

- Divide my remarks into three sections: the big picture, where we are with journalism, and what we should be doing about it.

### 1) Big picture

- We should see coverage of Brexit as *symptomatic* of a wider media trend but also cultural trend
- Trace its roots back to the cultural turn of the 1970s, a move away from 19<sup>th</sup> century positivism and rationality, towards the humanities and focus on the creation of meaning – think back to the hedonism of the late 1960s – a revolt against the war generation.
- During the 1990s, a greater focus on emotion and the self gained pace as the Internet developed (personalisation - My health, My finance etc, early Yahoo/AOL).
- Subsequently, growth of Reality TV, ‘selfies’, image based social media tools such as Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook – we construct, reconstruct and manage our identity daily – by the minute - through social media. Our Facebook profile, our Twitter profile...
- What this means is that we live in world increasingly driven by emotion, and with that has come a polarisation of public discourse – almost as though if I believe something is right, (and shout loudly enough) it is right. Emotion at the expense of fact.
- Evident in populism, seen in Brexit, Trump, but also climate change etc. So now we have alternative facts and anything that is not liked is deemed to be ‘fake news’.
- News has become sucked up into this environment.

### 2) News and journalism then and now

- Fair to say that news is dominated today by emotion – old adage ‘if it bleeds, it leads’ has never been more true.
- How did we get to this point? Worth thinking a bit about objectivity, at best a controversial and blurred subject.
- Normative practice, late 19<sup>th</sup> century, counterbalance to growing PR industry – a catch-all phrase which encompasses impartiality, freedom from bias, fact based journalism, the pyramid style of writing.
- But it is also a value and part of the professional ideology of many journalists

- Lived and breathed it at Reuters – no bylines/ little analysis, plain vanilla. Used to say ‘report the facts, let the readers decide’
- Of course objectivity often challenged, by New Journalism – Wolfe/ Mailer, Didion (combined reporting with fiction) – news channels like Fox, the tabloid media culture of the UK. What about the Sun’s 2011 headline ‘Swan Bake’, which demonised immigrants to Britain? Was there anything objective about that? Or about the way migrants and the voiceless are represented today – usually as threats or victims.
- Some UK newspapers developed a highly emotive campaign against the EU. The Daily Mail’s Enemies of the People headline, but have we forgotten Up Yours Delors – that dates back to 1990 and the single currency debate.
- So we expect our *tabloid press* today to be partisan. We have been conditioned to it for decades.
- But objectivity for public service *broadcasters* regulated by Ofcom has actually been remarkably stable as a concept.

3) What can we do about it?

- Time to think about reconceptualising objectivity, rethinking what we mean by the term.
- It can’t be stop-watch neutrality, giving equal airtime to politicians from opposing sides of the argument if one side is patently offering up views that don’t make sense.
- The BBC quite rightly, criticised this April by Ofcom for its handling of an interview with the climate sceptic Nigel Lawson.
- Ofcom ruling said:  

“Statements made about the science of climate change were not challenged sufficiently during this interview, which meant the programme was not *duly accurate*.”
- In re-thinking objectivity, it is not about giving equal say to opposing sides of an argument. It is about accuracy, and the journalist has a responsibility to make a judgement call – and challenge – weigh the facts - if someone is speaking nonsense.
- Climate change debate has moved on, with overwhelming evidence that it is happening.
- But Brexit is very much a grey area. Who dares to challenge the arguments of the Leavers or Remainers?

- Even re-tweeting a Remain comment risks being called out by some newspapers.
- As journalists we need to challenge more; journalism needs to reconceptualise its normative values of objectivity around three concepts – verification, transparency and contextualisation.
- Need to get to the closest approximation of the truth. Statements or so called user-generated content need to be verified and clearly sourced – that is full transparency.
- With the flood of material swashing around the Internet and in today’s ‘shouty’, populist, emotion-driven environment, we can’t just parrot back what people say.
- To cite Bob Woodward: “The job of journalism is not stenography. It is getting the full story and the meaning of that story.” (2007)