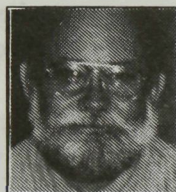


# TV — transparent or opaque?

**Try to understand the source of the story, the channel, the program, even the presenter. Presenters become credible because of their record of telling the truth, being transparent, that's what gets them their viewers and keeps them. The truth differs depending where you are standing.**



**By JOHN TAYLOR**

**TELEVISION** — in particular, the accountability and transparency of TV as a mass media — is a subject that is very dear to my heart.

We must assume at this point we are only concerned with the capacity of television to inform from a news or current affairs point of view, or from an editorial situation that is designed to make viewers think.

We must not forget, however, that the biggest role that television has, is to entertain, and in this area we are definitely not transparent. In fact, we are most opaque, often telling untruths for the sake of a good story, weaving a web of intrigue, action and suspense that is all poppycock — far from any truths or transparency, but that will nevertheless have the viewer believing it implicitly.

In this way, we can manipulate people's thoughts, maybe even their actions, all for the sake of good solid fiction entertainment.

It must be truthfully known that we honestly cannot be held responsible for the actions of those who don't want to think for themselves or question the words or actions of others. No one, and definitely I can't offer excuses regarding television to those who are just mindless viewers who always take at face value the things that they see and hear on TV.

I would expect our viewers to have opinions of their own and to understand that what we say, even in a news context, that there will be some bias or opinion difference, for after all, we are humans too.

## JOHN TAYLOR

Wouldn't it be a terrible world if we all had the same opinions. How boring and dreary it would be to live in that type of 1984ish Orwellian environment.

There is a saying 'What you see is what you get' - from a television point of view it should be modified to 'what you see, ain't necessarily what you get'

Let's look at a couple of examples:

On the eve of Desert Storm, with all its threats and diplomatic toeing and froing, that had the whole world wondering whether it was going to be the start of World War Three, we had a call from a man in Mount Hagen wanting to know if the war in the Gulf had started yet and would it be seen 'live' on EM TV. He also added the thought that the war would be a good thing and that he hoped that it would teach the Keremis a lesson. But why were the Americans coming here to do it, couldn't our own PNGDF do it cheaper?

Was he confused or had the opaque mass media given him the wrong idea? Desert Storm was a real TV war, so presumably television should take some of the blame.

We should also as an industry take some of the blame for this story:

During the early days of our latest coup or whatever it was called, I happened to be interviewed (because the experts hadn't arrived from down South as yet), by a well known media personality, who wanted to know whether there were armed police or Defence Force soldiers patrolling the streets of Port Moresby. I answered that when I had come to work that morning it had been a beautiful Papua New Guinea morning, cool, peaceful and calm. On my answering this way he was taken aback and quickly wound up the interview. I wasn't giving him the answers to his questions the way he expected or wanted. How can you be having a coup and be having a beautiful morning too?

That's television for you, would then my interviewer's viewers be getting a transparent view of what was happening, or an opaque view of what my interviewer would have liked to have happened?

We talk a lot about transparency or being opaque, so much so they are true PNG buzz words, but do we know exactly what they mean?

My *Oxford Paperback Dictionary* gives these explanations:

**Transparent** 1. Allowing light to pass through so that the objects behind can be seen clearly.

2. Easily understood [of an excuse or motive etc.] of such a truth, behind it is easily perceived.

3. Clear and unmistakable 'a man of transparent honesty'.

**Opaque** 1. Not transparent, not allowing light to pass through.

2. of a statement — not clear.

But on the same page as opaque I found this word.

**Openly** Without concealment publicly, frankly.

Maybe this is a better word for expressing transparency in relation to television. I think it is more applicable to a mass media that has a large component of entertaining fiction programs during its many hours of transmission to its unsuspecting, or should I say hopefully, suspecting viewing public.

The mechanics of going from being a transparent media to being opaque, I would think, could be frighteningly quick if you weren't very careful. This of course is an important part of my responsibility as Chief Executive to keep my station on track.

As much as anything it can be caused by the sheer competitive nature of the mass media, when it's all about selling more copies, getting better audience rating points — which means more viewers, or trying to 'sell' that story with just that sensational extra often invented details. If we are looking to place blame though, shouldn't we look at the English language for printing a dictionary with so many good emotive meaning words to use? Or maybe we should blame the training of our writers and journalists that they don't always use a word that is accurate, probably bland too, but nevertheless transparent, or maybe we should just blame human nature, just for the sake of blaming someone or something.

I would like you to think about blaming nobody, for a lack of transparency and look to ourselves for not making our own interpretation for a given story.

How do you know when to believe? Or what not to believe? Or in fact what to believe?

Try to understand the source of the story, the channel, the program, even the presenter. Presenters become credible because of their record of telling the truth, being transparent, that's what gets them their viewers and keeps them. Most presenters have a personal stake in telling the story as it happened — please understand that the truth differs depending where you are standing, and here's an example:

Picture this, two cars are approaching a pedestrian crossing that is clear of people. Car A is in the lane closest to the centre line and is in front of and travelling faster than car B which is in the lane closest to the kerb. As car A is about to cross the pedestrian crossing a man runs out from the kerb without looking, car A swerves into the kerb lane hitting the pedestrian

and throwing him to the ground heavily.

Car B smashes into the side of car A, which causes it to run over the pedestrian, killing him.

A camera crew from TV station B (or maybe it was even our News Department) was filming from the kerb and got all the action from their side of the street. Strangely a crew from TV station A (or maybe this crew was from *A Current Affair*) was filming from the median strip and they too caught all the action. *60 Minutes* was in the helicopter flying overhead, saw all the action but couldn't find anywhere to land.

Now crew B covered it as a news story saying how sad it was that a pedestrian had been killed in unfortunate circumstances by running in front of a car. They did close ups of the cars, interviewed bystanders and shot the ambulance leaving the scene, you all know that stuff, you have seen it a thousand times. Crew B then sent the footage back to the station by the magic eye link and it went to air within half an hour.

The crew from station A saw it all a different way from the other side of the street. They saw the driver of car A with an ice cream in his hand, miss his grip on the steering wheel so that instead of swerving to miss the pedestrian he didn't turn the wheel far enough and hit the pedestrian plus hitting the side of car B, forcing car B into running over and killing the pedestrian.

Late that night they had the story to air from their viewpoint, complete with animated drawings and comments from experts on the freezing effects of ice cream on a driver's ability to concentrate.

One accident seen from two different angles and what's more two different perspectives that would have come out on TV that night as almost being two different stories. Improbable you say? Ask a number of bystanders to an accident what happened and you will get a number of different stories — all by eyewitnesses.

So don't jump to conclusions about a lack of transparency in news and particularly beware of accusing the media of opaqueness, because there may be a reason for what you feel is not the truth. Accidents don't always look the same from both sides of the street.

As a postscript to this story, *60 Minutes*, which had shot everything from the helicopter, had a road safety expert come into the studio and scooped a story on competitive TV stations fighting for stories and causing accidents.

In all the television stations that I have worked in, different programs have different ways in which they would approach a similar story. The News Department shoots, edits, writes and presents a story differently to the way that *A Current Affair* does, as do *60 Minutes*, who are different to *Sunday*, the *Today Show*, and even the *Midday Show*.

All these programs are in competition with each other. They operate with their own budgets as unique entities. They look at stories with a different insight, sometimes even different shooting techniques — as an example, *60 Minutes* still shoot on film stock rather than video tape, because it gives the finished product a different feel.

But are they all transparent I hear you asking?

I think that the *TRUTH* is a basic ingredient and I am sure that transparency is uppermost in the minds of all television news and current affairs producers but viewers always must be aware of the individual opinions of the program producers and must never forget that truism of television:

*CAVEAT EMPTOR*, that wonderful Latin phrase for 'let the viewer beware'.

When you view the news next, or see a current affairs program just remember this:

*[Taylor fogs up his glasses and cleans them.]*

Opaque ... Transparent ... and from my dictionary a closing thought: 'of such a truth, behind, it is easily perceived'.

The onus is on us as individuals to perceive transparency. It's a state of mind, and if you live your life in a transparent state you will see the light go dimmer as the truth becomes more opaque.

□ *John Taylor was Chief Executive of EM TV for seven years until October 1997, when he stepped down from the position and became a Brisbane-based media consultant. He presented this paper at the 'Ombudsman Commission and the Media: Transparency and Accountability' seminar in Port Moresby on 14 May 1997.*