily on changes in broadsheet journalism, he is equally dismissive of the possibility that any democratising or enlightening effects could result from broadcasters' search for more popular markets.

Despite the continuing dominance of the rational-critical paradigm in academic debate about informational journalism, an alternative perspective has been gaining

ground. Surfacing in the 1990s, it too has a longer, if more fragmented, pedigree.[3] Arguing that studies of audience understanding and recollection of news bulletins suggest that the knowledge-forming aspects of "serious" journalism are at best only partially effective, this approach proposes instead that informational journalism should be regarded as a form of "cultural discourse" (Dahlgren 1988, 289; Langer 1998). Peter Dahlgren goes as far as to suggest that television is ill-adapted as a medium for analytical productivity: "even with the best of intentions, the technology of television and its modes of representation make it unsuitable for conveying abstract, or analytical information." Its strength lies elsewhere: "television is exceptional in its ability to mobilise affective involvement and convey the amorphous entity called implicit social knowledge" (1995, 58, 59). Although this might appear to be merely reversing the value-system of the Enlightenment paradigm, Dahlgren invites a review of the structural opposition on which it is based, rewriting John Corner's duality of the "public knowledge" and "popular culture" projects of television (Corner 1991) as "popular knowledge" and "public culture" (Dahlgren 1995, 39). He argues, for example, that the communities of interest that popular papers form may have little to do with a Habermasian conceptualisation of the polity, but function nevertheless as important means of encouraging the development of "shared interpretive frameworks" (Dahlgren and Sparks 1991, 17). Instead of a knowledge-forming conceptualisation of informational television, he posits a meaning-forming one, enabling people to relate their own "personal knowledge" to the sense-making offered by television (Dahlgren 1988, 287-8). Developing his notion of the "arational" aspect of television, Dahlgren suggests that those elements of televisual discourse (in which he includes news and current affairs) that escape the purely rational can be effective in developing a moral consciousness through their appeal to empathy and solidarity as well as fear and anxiety (1995, 69). Indeed, he argues that "logico-scientific" assumptions about rationality may blind us to alternative forms of reasoning implicit in aesthetic modes and in narrative structuring of our experience and of the world beyond (1995, 101, 113-4).

Neither critical approach tackles the genre of current affairs directly or explicitly, and indeed current affairs has been curiously absent from critical discourse, as if critics assumed, a long time ahead of John Birt's reorganisation of news and current affairs at the BBC, that it could be subsumed within discussions of its sister genre. Yet in many ways this is a curious assumption since news and current affairs — despite their obvious overlaps — differ at least in terms of required degree of topicality, time allocation and structure. While encroaching generic hybridity may make fools of all who try to disentangle generic specificity in contemporary television, it seems important to consider what makes such programming distinctive, if any assessment is to be offered of the aptness or otherwise of changing presentational styles and emphases.

Defining the Indefinable

Current affairs journalism has been caught generically between news and documentary. Its investigative role and its longer gestation time have allowed it occasionally to break news stories, but it more frequently acts in the role of feature material in the broadsheet press, elaborating and delving further into stories and issues that have already been publicised in news broadcasts. In this latter function, its

proximity to documentary becomes especially apparent (Corner 1995, 75). Yet the current affairs methodology can still be distinguished from documentary's. Documentary can legitimately and effectively slice into an issue or area of experience to reveal its otherwise hidden or latent characteristics. It need not have an argument or an analysis to offer, although it frequently has. Current affairs, on the other hand, carries an expectation that it will develop a case, and that it will use rational methods of evidence, contestation and argument to validate this. Of course this distinction, together with other generic boundaries, is suffering erosion, but my argument is that documentary and current affairs are differently situated both heuristically and epistemologically, and this leads to at least partially differential assessment of the role of personalisation in each.

At the same time, this situating of current affairs provides no inherent justification for assuming a simple preference for rationality over emotion or abstraction over experience, especially as the first of each of these pairings remains heavily loaded with their Enlightenment connotations. As Dahlgren (1995) suggests, there may be more ways to be rational than through strict adherence to the conventions of what have become established as logico-scientific methods. Depending on the issue under discussion, analysis may also require close attention to the quality of a specific experience if it is not to miss a significant element in its diagnosis. Equally, there is no inherent justification for presupposing that arationality delivers superior insights into the operation of the social and public world. Dahlgren's observation about the moral sensitivities it can engender may, as he himself acknowledges, be a double-edged proposition, since the arational takes us also into the murkier areas of moral insensitivities, and the processes that encourage one rather than the other are not explained. In documentary, as I have argued elsewhere, a case can be made, based on feminist theorising, that experience is capable of delivering powerful epistemological understanding (Macdonald 1998). In current affairs, with its emphasis on the progression of ideas, this process is less axiomatic. Ways need to be found for enabling forms of knowing that have not been traditionally integrated into the logico-scientific paradigm to assert their compatibility with the essential principles of logical and rational analysis.

Some critics have regarded the changes in journalistic direction produced by commercial pressures as a "feminisation" of the agenda and styles of presentation. Even some unexpected voices have joined this chorus. Charles Moore, right-wing editor of the British *Daily Telegraph,* is on record as claiming that the shift in the broadsheet press should be seen "not as a downmarket trend but as a feminisation of newspapers" (Engel 1996, 3). Feminist critics have been less welcoming of this interpretation. Incorporating perceived feminine values into a residually masculinised public sphere potentially reinforces rather than challenges gendered notions of value and legitimacy (Van Zoonen 1991, 227). At the same time, feminist cultural theorists such as Hélčne Cixous have promoted the case for greater variety in forms of thinking and reasoning, arguing that existing notions of rationality and linear thinking have been partial in their masculinist constructions. Evidence can clearly be adduced to support this proposition, but it requires a twist of rationality to turn this into a plea against reason and logic themselves. As Toril Moi puts it "we must aim for a society in which we have ceased to categorise logic, conceptualisation and rationality as 'masculine,' not for one from which these virtues have been expelled altogether as 'unfeminine'" (1985, 160).

My argument in analysing specific current affairs output will be centred on the role of personalisation in encouraging the knowledge-forming properties that I see as inherent to the current affairs genre. The criteria that I will apply are those that relate to argument and reasoned debate, but without prejudgement that the personal will inevitably be situated on the wrong side of this equation. In the age of the Internet, and in a culture that appears, as Langer (1998, 157-8) points out, often to value randomness over connectedness, a distinction needs to be made between knowledge-forming qualities and information. Information refers to output, not to interaction with recipients. It can be fragmentary, diffuse and take no account of the prior knowledge or composition of its audience. Techniques that encourage knowledge formation estimate (however unreliably) the degree and nature of the audience's prior knowledge; aim to communicate information that can be presumed to be new to most of them; and set this within a context that will enable understanding of the underlying issues while avoiding tendentiousness. Means of encouraging knowledge formation also foster a form of openness and sensitivity to the range of issues involved that may require conclusions to be tentative and provisional. Questions raised can remain unanswered, not because of a tantalising inertia on the part of the communicator, but because the complexity of the issues defies ready closure. In a highly managed information age, information is increasingly packaged to smooth away exactly the kind of rough corners that stimulate the audience to enquire further. Methods of knowledge-forming need to be diverse, verifiable against each other, and require to take account of affective as well as cognitive processes. The ultimate criterion on which their adequacy can be tested remains the quality of the analysis, judged not on reflex appeal to principles of abstraction and universality but on breadth of consideration of the issues, openness of perspective, verifiability, and sensitivity to the role of subjective as well as objective evidence.

In the discussion that follows, these considerations will be examined through an analysis of recent current affairs programming on British television. The two programmes investigated are *Panorama* (40-minute BBC1 programme, broadcast at 10 p.m. on Monday evenings) and *World in Action* (25-minute ITV programme made by Granada, broadcast at 8 p.m. also on Monday evenings). Each has a long history (*Panorama* began in 1953 and *World in Action* was launched in 1963), and each is regarded as a "flagship" current affairs programme by its home network. Despite coming under severe ratings pressures, and attracting the periodic ire of governments embarrassed by their investigative findings, both have survived in the Monday evening schedule, although *Panorama* has been moved progressively later into the evening, and *World in Action*'s days in its present format are reputedly numbered.[4] Personalisation in these programmes will be explored through three possibilities:

- the testifying to experience that is an important contributor to the formation of new knowledge;
- the deployment of personal case studies to open up issues for exploration and analysis;
- the deployment of human interest as a route into investigation of principles or policies.

These have been framed in positive terms, but as the discussion below demonstrates, the first two possibilities also risk being outnumbered by practices that are less compatible with what I am identifying as the criteria of good current affairs journalism.

The selection of programmes discussed is random, and is not intended either to suggest a pattern within each programme or to establish a comparison between them.

Testifying to Experience

One of the key criticisms of "human interest" identified above is its substitution of interest in individual circumstances for analysis of the social and political structures that would be the locus for change. Abstraction and grasping the totality in its theoretical dimensions are perceived as the *sine qua non* of rational debate. Experience and personal testimony are left out of this equation. The development of confessional television clearly pinpoints the dangers of voyeurism and exploitation that can reside in the spectacle of people expressing their emotions in front of the camera. Documentary, on the other hand, despite the problematic ethics of its preference for "victim stories," can produce powerful insights into contemporary or past social circumstances through its use of witnesses as testifiers to the subjective dimension of these realities. In the marshalling of evidence that is intrinsic to current affairs programming, it would be rash to discount the efficacy of testimony as an element in the construction of argument or to dismiss it as mere anecdote. Anecdote implies that the experience being related in atomised, individual and not readily verifiable via other types of evidence. Although it may well have resonance beyond the private and individual, that resonance will arise merely from iteration of other similar accounts (sightings of UFOs would be an example). Testimony is always specifically situated, can be corroborated from other evidence, and takes the listener into connections and movements between the private and the public worlds that might be otherwise difficult to penetrate. It is, in this respect, an important form of evidence, especially when the issue under analysis is hard for an audience to grasp because of physical, social or psychological remoteness. On the other hand, what current affairs' producers might like to consider as testimony is frequently little more than the spectacle of emotion offered for the audience's voyeuristic entertainment, providing no access to fresh knowledge, or new routes to understanding the connectedness of the personal to the political. In order to demonstrate the differences involved, in terms of presentational style and structuring of this aspect of personalisation, I will consider three *Panorama* programmes that in their varying ways might claim to testify to basic human emotions of fear, grief and anger. These programmes were concerned with neighbour nuisance, paedophiles being released into the community, and the aftermath of the Rwandan massacres of 1994. The range of topics is itself indicative of *Panorama*'s evolving mix of old-style investigation and analysis, and more recent emphasis on being in tune with the news agenda of papers like the middle-market *Daily Mail.*

The programmes on nuisance neighbours and paedophiles ("Nicking the neighbours," 30 March 1998 and "Defend the children," 11 May 1998) deal with topics of current popular concern and interest. A documentary, *Neighbours from Hell,* had been achieving high ratings on ITV and the release of paedophiles into the community had been receiving extensive coverage in the media during April 1998, following the discharge from prison of convicted child killer Sidney Cooke. Both are emotive topics, and ones where public feeling is a factor in the formation of policy. Yet a current affairs programme has the responsibility to situate, contextualise and make evidential demands of the personal sentiments which it reports, and neither of these programmes delivers testimony in this way. Instead, both offer spectacles of feelings and experiences

that provide little aid to analysis. "Nicking the neighbours" focuses on the conflict between nuisance tenants on council estates and local authorities in the Midlands and North of England who are now pursuing tough policies of eviction in line with recent legislation. The conflict-driven structure of the programme is clearly defined from the start: "tonight on *Panorama* the battle to get rid of neighbours from hell." Extensive on-camera accounts are provided of the torment the victims had to endure, and in two cases, surveillance footage is deployed to enable us to witness the nature of the harassment suffered. Access is also given to some of the alleged perpetrators, refusing to accept the charges against them and behaving defiantly or arrogantly under questioning. In the manner of "reality television," this may provide information, but it is the kind of information that brings to life what we already know: that people enduring harassment from their neighbours live in constant states of anxiety and fear, and that perpetrators are unlikely to be remorseful. Hearing these experiences being relayed may indeed intensify affect, by inviting sympathetic identification for the victims and increasing antipathy to the offenders, but the signification of feeling in this programme is unproductive in enlightening the viewer about the range of considerations that might apply in a critical re-assessment of the problem. How personal experience might have been used more productively is indicated in the discussion in the next section of a *World in Action* programme on a similar theme.

Reinforcing a divide between ordinary people and officialdom, there is no movement in this programme between individual experience and public consideration. Although accounts from both victims and their alleged harassers raise a number of problematic issues (such as the intimidation of witnesses; the subjection of nuisance neighbours to both civil and criminal action; and the eviction of innocent people — including children — because of the actions of friends or family), none of these is pursued within the programme's structure. No attempt is made, either, to address the significant problem raised by the commentary only in the last few minutes: "where do anti-social families live when they've been evicted?" Instead of analysis, the audience is offered spectacle and sensation. Complex policy issues are bypassed in favour of highlighting the results of what the programme often reduces to a matter of "bad behaviour."

If the anger and fears of harassed tenants are narrated in "Nicking the neighbours," they are visibly articulated in body language and behaviour in "Defend the children." Recurring shots of hostile crowds protesting outside buildings thought to house a released child sex killer frame the programme. The monstrosity of the gang of paedophiles who were led by Sidney Cooke is emphasised by the introductory commentary ("this is the story of a ring of men who used and killed children for pleasure"), and intensified by the unflattering monochrome mugshots and photographs of the men intercut throughout the programme, and the on-camera expressions of grief and anger from the relatives of the children who were murdered. The relatives' evidence bears witness to their continuing anguish, but this form of personal testimony is deployed here to resonate with wider public concerns about paedophiles, rather than to take us into consideration of issues relevant to the analysis, such as how victims of serious crime or their relatives deal with the release of offenders back into their communities, and what support and protection they might receive. Again, the experiences narrated are those which anyone in these circumstances might feel. Although their presentation invites identification and empathy, the testimony is not productive in developing the analysis.

Popular sentiment and the feelings of relatives of victims are important ingredients in the understanding and development of this issue, but they need to be contextualised in ways that might produce new knowledge. If the anger and grief of the relatives is self-explanatory, the ferociousness of public hostility is not, and the consonance the programme helps to establish between these masks the need for analysis of public sentiment and a closer inspection of the presuppositions involved. Indeed, far from analysing these, the reporter takes his cue from the nature of public anxieties. When, thirty minutes into the programme, the commentary eventually reminds us that "for all the real fear felt by campaigners, the statistics of child sex abuse are that the risk isn't normally from a predatory attack by a stranger at all," and this view is corroborated by an expert, we are quickly directed back into the flow of popular concerns by the reporter's link into the next sequence: "but the attention and the protests were all to be focused next on Sidney Cooke, the leader of the gang." Where popular sentiment goes, the programme, it seems, must follow.

Strong emotions provide ready points of identification, but provide little help in analysing situations unless the specific prompts that generate these are explained. One of the most emotive scenes in "Defend the children" involves the residents of the St. Paul's district of Bristol angrily confronting officials at a public meeting about the possibility that Cooke might be housed in a bail hostel in their area. Their feelings are unsurprising, and the conflict between "ordinary" people and the authorities predictably filmed. No attempt is made to situate the residents' anger by allowing them individual access to camera to articulate their grievances. Emotion again refers in a self-enclosed move purely to itself, instead of helping to advance discussion of relevant issues (here, potentially, the frequency with which difficult social cases are located in the already most disadvantaged areas of our inner cities).

Both these programmes play to public concerns and amplify these instead of using personal cases or feelings to develop analysis of relevant issues. The audience is invited to spectate rather than understand. The popular appeal of this may be undeniable, with "Nicking the neighbours" gaining an audience of 6.28 million and a rare ranking for *Panorama* in the "top 70" audiences of the week,[5] but the knowledge-forming properties of this approach remain suspect.

In Fergal Keane's return visit to Rwanda broadcast on 10 February 1997, on the other hand, testimony is used to encourage the audience to participate in an understanding of that country's continuing problems, which geographical distance and magnitude of scale would otherwise inhibit. Three female survivors of the massacre that took place in their remote village in 1994 recount their experiences in terse prose, sometimes apparently reading from scripts, with minimal display of emotion. Entitled "Valentina's story" because of its resumption of the life-story of a survivor whom Keane had met in 1994, when her life hung in the balance, the programme enables the personal accounts to act as a moral touchstone for the analysis of the role of the UN, the Hutus, and the Tutsis' search for justice that it also explores. As Valentina walks into a church, once the scene of a massacre but now filled with the living, her commentary states: "I get angry when I come into the church. I know they killed people in here. I don't feel happy when I'm inside. I'll never forget what happened." This situated, highly contingent and understated expression of emotion departs radically from the physical and verbal explosion of anger from people confronting the predictable triggers to such feelings provided by troublesome neighbours or released paedophiles. As testimony,

it takes us further into an understanding of what the unimaginable concept of "genocide" means to survivors.

Fergal Keane's own commentary exemplifies the journalism of attachment that Martin Bell has propounded.[6] Unmistakably adopting the perspective of the Tutsi minority rather than the Hutu majority, his commentary is caustic in its criticism of the UN and the Hutu ringleaders. The camerawork parallels this emphasis, filming the Hutus in long panning shots of the living to contrast with the empty or corpse-filled spaces of the scene of the massacre. One of the most chilling remarks emerges not from the witnesses, but from Keane's observation that the killers "kept normal working hours, returning home every evening," taking four days to complete the killing of the local community. Yet the programme also includes a rare interview with an "ordinary" Hutu killer who is willing to confess to his participation in the massacre. Keane accentuates the moral question of how he, as a man with a large family of his own, could bring himself to murder children, a question that might be asked, with variations, of killers down the ages. The more situated question, of how peaceable neighbours can be persuaded by leaders to turn so savagely against their own community and their own erstwhile friends, is not addressed. An opportunity to gain insight into an aspect of the unknown history of Rwanda quietly evaporates, despite the tantalising opening this man presents in telling of his pain on reflecting that he, as an orphan himself, was looked after by a Tutsi man who was one of the earliest victims of the massacre.

The power of testimony in "Valentina's story" makes any comparison with human interest, as in the human interest story, unthinkable. Yet the manoeuvring of audience interest that Fergal Keane accomplishes in this programme is dependent on personalisation and the epistemological reverberations between the affective personal witnessing and the ungraspable, impersonal magnitude of public events. There is just enough here, too, to alert us to the limitations, and even the tendentiousness, of the story that is told. The depersonalised Hutu killers would be in danger of being too easily demonised were it not for the unanswered questions prompted by the one of their number who appears uneasily in front of the camera.

The Personal Case Study

Incorporating personal case studies might seem the easiest and most obvious way for current affairs producers to combine human interest and analysis. Marrying the development of an argument to the affecting and attention-arousing capacity of particular life stories might seem the optimum solution to Yentob's "tricky area." Yet this potential answer is itself fraught with difficulties. Just as anything, it is said, can be proved through the deft use of statistics, this could be equally true of the televisual presentation of case study evidence. Television, for one thing, makes specific demands of its ordinary participants. Not everyone can deliver a "virtual performance" (Nichols 1991, 122) for the camera, but researchers are under pressure to seek out those who can, and the balance of the sample may be upset as a result. In addition, as many who agree to take part later complain, the editing process can distort individuals' accounts of their own circumstances. In the era of intensifying competition, polemic, as a more exciting alternative to balanced analysis, becomes especially tempting. With this variety of pressure points on the delicate nerve of public service responsibilities, something is bound to give. The discussion of particular programmes that follows is divided between

examples which have yielded to this temptation, and those where the personal case study has been used effectively to develop and sustain analysis.

Case studies in television as in other communicative forms raise immediate issues of typicality. Never an easy concept, this requires especial attention when dealing with the tight time constraints and dramatic and visual requirements of television. As Lukács appreciated in relation to realism even in the diffuse space of the novel, the typical is distinct from the average. "The exact copying of reality by a mere on-looker offers no principle of grouping inherent in the subject matter itself" (Lukács 1972, 148). On the other hand, "the most essential social factors can find total expression in the apparently accidental conjunction of a few human destinies" (Lukács 1972, 148). Logic demands that the "typical' case study nevertheless avoids the pitfall of confusing "all" and "some." As Robert Thouless (1953, 25) puts it in his seminal *Straight and Crooked Thinking*, "a common form of dishonest argument is the statement 'A is B' when 'Some A is B' would be true, but in which the untrue statement 'All A is B' is implied for the rest of the argument.'" As autobiography, diaries and other forms of life story become of increasing interest as historical and social evidence, social scientists have equally been wrestling with the dilemma: "either we must deny the legitimacy of life stories as research materials, since they do not meet the traditional scientific criteria ... or we must force the latter on the former, thus suffocating their heuristic value" (Corradi 1991, 106). Corradi adopts Ricoeur's notion of "emplotment" to suggest that social scientists need to transcend this difficulty by establishing a clear two-way process between social structures and personal life-stories: "we 'explain' the biography by relating it to the social structure and, vice versa, we break down a social structure into its constituents and assess its differential weight and meaning for the lives of individuals" (Corradi 1991, 110). The comparison between life stories, rather than simple number-crunching, becomes the basis for validation: "hypotheses on one life story are validated to a certain extent when they are successfully scrutinised against another one" (Corradi 1991, 112).

This suggests a number of bases for evaluation of the current affairs case study. Numerical quantity is unimportant, but diversity and significance for illuminating different aspects of the topic under discussion are. The principles of choice might be governed, as Lukács suggests, by the requirements of "the subject matter itself," but these need to be explained and contextualised. The trap of tendentiousness, with an easy slippage into using "some" to persuade us that the thesis applies to "all," needs to be avoided, and a clear two-way process established between social structuring and individual biography, with each illuminating and interrogating the other.

In recent years, a number of editions of *Panorama* have been devoted to the changing roles of men and women in contemporary western society. In-depth analysis of this would produce a fuzzy picture of partial gains by women, varying by factors such as social class, ethnic identity, educational achievement, age and family position, alongside complex changes in men's lives, produced by altering employment patterns and other social developments. Such complicated material would be manifestly unappealing to the producer of a short slot in the evening schedules. Evidence that boys are now falling behind girls in school performance, when for decades it was assumed that girls were educationally disadvantaged, especially in scientific and technical subjects, is just the kind of manageable nugget that television can work on. Dramatic in its reversal of expectations, easily communicable in a short period of time, and readily illustrated,

it has the vital ingredients for interesting televisual development. Editions of *Panorama* devoted to this topic include "Men aren't working" (16 October 1995) and "Missing mum" (3 February 1997). Both employ extensive case studies to promote their argument, but in each case personalisation leads to inadequate or misleading analysis.

"Men aren't working" sets out to exemplify the thesis that young men are being left behind in employment and career ambition. Analysis gives way to tendentiousness as soon as the case studies are identified. Three intelligent, ambitious and articulate young women, who are either at or on their way to various universities, are set against four young men from the same school background who are presented as lacking energy, drive, or any desire to leave their local environment. All are from Shildon, Co. Durham, an area formerly dependent on heavy industry. A further two young men from Darlington who have been in low-paid employment, but now prefer life on the "dole," complete the picture.

This programme provides no corroborating statistical or other research evidence on screen to contextualise its argument (although at least two surveys or studies are referred to but not identified). The opinion of experts, including a psychological counsellor at a Darlington hospital, and the acting headmaster of a local comprehensive, is deployed to confirm the thesis that boys are now the ones who are feeling dispirited and lacking in self-esteem. The only other support for the case studies comes from the employment ratio of seven women to three men at Hutchison Telecom (UK) Ltd., Darlington's biggest employer and one of the hi-tech operations increasingly replacing the area's previous dependence on heavy industry. The voice-over commentary repeatedly asserts, however, that the specific case studies are part of a wider generality. The local instance the programme starts with, of a young woman from Shildon who is about to embark on a course at York University while her boyfriend remains behind in an unskilled and insecure job, is given universal significance: "*like an increasing number of young men in Britain today* [my emphasis], his girlfriend's leaving him behind." Later, we are told that "in Darlington, *as in towns across Britain* [my emphasis], young men are not just losing jobs: they're losing interest," and in the concluding lines of the programme, the reporter, returning to the young couple featured at the start, comments "the emotions generated by their diverging paths *are now shared by more and more young people across the country* [my emphasis]."

Narrative structuring and personalisation might have been deployed in this programme to generate interest in the diversity of factors leading to the difficulties facing young unskilled men in late twentieth century Britain, and what the policy implications of these might be. Instead, we are presented with a simple and repetitive tale of female success and male failure, with apparently settled causes of female aspiration and changing employment structures. As *Panorama* puts it in its own terms: "this is the story of what happens when the jobs young men relied on go, and the women who relied on men stand on their own feet."

"Missing mum" provoked instant controversy when it was broadcast on 3 February 1997. It was based on research studies in both the United States and Britain that demonstrated that children of parents who both worked full-time tended to perform consistently worse in examinations than those of parents whose mothers worked only part-time. To compound the problem, the research also suggested that boys were more seriously disadvantaged in this respect than girls. As the title of the programme indicates, although the research conducted in Britain centred on working *parents*, the

attribution of responsibility for ensuing difficulties is laid squarely here on the shoulders of *mothers*. This appears especially ironic in the case of one of the families depicted, who organised parental roles so that the father stayed at home when the children were young, while the mother continued with her career as a doctor. When the children were old enough, the father returned to work, and is himself often not home until late. Despite this, it is the mother who is held responsible for spending long hours on her career away from home to the potential detriment of her children. This family subsequently complained about the way their contribution had been edited, and especially about the selective use of extensive interview material with their three children. Only the one who claimed to be disadvantaged by his parents' absence was featured on screen in the eventual programme.[7]

Although the evidence from case studies in this programme is set against evidence from research studies, these were exploited to support the programme's case. The contexts in which the research was carried out were ignored, and the programme glossed over the British study's finding that children of women who stayed at home were performing least well at GCSE stage, explaining that this was anticipated since these were the mothers who were worst off both materially and in terms of their own educational background. Having spent most of the programme implying that the solution to the problem was for mothers to adjust their working hours to ones compatible with their children's school day, a late twist in the argument was provided by a spokesperson from the Family Policy Studies Centre who argued that the evidence suggested not that mothers should return to the kitchen but that working hours should be generally reduced to make work schedules more child-friendly. Because this is not pursued through the personal case studies, it remains as an unexplored dimension to an analysis that is otherwise neatly self-enclosed.

If these are examples of personalised case studies used tendentiously, other editions of *Panorama* and *World in Action* incorporate the case study more productively. An edition of *Panorama* broadcast on 29 September 1997 investigated the Labour government's "new deal" for lone parents, encouraging them back to work and off welfare. Because this programme has a critical purpose, rather than its own thesis to propose, it deploys personal histories to complicate the issues. Three women in Cambridge are featured (Cambridge being one of the trial areas for the scheme) who have very different attitudes to work and the duties of the state. One wholly endorses the need to be self-reliant, but the other two, for different reasons, defend their entitlement to be supported through welfare. Investigation of tactics used in Wisconsin to force single parents into work by cutting their entitlement to welfare produces similarly divergent views from some of the women affected.

It would have been easy for this programme to have been more selective and partial in its presentation of case studies, either in support of, or opposition to, government intentions of requiring single parents to explore work and training opportunities once their youngest child reaches school age. Instead, it allows the women themselves to extend the critical agenda. The case that introduces and concludes the programme, a woman living near the council estate where Tony Blair made his welfare-to-work speech in June 1997, argues that she feels lone parents are an "easy target" for making cuts. She also points out that for someone like herself to go back to work (she has three children, has never had a job and receives no financial assistance from the fathers of her children), training and support are necessary to counteract the lack of confidence

women in her position feel. Deficiencies in child care are identified as a problem, a point that the programme picks up later and amplifies by means of a glimpse into the life of "a model single working mother" who struggles with the pressures of competing demands on her time, and survives only thanks to a local after-school club. Taking up the point, the reporter comments: "the government may want lone parents to work, but at present only two per cent of children of primary school age have access to an after-school club like this." The personal demonstration of the benefits of such clubs turns a dry piece of statistical information into an effective source of knowledge-production, which in turn can be used by the reporter to wrest an acknowledgement out of Malcolm Wicks, MP and member of the Social Security Select Committee, that there is "a childcare gap" in this country.

The reporter effectively presents the varied spectrum of single mothers' perspectives against the monocular vision of a government clinging to the belief that all single parents want to work, regardless of rates of pay or access to adequate childcare facilities. The impression of single-minded dogma over-riding the evidence is increased by reporting on a survey carried out by the Policy Studies Institute which demonstrated that although 85 per cent of lone parents stated that they wanted to work, for most this was a long-term rather than an immediate desire. Only a quarter expressed an interest in working at once. "Emplotment" between the personal case studies and the political analysis is effectively pursued.

Despite its populist title and its tighter time schedule, *World in Action's* "Neighbours from hell" broadcast on 10 June 1996 is more successful than *Panorama's* programme on nuisance neighbours in using personal case studies to broaden the scope of its investigation and move the discussion through a variety of considerations. After first, like *Panorama,* inviting identification with the related experiences of some of those who suffer harassment, its next case study demonstrates the obstacle of intimidation of witnesses that has to be overcome before resolution through the courts can be achieved. A further case demonstrates that even when court action is brought, no effective redress may be achieved, as a witness testifies indignantly to the dismissal of her evidence in court. The case studies help to diversify the issues to be analysed, but also act as means of interrogating proposed Conservative government policy (the "new legislation" of the *Panorama* programme). Although the programme does not reach any clear resolution, it highlights a number of defects or omissions in the new housing bill.

The most productive use of personal case studies occurs when an open rather than closed agenda is pursued, with the aim of investigating the diversity of the issue, not of proving a prejudged thesis. The last two programmes additionally demonstrate how the personal can be used to interrogate and unsettle some of the smoothness of official policy. The evidence from the case studies is sufficiently diverse here to prevent the distinction between "all" and "some" being blithely disregarded, as it tended to be in "Men aren't working" and "Missing mum." This may make for weaker drama in presentation, but it considerably sharpens the knowledge-forming properties of the programme.

Investigation Through Individual Interest

So far the journalism that I have been considering might be classed as "issue-based." But one of the prime objectives of current affairs programming historically has also been to investigate and break new stories, in the wake of painstaking research. It is

this tradition of journalism that has variously earned plaudits for current affairs programmes and raised occasional hackles in governments obsessed with secrecy. Investigative journalism has long been able to exploit the narrative advantages of setting up a hermeneutic puzzle that will be resolved in the space of the programme. Even then, some topics need more massaging than others to earn audience attention. Investigations into the meat suppliers of a major British retail outlet, or cowboy builders pushed *World in Action* into a place in the top 70 British programmes with audiences of 5.84 and 7.13 million respectively.[8] Subjects such as the sale of arms by British companies to Indonesia, or the conduct of Combat 18 are unlikely to be such crowd-pullers. Editions of *World in Action* that tackled investigations of these topics relied additionally on personalisation in order to sugar their respective pills.

"Profit before principle" was broadcast on 9 June 1997 as the second in a two-part investigation into Britain's commercial links with Indonesia. This explored the extent of British sales of arms and other military equipment to the repressive regime in Indonesia, and the likely stance of the new Labour government towards this trade. Using a hidden camera, *World in Action* twice infiltrated the offices of Procurement Services International (PSI), a company which it revealed to be engaged in contracts to supply armoured and civilian vehicles for Indonesia claimed to be worth around £400 million since 1993 (with another £700 million of orders in the pipeline). The second time, they were accompanied by José Ramos Horta, the holder of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize, well known for his defence of his fellow East Timorese against Indonesian aggression. He is introduced to us not on a public platform, but receiving the attention of the hair colourist charged with constructing a disguise that will enable him to pose as head of a front company for his visit to PSI. Despite the potential levity of this, Ramos Horta carries the authority of his own testimony: "I'm not speaking as an academic. I'm speaking as someone who has felt in his own family the destruction, the pain brought upon the people of East Timor by the Indonesian army" (he lost three brothers and a sister in the troubles following the invasion of East Timor by Indonesian forces in 1975).

During the visit to PSI, as the managing director boasts of his export trade to Indonesia, and his ability to avoid Indonesia's import taxes, the Nobel prize winner sits impassively, succeeding in disguising his emotions even when claims are made that the killings in East Timor have been wildly exaggerated. The production team have some further fun when they are permitted to use video cameras openly to film vehicles in the company's warehouse. Ramos Horta clambers aboard a Hornet of a type widely used in the repression in East Timor and offers a mock salute to the camera. Later, he confesses a passing ethical unease about tricking his welcoming host ("as a human being I couldn't help but feel bad"), but comments that his political sentiments quickly overtook his personal qualms.

The frame of human interest and its attendant irony encourages involvement in a programme that is also an effective piece of investigative journalism. It clearly establishes British links, through its defence exports, with repression both within Indonesia and in East Timor, and provides strong visual reminders of the nature of the terror practised by the Indonesian authorities. The collusion of the Conservative government in granting export licences while overtly condemning the human rights abuses perpetrated by the regime, and the lack of any strong signal so far that the Labour government are to depart radically from this policy are also authenticated by

a company which claims to be the second biggest exporter of military hardware to Indonesia after British Aerospace. The use of Ramos Horta is not merely a hook to draw us into the programme: his presence in the undercover filming adds a dimension to the exposition that works both at the level of affect and epistemology.

"Playing with fire," *World in Action* 6 April 1998, equally relies on human interest to draw the viewer in. Over video footage of an aggressive thug, the commentary introduces the protagonist: "Meet Charlie Sargent. He likes to threaten people. He likes to attack people. For five years he led a gang of thugs who wanted to bring Nazi ideas back to life." An actor, speaking the words of a Combat 18 activist, then takes up the character sketch, informing us that Charlie Sargent is known as "the pig," "a bit of an animal" and a "knife merchant." Despite the early impression, the point of this sinister introduction is not to trigger a series of visually exciting reconstructions of Combat 18 violence (those that are included are shot in black and white and relatively restrained). Instead, a detective narrative is initiated to investigate links first between Combat 18 and the UDA and then, in a further twist, between Combat 18 and the British Special Branch. Charlie Sargent is revealed to have been an informer for the Special Branch, despite his active leadership of an organisation with terrorist ambitions. Now in prison for the murder of a rival following his expulsion from the group, he is shown to have planned a number of attacks, including one (which was foiled) on *World in Action* journalist, Quentin McDermott, who had taken part in a previous investigation into the organisation. The programme uses this link to criticise the police for not warning any of the targets who had been selected, even despite evidence that the raid had not dented Combat 18's fervour (two weeks later, Combat 18 firebombed the Kent home of a prominent Anti-Nazi League member). As an informer, Charlie Sargent helped the police to foil the Danish letter-bombing campaign planned by the group, but the programme questions the ethics of police using such a ruthless individual as an informer. The programme has skilfully deflected interest from purely personal questions: who is this man? what has he done? on to more significant and public questions of the boundaries of police morality and collusion with known thugs.

In both these programmes, despite brevity of time, significant areas of investigation and analysis are carried on the back of human and narrative interest. Both could have been more dryly and abstractly presented, but it is unlikely this would have worked well with the audience. Yet neither has sacrificed the principles of informative journalism on an altar of populism.

Conclusion

Television may indeed be a medium ill-suited to abstract analysis, but, unless the knowledge-forming requirements of current affairs programming are merely to be blithely abandoned under pressure for ratings, a measured review of the compatibility between popular forms of audience engagement, such as personalisation, and methods of analysis needs to be pursued. This article has argued that there is no automatic correlation between personalisation and loss of analytical rigour, although a number of traps lie in wait. Personalisation has a diversity of forms, some of which are demonstrably remote from the limitations of the human interest story. There seems little merit, at the present time, in merely echoing what John Langer (1998) criticises as the "lament" for a supposedly golden age of television journalism. Television producers and their managers will take little note. If personalisation and human interest are here

to stay, it is more productive for research to inspect the qualities of the popular that can co-exist with rational analysis and investigation. As academics, under pressure to make our teaching more pedagogically interesting, lively and user-friendly without abandoning academic and scholarly rigour, the task should not be too alien.

Notes:

1. The programme at issue here was *Panorama*'s "Babies on benefit," broadcast on 20 September 1993 which claimed that increasing numbers of young single women were having babies specifically to enable them to live off the state and ensure good access to housing and benefits. The Broadcasting Complaints Commission in September 1994 declared this programme "unfair and unjust" in its approach, but the finding was contested by the BBC on the grounds that since the complaint had been made by a lobby group (although on behalf of one of the participants), it was technically outside the remit of the BCC. The BBC subsequently sought judicial review through the courts, and the High Court overturned the BCC verdict in 1995. Despite this outcome, the attendant publicity was harmful to *Panorama's* reputation.

2. Arthur Christiansen was the editor of the *Daily Express* between 1933 and 1957.

3. See, for example, Elliott (1980) on news as ritual; Silverstone (1981) on television and the mythic; and Bennett and Edelman (1985) on news and narrative.

4. In February 1985 *Panorama* was moved from an 8.10 p.m. slot in the evening to 9.30 p.m., and in June 1997 from 9.30 p.m. to 10.00 p.m. Although the 1997 shift was claimed by the BBC to be a move designed to strengthen its position, this was regarded sceptically by critics, who argued that the BBC's public service commitment was being further weakened. At the time of writing, the future of *World in Action* in its present format appears uncertain. Steve Anderson, appointed as head of ITV news and current affairs at the end of 1997, admits that it is under review as the network seeks bids for a new 60-minute current affairs programme intended to emulate the success of *Hard Copy* and *60 Minutes* in the United States (Ahmed 1998, 8-9). Key journalists have also been leaving the programme, and the editor of four years, Steve Boulton, is also set to depart.

5. The scale of this achievement can be judged by the percentage increase of 111.4% on the previous week's *Panorama* audience (*Broadcast,* 24 April 1998).

6. Discussed in *The Truth Is Our Currency,* Radio 4, 16 May 1997.

7. These criticisms were broadcast on *Biteback*, BBC1, 2 March 1997.

8. *World in Action,* 21 July 1997 and 3 November 1997 respectively (source: *Broadcast,* 15 August 1997 and 21 November 1997).

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