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FOUR ELECTIONS AND A FUNERAL†

MARCO BARDAZZI*

Let me start by quoting Friedrich Nietzsche: “There are no facts, only interpretations.” I am beginning with a quote by Friedrich Nietzsche not only because with such an authoritative panel here I need to find some tricks to make you believe I am a man of letters, but also because unfortunately this sentence often comes to mind when I look at my profession.

I would love to describe my job, rather than with these words by Nietzsche, with another quote that I have found to be one of the best definitions of journalism available. It is from Alexis Carrel, winner of the 1912 Nobel Prize for Medicine: “A few observations and much reasoning leads to error; many observations and a little reasoning to truth.” He was talking about scientific research, but I think of it as a sentence ready for a textbook about journalism as well.

Nietzsche, though, seems to have more to do with my daily job than Carrel, and I know I’m giving ammunition to Mr. Donohue here.

I had a clear perception of this during the past year when we, as journalists—and I am talking about European journalists because I am a foreign correspondent working for the Italian media—have failed in just twelve months to tell the story right in four major elections. This is the reason for the title of my speech. The four elections were the Democratic primary (January-February 2004), the Afghanistan election (October 2004), the United States presidential election (November 2004), and obviously, the Iraqi election (January 2005).

† On March 31, 2005, the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy* hosted a symposium entitled *After Objectivity: What Moral Norms Should Govern News Reporting?* Mr. Bardazzi was the third speaker at the Symposium. See also William Donohue, Truth, Ideology, and Journalism (Mar. 31, 2005), in 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL’Y 711 (2005); Kenneth Woodward, Neither ‘Objective’ Nor ‘Post-Modern’ (Mar. 31, 2005), in 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL’Y 719 (2005); Matthew Storr, If Not Objectivity, How About Honesty? (Mar. 31, 2005), in 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL’Y 733 (2005).

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The funeral is included in the title to commemorate something we have lost—objectivity.

Let me just give you a few ideas and my thoughts about these four elections. The first election I'd like to discuss is the Democratic primary. We were convinced, as journalists—I'm still talking about Europeans, although I'm sure it was the same for Americans because foreign correspondents copied what the Americans do, because we are not able to cover the country as they do—that Howard Dean was going to win the primary. We fell in love with Howard Dean. He was perfect from a journalistic point of view. He was something new, he had a new way of doing politics, he had all these organizations on the web—the moveon.org groups all around the country, these new ways of making money on the Internet. That was perfect—something new, something brilliant. We thought he was going to be the one who was going to challenge President Bush, and we all know what happened. As soon as people went to vote, it was not Dean. It was instead John Kerry.

The second election, a few months later, was the Afghanistan election. We were telling the story of Afghanistan as a disaster waiting to happen. Journalists believed it was impossible to have elections in Afghanistan. I really think that part of the world is of great importance to us as Western countries, and we know this because of September 11, 2001. Those elections were really a turning point in the history of Afghanistan. It was the first time they had an election, and we were telling, day by day, that it was impossible that something like this could succeed. Actually, they did have many problems, but in the end, the elections succeeded. And now, they still have to struggle greatly, but they have a president, Hamid Karzai, and they have a country that is trying to move on. So I think we screwed up this one also.

Then, a few months after the Afghanistan election, there was the 2004 United States presidential election. The Italians went to bed sure that John Kerry was the new President of the United States because, in the Italian newspapers, that was already written. That was the impression that I got, traveling around the country in the weeks before the elections. Looking at the American media, it seemed that it was impossible that the result could be something different than a victory by Senator Kerry. We believed that story, and we believed that the country was going in that direction. We were wrong again.

Fourth, and finally, we have the Iraq election. A few months ago, you all remember, we again believed it was impossible to have an election in a country like Iraq. It was going to be *Apocalypse Now*, it was going to be a disaster and could not work. The

insurgents were going to create a problem. Then, we were really struck by what happened. Millions of people went to the polls to decide their future. Iraq is now still a country that is in a great amount of trouble, but they had the election, and I think we, as journalists all around the world, did not get the real feelings of the Iraqi people during that period. So, there was a problem that time.

Why did we fail so badly? I think it was because we lost our capacity to look at men and at women. We are so detached—and I'm talking about my personal detachment—from the real man that we really, genuinely thought that *Fahrenheit 9-11*, a brilliant documentary by Michael Moore, could be a serious factor in a race for the White House. It is a reality that asks us, as journalists, to reflect on our job and responsibilities. I could take other examples from my own experience.

When I was at the United States Central Command base in Qatar in March 2003 covering the war in Iraq, we had six television screens always on in the media center, one beside the other. On four of them, you could follow the coverage by the major American networks. A fifth one was for the British television (BBC or Sky News), and the sixth was for Al Jazeera. You had two totally different wars going—one on the Western networks and one on the Arab one. My desk in the headquarters was right in front of all of these television screens, so for one month, this is what I saw on those television screens. I saw a clean, surgical, spectacular, and bloodless war on the Western networks. However, I saw a terrible and endless show of massacres, with children without limbs and bloody corpses, on Al Jazeera's network. Which one was the real war? Neither of them and both of them at the same time.

So, what is objectivity? What is it, in a world where information is available everywhere, on your computers as well as on your cell phones and hand-held devices? What kind of moral rules can you impose on us, as journalists, now that everyone can be a "journalist" by starting a blog on the Internet?

The debate is open both in American and European journalism. There are those, like Dan Gillmor, who are openly talking about the end of objectivity. He states, "I'd like to toss out objectivity as a goal," Gillmor says on his own Internet blog, "and replace it with four other notions that may add up to the same thing. They are pillars of good journalism: thoroughness, accuracy, fairness, and transparency."

Others, like the Columbia sociologist Herbert Gans, are trying to replace objectivity with news reporting with a "multiper-

spectival approach.” For instance, instead of the dominant parties defining politics, multiple parties will define politics. Instead of the dominant ideas being heard, we will hear multiple ideas. Instead of the dominant speakers in the news, we will hear from many more speakers. Instead of a dominant frame, we will have multiple frames. This is, of course, easy to say, but difficult to do, from a journalist’s point of view.

According to Daniel Okrent, the public editor of the *New York Times*, the fact that objectivity is so elusive does not mean that a paper cannot be fair. “Objectivity is not a walk down the middle of the road,” he says, but “testing an idea and coming to a conclusion. Objectivity should be a reality check: testing bias against the evidence.” Furthermore, Okrent states that readers “want something more out of us than an ‘on the one hand/on the other hand’ recitation of opposing sides.”

All of these ideas are absolutely interesting. Still, personally, I need something more to understand what my job is about. Rules, even moral rules, are not enough to help me in my daily struggle to tell the stories of the human adventure.

A few weeks ago, while talking to a group of journalists in Italy, the Archbishop of Bologna, Monsignor Carlo Caffarra, suggested that we read St. Thomas: “Since man is a social animal, one man naturally owes another whatever is necessary for the preservation of human society. Now it would be impossible for men to live together, unless they believed one another, as declaring the truth one to another. Hence, the virtue of truth does, in a manner, regard something as being due.”

We have a moral debt to our readers, to you. The primacy of truth implicates a scrupulous respect for reality. It is necessary to check facts and to weigh the sources, with critical conscience, openness, and curiosity, before we can submit them to you.

We also need, I think, to be bold as journalists. We have to work without self-censorship in doing our job. The model, in this case, should be the patron saint of journalists, St. Frances of Sales. St. Francis of Sales volunteered in 1594 for a mission to the south shores of Lake Geneva to re-establish the Catholic faith in a Calvinist land. It was a perilous mission with considerable personal danger. He was attacked and beaten, shot at and poisoned, but he did not give up. He was a “reporter of Christ,” who scattered his pamphlets and leaflets among the inhabitants of that region. In two years, he had converted 8,000 souls. And they chose him as their patron saint of reporters.

Our responsibility is, from a certain point of view, a matter of education. This has to do with what Mr. Woodward was saying

before and also with the idea that journalists that are themselves well-informed. We can steer choices and decisions by the public opinion; so education surely is part of our job. Education, then, helps people to be really free. In the Jubilee of Journalists in 2000, Pope John Paul II said: "One cannot write or broadcast only with a view to audience share, to the prejudice of truly educational services."

In my opinion, I think that there are two ways of doing my job. Either we inform to set people free, helping them to make their choices with knowledge of all the factors, or we inform to produce consent on decisions already made by someone else. For free information, more than rules, we need journalists who are free. Education comes to mind again. As journalists, I think we need a fresh start, which is not a matter of a new "idea," but rather, a matter of being faithful to our most original experience because "reality precedes us, and it is positive." We need to stay in front of this reality.

In conclusion, I would like to quote Father Luigi Giussani, the founder of the Catholic Movement of Communion and Liberation, who died a few weeks ago in Italy, and who was part of my personal story as a journalist. "I see in Italy and the world," Giussani said, "a terrible falling apart of education. This is why we must pay attention to those persons among us who are placed in positions on which the education of others depends: teachers and journalists." Giussani added, "What I ask of you journalists is the awareness of being at the root of the conversion of the world. Try to be those who miraculously provoke the life common to all men." You cannot provoke the life common to all men, though, if your life has not been provoked by something, and if you are not willing to have it be provoked every day by something else.

