

The “Anglo-Saxon Style” of Journalism

George Kennedy

In 1978, when democracy was restored after 40 years of dictatorship in Spain, a new generation of journalists began to create a new generation of newspapers. Asked by a visitor from the United States to describe their goal, several explained that they intended to introduce the “Anglo-Saxon style” to Spanish journalism (Kennedy, 1984).

Those journalists understood the “Anglo-Saxon style” to be the practice of British and North American journalists, in contrast to the approaches more common on the continent of Europe, and in contrast to the traditional journalism of Spain (and of many parts of the old Spanish Empire). The key components of this style of journalism were independence, an emphasis on facts rather than on opinion, aggressive reporting of public affairs and insistence on the right of citizens to essential information about their rulers.

Nearly 25 years later, readers and students may judge for themselves

the degree to which the pioneers of contemporary Spanish journalism achieved their goals. The purpose of this article is rather to examine the “Anglo-Saxon style” itself. The basis for the examination is the author’s 30-plus years of experience as practitioner and teacher of journalism in the United States and his study of British journalism during a recent four-month residency in London.

To begin with the conclusion, as followers of the “Anglo-Saxon style” are taught to do on both sides of the Atlantic, a comparison of British and North American journalism, especially as practiced in newspapers, shows differences that are nearly as important as the similarities. While those Spanish journalists correctly identified the characteristics that distinguish the style from Continental traditions, they overlooked—perhaps deliberately—significant distinctions between the British and American variants.

Close reading of Britain’s national

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newspapers and comparison to comparable papers in the United States reveals these tendencies:

- Objectivity, which might also be called balance or professional detachment, is a core value of North American journalism. It is not at the core of British journalism.
- Analysis and interpretation, which in the United States are typically restricted to articles identified as such, are a frequent component of regular news reporting in Britain.
- Similarly, first-person reporting (I was there; this is what I saw) is much more common in Britain than in the United States.
- While British newspapers maintain their independence from political party or factional sponsorship, they do not conceal, as papers in the US usually do, their ideologies.
- Personality, both the personalities of those in the news and the personalities of the writers, plays a more important role in the British than in the US press.

Here is an example that illustrates the differences.

First, the opening paragraphs of an article in the New York Times that resulted from a reporter's visit to a bombed city in Afghanistan:

“The American war on

Kandahar, the redoubt of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, was waged nearly exclusively from the sky. Satellite -and laser-guided bombs rained down on buildings in the city center, on villas in the wealthy outskirts and on mud-brick houses in its labyrinthine slums.

American and anti-Taliban soldiers entered the city earlier this month only after the Taliban and Al Qaeda had fled.

Scars remaining from the Soviet war two decades ago show wanton destruction here. By contrast, the American bombs hit with such precision that in most cases they destroyed their targets and left adjoining houses largely undamaged.

The capture of Kandahar, perhaps more than any other city in Afghanistan, stands as an example of the new American high-tech war.

A visit to about 20 bombing targets in the city showed that relatively few innocent bystanders had been killed, largely because the bombs were accurate, though also because many residents had already fled” (The New York Times, 2001).

Now this article, which resulted from the visit to another bombing site by a

correspondent for The Independent, a British national newspaper:

“The village where nothing happened is reached by a steep climb at the end of a rattling three-hour drive along a stony road. Until nothing happened here, early on the morning of Saturday and again the following day, it was a large village with a small graveyard, but now that has been reversed. The cemetery on the hill contains 40 freshly dug graves, unmarked and identical. And the village of Kama Ado has ceased to exist.

Many of the homes here are just deep conical craters in the earth. The rest are cracked open, split like crushed cardboard boxes. At the moment when nothing happened, the villagers of Kama Ado were taking their early morning meal, before sunrise and the beginning of the Ramadan fast. And there in the rubble, dented and ripped, are tokens of the simple daily lives they led.

A contorted tin kettle, turned almost inside out by the blast; a collection of charred cooking pots; and the fragments of an old -fashioned pedal- operated sewing machine. A split metal chest contains scraps of children’s clothes in cheap bright nylon.

In another room are the only riches that these people had, six dead cows lying higgledy –piggledy and distended by decay. And all this is very strange because, on Saturday morning– when American B-52s unloaded dozens of bombs that killed 115 men, women and children –nothing happened.

We know this because the US department of Defence told us so. That evening, a Pentagon spokesman, questioned about reports of civilian casualties in eastern Afghanistan, explained that they were not true, because the US is meticulous in selecting only military targets associated with Osama bin Laden’s al-Qa’ida network. Subsequent Pentagon utterances on the subject have wobbled somewhat, but there has been no retraction of that initial decisive statement: “It just didn’t happen” (The Independent, 2001).

Both these pieces of writing fall within the “Anglo-Saxon style” of journalism. Both are based on independent, eye-witness reporting of information that is relevant to public policy. Both are packed with facts. Both are, so far as a reader can tell, accurate. However, the story that appeared in the Independent would not have been published by the New York Times, and vice versa.

The American writer has stayed within the boundaries of objectivity. He distances himself from his subject matter and avoids emotive language. He relies on authoritative sources, though they are implied rather than explicit, to explain what he sees. He gives few clues to his own reaction to the facts he observes. A reader would be hard-pressed to infer from this article the writer's ideology or opinions.

The British writer also is guided by the conventions of his journalistic culture. As this work shows, those conventions permit –even require– that the writer put himself into his work. The sum of these facts is an emotionally powerful picture of loss, destruction and death. The sarcastic repetition of the phrase “nothing happened” tells the reader clearly what the writer thinks of the facts he sees and of the authoritative source he cites.

These samples are exemplary of the two distinct variants of the “Anglo-Saxon style.” Any reader can easily test that assertion by reading representative pieces from such US newspapers as the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and USA Today (the three North American papers that might be called “national”) and then turning to The Times, The Guardian or another of the 11 national daily papers published in London.

In seeking to understand why the British press has evolved so differently

from the North American, the author turned to several British experts. From personal interviews¹, a consensus emerged. The most important factors were said to be these:

- Geography
- Competition
- Tradition
- Self-regulation

Great Britain (defined as England, Scotland and Wales, with Northern Ireland a part of the United Kingdom) is a small, compact, densely populated nation. Its 60 million people are concentrated in a handful of urban centers, with London by far the dominant city. For purposes of comparison, while London has nearly 12 percent of Britain's population, New York has less than 5 percent of the United States population. Further, the absence of severe geographic features permitted development in the 19th century of a rail and road network that puts every corner of Britain within a few hours of London. Unlike the United States, Britain has a highly centralized government and economy, both based in London.

Its geography also dictates that Britain must be constantly aware of and concerned about affairs in Europe, just 20 miles away, and about developments in distant corners of the world from which its essential trade flows. Many of those distant lands, of course, were at one time part of the British empire and remain connected through the Commonwealth.

By contrast, the United States is nearly a continent to itself, separated by oceans from both Europe and Asia, and divided internally by great rivers, mountains and desert.

The journalistic implications are that the British press developed, and remains, centered where the politics and economy of the nation are centered, in London. Ten national newspapers account for about 70 percent of the total daily circulation, which is approximately 18 million. This dominance by a nationally circulated press is unique in the industrialized world. (Stokes and Reading, 1999) Of course, television is similarly centralized in London. Despite the emergence of several independent operators, the British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC) remains the dominant provider of journalism in both television and radio.

This concentration has resulted in a level of competition unknown in the United States. Here, the typical newspaper enjoys something approaching a local monopoly. Fewer than 20 US cities today have competing daily newspapers. The competition, both journalistic and commercial, in the US is more likely to be among media, as newspapers, television and radio compete –with, increasingly, the Internet as a factor– for the time and attention of audiences.

US newspapers, therefore, tend to the middle of the ideological

spectrum. Objectivity in reporting and moderation in commentary serve the commercial need to appeal as broadly as possible to diverse communities. Arguably, in the absence of multiple print competitors, those characteristics also serve the highest journalistic good –supplying essential information in an unbiased way to an entire population.

The British situation is sharply different. With 10 newspapers competing for slices of the broad national audience, none can aspire to be all things to all people. Each must seek a sustainable niche. The British national newspapers, then, divide in two directions. First, reflecting a demographic and cultural difference from the US, there is a broad class distinction between the so-called “quality” papers –which are published in broadsheet format– and the “popular,” or tabloid, papers. The former generally present news and comment in a more serious and often more subdued fashion. The latter place more emphasis on celebrity, sensation and sport. Between those categories are currently two “mid-market” papers, tabloid in format but somewhat less sensational in content.

The “quality” papers are The Times, The Telegraph, The Guardian, The Independent and the Financial Times. Their daily circulation ranges (October 2001 figures) from 974,362 (the Telegraph) to 203,402 (the Independent). The mid-market is occupied by The Daily Mail (2.4

million) and the Express (877,735). The “popular” – also called the “red-top” – papers are the Sun (3.4 million), The Mirror (2.2 million) and the Daily Star (725,552). (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2001).

Within these horizontal categories, the papers divide again by ideology. Though no British newspaper today is allied with a political party, readers have no difficulty finding the paper to suit their political persuasion. The Telegraph, The Daily Mail and the Sun are strongly conservative. The Guardian, the Independent and the Mirror are on the left. The Times, the Financial Times and the Express are on most issues slightly right of center. These ideological stances are reflected in reporting as well as in commentary.

The distinction between ideology and partisanship was illustrated by coverage of the American-led war on terrorism. The Mirror, The Guardian and the Independent, all of which are generally supportive of the Labour government, provided the most consistently critical coverage of the war, which the Labour government strongly supported. The Sun, which generally supports the Conservative Party, was the most vociferous journalistic backer of the war.

These divisions by class and ideology are nothing new. Nor is the British tradition that the newspapers play a central role in the public conversation that shapes both politics and culture. On its first day of publication in

1785, The Times said:

“It would seem that every News-Paper published in London is calculated for a particular set of readers only; so that if each set were to change its favourite publication for another, the commutation would produce disgust, and dissatisfaction to all (Whale, 1980).

Surveying more than two centuries of this tradition, the media scholar Jeremy Tunstall concluded:

The leading newspapers in Britain (and probably in most comparable countries) will continue to be extremely powerful both within the media and across the broad range of public policy and public life. On some measures the newspapers will continue their industrial decline. But the newspapers are likely to remain the most politically interested, most policy focused, most partisan, and most potent of the mass media” (Tunstall, 1996).

Despite its acknowledged standing as the mother of democracies, Great Britain has no written constitution. It therefore has no equivalent of the famous First Amendment to the US constitution, which effectively guarantees freedom of speech and of the press. Instead, press freedom

in Britain relies on a complicated network of custom and legislation. As a result, on the one hand, libel law in Britain is much stricter than in the US. On the other hand, until the recent adoption of the European Human Rights Convention, there were virtually no limits on invasion of privacy by journalists.

In this environment, and in a typically British spirit of compromise, newspapers in that country have developed a system of self-regulation unknown in the US.

The first attempt at self-regulation took effect in 1953, with the creation of a Press Council. Nearly 40 years later, the current model was installed. Today, British newspapers and magazines are monitored by the Press Complaints Commission, which enforces a code of practice created by the journalists themselves. The code is, in effect, a code of ethics. It sets guidelines and limitations intended to assure fairness, honesty and consideration for both the subjects of reporting and its audience. The code makes special provisions to protect the privacy of children and others less able to protect themselves. All the newspapers and magazines subscribe to it. Newspapers typically make adherence to the code part of the employment contract of journalists (Shannon, 2001).

The Press Complaints Commission is funded by assessments levied on news organizations, Its small professional

staff accepts complaints, investigates and, when conciliation fails, conducts adjudications. If a newspaper is found to have violated the code, the offending paper is required to publish that finding prominently and promptly. In practice, that happens.

Critics say that the Commission is a toothless watchdog. Certainly, it has no power comparable to the Independent Television Commission, which polices broadcasters and which can, and has, levied heavy fines for transgressions. Critics also complain that the Commission functions best as a self-protective mechanism for the press, shielding it from statutory regulation. That shield is certainly in place, welcomed by journalists and accepted, at least so far, by politicians and the public.

Supporters of the Commission point out that it offers members of the public a quick, simple and inexpensive avenue to seek redress for wrongs committed by a powerful and otherwise practically untouchable institution. A complaint to the Commission costs nothing to file, requires no lawyers and involves no publicity, unless an adjudication is published. Complaints are typically handled within weeks, versus the years required for many lawsuits. Supporters also note that the “shield” of which critics complain actually protects press freedom as well as self-interest. Legislation, such as the privacy law most often advocated, might limit abuses but would certainly also limit freedom.

In the United States, constitutional guarantees permit few legislative limits on journalistic activity, even when that activity results in inaccuracy or unfairness. The Federal Communications Commission exercises only weak controls on the content of broadcast journalism. A handful of local, voluntary press councils exist, but the only attempt to establish such a body at the national level collapsed when major news organizations refused to participate. Similarly, while several codes of ethics exist, none is universally accepted and none has any enforcement mechanism. This lack of regulation is often cited as justification for refusal

to classify journalism as a profession at the same level as law or medicine. The same lack of regulation is equally often cited as a major contributor to the vigor and independence of US journalism.

This overview suggests that even such a well-intentioned label as the “Anglo-Saxon style” of journalism, which does serve to distinguish one broad set of practices from other approaches, creates the risk of oversimplification and stereotyping. Journalists and scholars should be especially wary of falling into either trap whether they are discussing the subject matter of journalism or journalism itself.

FOOTNOTE

- 1 Interviews were conducted in person in London during November and December 2001. Interview subjects included current and former senior editors and experienced journalists of The Times, The Mirror, The Guardian, The Observer, The Independent, as well as senior faculty at the City University and Westminster University and senior staff members of the Press Complaints Commission.

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