

News, Politics & Power:

Assignment 1

‘Tuchman (1972) argues that objectivity in news is a strategic ritual. Explain what Tuchman means by this, evidencing your answer in an example from a news story from an established news outlet.’

Within the breadth of literature about the study of news media, Tuchman’s ‘*Objectivity as Strategic Ritual*’ stands out as an insightful analysis into how journalistic practices operate with regard to the use of ‘objectivity’.¹ In this paper, Tuchman outlines the concept of a ‘strategic ritual’ as a “routine procedure” that has “only tangential relevance to the end sought” and that serves to “deflect potential criticism” of journalists and their news organisations.² Tuchman argues that this ‘strategic ritual’ can be found within news media in four major categories: presenting conflicting possibilities, presenting supporting evidence, using quotations, and the structuring of information.³ These four procedures seem fundamental to Tuchman’s theory and help to inform her inspection into what ‘objectivity’ consists of in the context of news and how it may be invoked by journalists. I feel that these ideas might be best explored through the example of a news article from ‘The Economist’

¹ Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen’s Notions of Objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), 660–679.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2776752>

² Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen’s Notions of Objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), P661.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2776752>.

³ Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen’s Notions of Objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), 660–679.
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entitled ‘Kemi Badenoch, the Tories’ new leader, plans war on the “blob” as it seems to contain each of Tuchman’s objectivity procedures in some capacity.⁴

The first of Tuchman’s rituals, that of presenting conflicting possibilities, is referred to in her paper as “problematic” as she posits that presenting a two-sided framework to a certain issue may not equate to objectivity, especially if there are more than two “truth-claims” to a given topic.⁵ Such a procedure can be seen in the overall structuring of the aforementioned article from ‘The Economist’ as it leads with information about Kemi Badenoch’s newly released pamphlet: “Conservatism in Crisis: Rise of the Bureaucratic Class” and subsequently details the opposing view from Labour Party supporters.⁶ In fact, this article adheres so much to Tuchman’s procedure that it seems to make a direct comparison between the two opposing views. This can be seen through the phrases “an idea circulating on the Tory right: that the “blob”, a sticky nexus of liberal interest groups, works to thwart the policy of Conservative governments” and “The blob is, for Starmerites, the solution not the problem” which may be viewed by Tuchman as a clear attempt to invoke a sense of objectivity by outlining “both sides of the story”.⁷ For Tuchman, this structural device would not, however, suffice in making the article objective since there are many views (those of the so-called “blob” for example) that have not been discussed and who’s input in the story might alter readers’ perceptions of the truth. Therefore, it seems that the presentation of conflicting possibilities

⁴ <https://www.economist.com/britain/2024/11/02/kemi-badenoch-the-tories-new-leader-plans-war-on-the-blob>

⁵ Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen’s Notions of Objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), P666.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2776752>

⁶ https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/66e290977b0f17041797e6ae/66fb3a4aa6d5bf17f7481ed1_Conservatism%20in%20Crisis.pdf

⁷ <https://www.economist.com/britain/2024/11/02/kemi-badenoch-the-tories-new-leader-plans-war-on-the-blob>

as a journalistic procedure is appropriate for avoiding claims of ‘bias’ yet is too simplistic to offer a true sense of objectivity to news media.

In another vein, Tuchman’s paper also highlights the strategic ritual of presenting supporting evidence, in the form of contextual ‘facts’, that journalists may use in order “to support a truth-claim”.⁸ However, Tuchman suggests that “it is sociological commonplace that “facts” do not speak for themselves” as readers’ interpretations of a ‘fact’ will vary widely depending on their personal experiences and how the ‘fact’ is presented by a journalist.⁹ In the story from ‘The Economist’ this procedure can be found in the phrase “[Kemi Badenoch] faces a daunting task: at the general election in July, the Tories were reduced to their worst defeat since at least 1832 in both seats (121) and vote share (24%)” as the claim that she “faces a daunting task” is supported by ‘factual’ statistics of the Tories’ disagreeable political position.¹⁰ This would appear to Tuchman as a clear example of invoking ‘objectivity’ through statistics since the same election numbers used in this article might also be used in a different context to support an alternate narrative (such as suggesting that the Tories have done very well politically until recently, perhaps). Because of this, Tuchman would argue that ‘facts’ are malleable and can be manipulated to suit the needs of journalists, thus the use of supporting evidence in news is not adequate for claiming ‘objectivity’.

⁸ Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen’s Notions of Objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), P667.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2776752>

⁹ Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen’s Notions of Objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), P668.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2776752>

¹⁰ <https://www.economist.com/britain/2024/11/02/kemi-badenoch-the-tories-new-leader-plans-war-on-the-blob>

Another of Tuchman's objectivity procedures is the use of quotations "as a form of supporting evidence" that can serve as a "signalling device" and that allows journalists to "remove [their] presence from the story".¹¹ The use of quotations as a tool to invoke objectivity can be seen in the article from 'The Economist' where the writer places the terms "Blob" and "new bureaucratic class" in quotations to signal to readers that the (seemingly derogatory) terms are not of their own creation, thus removing the impression that the writer may be injecting their own view into the narrative.¹² Interestingly, the writer proceeds to use the term "new bureaucratic class" without quotation marks later in the article, a choice which may indicate to readers that the term is 'factual' enough to protect the journalist from claims of bias and which might also, inadvertently reveal the writers own political leanings.¹³ Tuchman would likely see this decision as one that is typical of objectivity procedures since the journalist has been able to invoke an objective tone whilst simultaneously veering the article towards a certain perspective.

Tuchman also states that quoting a person's speech can aid newsmen in claiming objectivity as they are able to retain an impression of impartiality whilst "getting others to say what [they themselves] think".¹⁴ This use of quotations for reported speech can be found in the article from 'The Economist' through the quote from a biographer who states that "[Kemi Badenoch] has to fight the machinery of government, the activists, the broadcast media and

¹¹ Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), P668.

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¹² <https://www.economist.com/britain/2024/11/02/kemi-badenoch-the-tories-new-leader-plans-war-on-the-blob>

¹³ <https://www.economist.com/britain/2024/11/02/kemi-badenoch-the-tories-new-leader-plans-war-on-the-blob>

¹⁴ Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), P668.

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others pretty much all the time”.¹⁵ The use of this reported speech, Tuchman might suggest, permits the writer to elicit sympathy for Mrs Badenoch’s position from readers whilst maintaining the illusion of impartiality in order to deflect the potential criticism of bias.

The last of Tuchman’s objectivity procedures explored in her paper is the “structuring of information in an appropriate sequence”.¹⁶ Tuchman identifies this ritual as an overarching “formal attribute” that “theoretically resembles an inverted pyramid” and that places the most important information of an article at the beginning and information of “decreasing importance’ throughout.¹⁷ In the article from ‘The Economist’, the writer appears to adhere to such a structure as the story opens with information about Kemi Badenoch’s “pet issue of combating progressive identity politics” and proceeds with lesser, contextual information in later paragraphs.¹⁸ For Tuchman, this structure “is the most problematic formal aspect of objectivity” as it requires journalists to make an explicit decision about what information they choose to prioritise.¹⁹ As a result of this, Tuchman might argue that the structuring of information as a news procedure does not adequately exempt an article from accusations of bias.

¹⁵ <https://www.economist.com/britain/2024/11/02/kemi-badenoch-the-tories-new-leader-plans-war-on-the-blob>

¹⁶ Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen’s Notions of Objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), P669.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2776752>

¹⁷ Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen’s Notions of Objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), P670.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2776752>

¹⁸ <https://www.economist.com/britain/2024/11/02/kemi-badenoch-the-tories-new-leader-plans-war-on-the-blob>

¹⁹ Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen’s Notions of Objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), P670.
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To conclude, Tuchman's four strategic rituals appear to serve as a useful tool by which to analyse the practices of journalists in their pursuit of 'objectivity'. Each of these procedures can be found, in some form, in the article discussed above which may indicate how pervasive such techniques are in modern news media. Though these rituals do seem to allow a certain amount of protection from criticism, Tuchman would ultimately posit that they are not the route by which a journalist can truly achieve 'objectivity'.

1,183 Words

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