

# 3.9 Communicating Facts

## Aim

- To highlight the difference between fact and opinion.

### Procedure

Give the following two reports to the students:

#### A

*As I was standing at the bus stop, a beggar crossed the road and sneaked into a clothes shop meant for the rich. After a few moments, the owner appeared at the door and called the police who were standing at a police post nearby. He had caught the beggar stealing. He held the thief by the scruff of his neck until the police arrived. They took him to the nearest police station.*

#### B

*As I was standing at the bus stop, a boy dressed in shabby clothes crossed the road and entered the department store. After some moments, a man who appeared angry came to the door of the shop catching the boy by the scruff of his neck and shouted for the police. The police arrived after a few seconds and took the boy away.*

Ask the students to answer the following questions:

- Can you spot the differences between the two reports?
- Which of the reports is the more subjective – i.e. containing the opinion and bias of the reporter? Can you underline the phrases and words used that indicate the reporter’s opinion?
- What are your reasons for your choice of the more objective report (i.e. the one that is more true to fact.)?
- Which of these reports do you find more interesting to read?

### Input

- When we communicate we express ideas, thoughts, and opinions.
- But how objective (true to fact) are our opinions?
- Michael Schudson, in his classic, ‘*Discovering the News*’, traces the rise of objectivity to the Post-World War I period. When scholars and journalists alike turned to the methods and language of science in an attempt to make sense of a world that was being turned upside down by the influence of Freud and Marx, the emergence of new economic forces and the erosion of traditional values. Objectivity was a reliance on observable facts, but it was also a methodology for freeing factual reporting from the biases and values of source, writer or reader. It was itself a value, an ideal.
- In the examples above, the narrative style of B is the more factual one. The description of the event is free from any bias. The narrator is merely retelling what went on before his eyes, as he saw it happen.
- The narrative style of A is interpretative. The description goes beyond a mere ‘laying bare’ of the events that happened. It describes how the narrator has himself perceived the event. His biases and judgements are included in his narration.

As I was standing at the bus stop, a beggar crossed the road and sneaked into a clothes shop meant for the rich. After a few moments, the owner appeared at the door and called the police who were standing at a police post nearby. He had caught the beggar stealing. He held the thief by the scruff of his neck until the police arrived. They took him to the nearest police station.

- The bias in the words and phrases is explained below:
- ‘Beggar’ - Either he has seen the boy begging before or he presumes he is a beggar by the way he is dressed, relying therefore on a bias that likens all or most shabbily dressed people to be beggars.
- ‘Sneaked’ - The narrator describes the way he sees the boy entering the shop. It is a way that, to his mind, appears suspicious.

## Materials Required

- Copies of the Procedure.

- ‘Meant for the rich’ - The narrator may have been to the store himself and may have found the prices very high or he may be judging from the look of the shop, or from hearsay.
- ‘Owner’ - Is the man who caught the boy by his neck the owner? How sure is the narrator of this? Probably the narrator knows him to be the owner due to a previous acquaintance.
- ‘He had caught the beggar stealing’ - The narrator standing at the bus stop across the street could not have seen so clearly as to declare the exact nature of the ‘crime’ committed by the boy. He may have fought with someone in the shop, or may have threatened a sales agent...we are not really sure. Here the narrator takes the liberty to provide the answer that his listener will inevitably ask: But what happened in the shop? Why was the boy caught?
- ‘Thief’ - The foregone conclusion.
- ‘Nearest police station’ - How certain is the narrator about where the police are taking the boy and whether they are actually taking him to the police station nearest to the scene of the crime?
- In this lesson we have learned to be critical of the ways we communicate about an event. Are we factual and objective or are we prone to put in our biases and our subjective opinions? More often than not, the latter is the case. This is because mere factual information is not very interesting. People do not only want to know what happened, they want to know how and why an event occurred.
- In entering into these areas we tread on unsure ground because only a thorough verification would help us arrive at the correct answers.
- Unfortunately, popular communication lacks the patience of investigative research and so we supplement the news with our own theories and opinions. This is how rumours begin. Rumours are distortions of a core fact – distortions that contain more of subjective opinion than objective news. And as long as the rumours are rife, as long as they are in circulation, they accumulate more and more of opinion and less and less of objective fact.

## Review

1. When we communicate we express ideas, thoughts, and opinions but we need to reflect on how objective (true to fact) our opinions are.
2. Objectivity first came about in an attempt to make sense of a world that was being turned upside down by the influence of Freud and Marx as well as new economic forces and the erosion of traditional values.
3. Popular communication lacks the patience of investigative research and so we supplement the news with our own theories and opinions.

## Reflection

Time, space and the ethical values of a journalist are all factors that determine how objective a news story is. How can we work around these factors to ensure that our stories are the best obtainable version of the truth?

## Relevant Skills

Cover a story from the street and prepare it for presentation. Evaluate the bias of your informants, i.e. What are the facts? What is not true?

## Resources

BOSCOM-INDIA. ‘SHEPHERDS’ FOR AN INFORMATION AGE. Matunga: Tej Prasarini, 2000.

Wirchasuck, Peter. Building Effective Leadership. Canada:

