Sophia University Junior College Division Faculty Journal
第 45 号, 2024, 55-67

Empathy in Journalism: A Prescriptive Construct Takes Shape

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Abstract

This article looks at the manner in which empathy has been taken up in recent years as an explicit focus of journalistic discourse and practice. I consider how empathy is defined in journalism, how it is invested with value in journalistic circles, and how it is being used to shape journalistic practice. My concern is with how empathy serves as a prescriptive construct in journalism, serving to guide discussions about the nature of journalistic work and how best to carry it out. Toward this end, I examine a range of publications aimed primarily at professional journalists and journalists in training. My review of this material suggests that while there is a diversity of views about why and how empathy is important in journalistic work, advocates of empathy tend to emphasize the value of empathy in terms of eliciting information from sources and the potential influences on audiences of journalistic work, and much less so the precise craft of writing or otherwise producing journalistic reports or stories.

Introduction

> Empathy is one of the greatest gifts a journalist can have. If you come by it naturally, you can actually feel what your subject is feeling, and that can be a painful burden sometimes. But even if you have to develop the empathetic wavelength, it not only makes the person you're interviewing feel understood, it elevates your writing. (Howard, 2017)

The above words, appearing in an article on empathy and journalism at Nieman Storyboard, a website hosted by the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University, encapsulate many of the key stands of thought about the place of empathy in contemporary journalism: in apparent contrast to the longstanding ethic of journalistic objectivity, empathy is now regarded as a professional virtue for journalists; it is something that can be learned and cultivated; it brings journalists closer to the individuals they interview as sources; and it has a positive impact on their works that

are shared with audiences.

This appears to represent a fairly recent turn in journalistic thinking. Just a little over a decade ago, it could be said that empathy has "little place in the familiar rhetoric about journalism" (Schudson, 2013, p. 37), and a few years later, that "empathy has been a neglected concept. It has been neither addressed in journalistic work practice nor in relation to the debate about emotions in journalism" (Glück, 2016, p. 894). But from around the time when these very views were published, there has been a significant upswelling of interest in and discourse about empathy in journalism, with a growing number of professional journalists and teachers of journalism ruminating about the place of empathy. In a published discussion between two editors at a small regional newspaper, for instance, one stated: "We're kind of at a crossroads where journalists are really figuring out what it means to be a modern journalist and redefining and redeveloping that concept. And, empathetic journalism is … a big part of the overall conversation of what it means to be a journalist" (Grace & Neville, 2023). Many in the field have been advocating a more explicitly central role for empathy in journalistic practice.

This movement within journalism is perhaps not surprising given the more broadly societal attention paid to empathy over roughly the last two decades as well as an accompanying uptick in scholarly research on empathy. Research on empathy has been multidisciplinary, spanning disciplines ranging from psychology to philosophy to anthropology to biology. Empathy has likewise become a focal point in a wide range of spheres of activity including early childhood education, business management, healthcare, and even museum management. In online publications aimed at general audiences in recent years, empathy has typically been characterized as a societal good and its lack as a moral failing (C. Oliver, 2018). Seen in this broader context, the increasing attention to empathy in journalistic circles would appear to be one contributing element of the way in which empathy—the term and concept itself, and an array of practices surrounding it—has risen in importance more generally.

In the present article, my aim is to elucidate the key contours of the recent journalistic concern with empathy, including how empathy is defined in journalism, how it is invested with value, and how it informs journalistic practice. Most of all, I am here concerned with how empathy serves as a prescriptive construct in journalism, working not merely as a vehicle with which journalists may reflect upon or scrutinize published articles or other journalistic output, but as an ideational device that orients journalistic practice in a number of ways. Toward this end, I examine a range of publications

aimed primarily at professional journalists and journalists in training, and to a lesser extent scholars of journalism. My review of this material suggests that while there is a diversity of views about why and how empathy is important in journalistic work, advocates of empathy overall emphasize the value of empathy in terms of approaching and eliciting information from sources, and much less so address the precise craft of writing or otherwise producing journalistic works.

Given that the journalistic discourse examined herein is, by and large, in fact not focused on the nitty-gritty details of what empathetic journalistic works actually look like in their published or broadcast forms, the discussion that follows is likewise not aimed at analyzing specific examples of empathetic journalistic writing or reporting (for such analysis, see C. Oliver, 2022). While journalistic work is of course ultimately geared toward getting reports or stories out to audiences, journalistic practice involves the perspectives from which journalists envision a story even before setting out to collect information on it, identifying the kinds of individuals to seek out as sources, and how to approach and talk with those people so as to elicit insightful or otherwise valuable responses from them. Much of the journalistic discourse on empathy is concerned with such facets of practice that precede the actual writing or producing of a report or story.

Conceptual orientation

As noted above, in this article I take up empathy as a prescriptive construct, in this case a term and concept that has come to be invested with significance and notions of utility that go beyond the more "neutral" academic definitions of the term. The relatively reader-friendly *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, for instance, defines empathy as "understanding a person from their frame of reference rather than one's own, or vicariously experiencing that person's feelings, perceptions, and thoughts. Empathy does not, of itself, entail motivation to be of assistance, although it may turn into sympathy or personal distress, which may result in action" (*Empathy*, 2023). The *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior* notes that in the academic psychological literature, empathy has been taken to "encompass processes that are responsible for, or that result from, (1) understanding what another person is thinking and feeling; (2) a broad range of perceptual, cognitive, and affective responses to negative and positive events in the lives of others; or (3) both" (Stocks & Lishner, 2012, p. 32).

While journalistic discourse on empathy sometimes draws upon such definitions, it typically uses them in service to ascribed valuations of an empathetic approach to journalism, thereby loading empathy with additional meaning. In the process, empathy

becomes not merely a descriptive term but a prescriptive one as well. It is similar to what has been discussed in anthropological literature as linguistic ideology or ideology of language, whereby features of a given language—such as English gendered pronouns (Silverstein, 1985) or Japanese "women's language" (Inoue, 2006)—come to be ideologically invested with meanings, making them focal points of societal discourse, and in some cases leading to the transformation or even regimentation of linguistic practice. Explicit talk about the place of empathy in journalism likewise has the capacity to take on a metadiscursive role, helping to galvanize views in journalistic circles about what empathy is, why it is important, and how it should figure into the conduct of journalistic practice.

Methodological issues

For this article, I examined several dozen English-language publications addressing empathy in journalism or closely related matters, such as the place of emotion in journalistic reporting. The vast majority of these materials are aimed at a target readership consisting of professional journalists, students and teachers of journalism, and to an extent scholars of journalism. These include articles and essays posted on websites geared toward journalists such as the aforementioned Nieman Storyboard and Columbia Journalism Review, announcements of and reports on workshops and other professional-development events hosted by organizations such as the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, blog-style postings written by professional journalists, articles in academic journals devoted to journalism, and books on journalism put out by academic publishers.

These materials were identified primarily through online searches, and while it was not the author's intent to locate materials originating specifically from the U.S., the majority of the materials used ended up being from journalists or organizations located in the U.S. There are various reasons why this might be the case, with one possibility being that the fairly recent concern with empathy—and by extension emotion—in journalism may be a particularly American one. Just as the centrality assigned to objectivity in journalism can be characterized as "the norm that historically and still today distinguishes U.S. journalism from the dominant model of continental European journalism" (Schudson, 2001, p. 149), it could likewise be true that against the backdrop of objectivity, the concern with empathy in journalism varies regionally rather than being common globally among journalists working in English. It is beyond the scope of this article to address this issue more fully, and the conclusions drawn herein must be

read with that limitation in mind.

Definitions of empathy

In the journalistic literature on empathy, empathy is defined in different ways, and in some cases there are conflicting views on what kinds or aspects of empathy are suitable for journalistic work. Harland (2008) offers a general, straightforward view of empathy as "the understanding and recognition of another's feelings," a definition that frames empathy in terms of emotional sensitivity. Glück (2016, p. 894) provides a more nuanced view: "Empathy is generally seen not as an emotion *per se*, but closely tied to emotions. It contributes essentially to the perception of emotions in others while not necessarily leading to a sharing of those emotional states." Glück, like some others, goes on to note that empathy is to be differentiated from related concepts such as sympathy, pity, and compassion, all of which suggest an attitudinal stance toward another person whereas empathy by itself does not involve such judgment. Mendonsa (2017) puts it more bluntly in stating that empathy, for journalists, "doesn't mean getting sucked in or becoming an activist. Empathy is a tool that allows for connection with other human beings. It is a portal for experience ... not for absorption."

Some make a further distinction between different types of aspects of empathy. Bradshaw, for instance, draws upon a distinction often made in the psychological literature between cognitive empathy and affective empathy: "Empathy—specifically cognitive empathy—is the ability to imagine *what it is like to be in someone else's shoes*" (Bradshaw, 2020, italics in original). The difference between these two types of empathy is important, he states, because "it is possible to imagine what it is like to be a particular person (cognitive empathy), including criminals and corrupt officials, without feeling sorry for them (sympathy) or feeling the same way (emotional empathy)" (Bradshaw, 2020). Along similar lines, Kessler (2022) is careful to point out that empathy does not mean softness, or agreeing with someone, or feeling an emotional bond with them; instead, it is "the ability—or I would say the ongoing challenge—to try to understand another person's point of view," adding that, for journalists, it is "more helpful to our work to think of empathy as either a cognitive response or an emotional response."

Bui (2018c) utilizes a tripartite view of empathy, consisting of cognitive empathy, "the ability to see the world through another person's perspective;" affective empathy, "physically and emotionally experiencing another person's emotions;" and behavioral empathy, "the verbal and nonverbal communication that indicates someone understands another person or her perspective" (see also Archer & Finger, 2018). Whereas Bradshaw,

as noted above, sees cognitive empathy as the essence of what it is to imagine being in someone else's shoes, and Kessler puts cognitive and affective empathy on an equal footing, Bui suggests that affective empathy is likely to make journalists uncomfortable as it may be a sign that they have gotten too emotionally close to their subjects (Bui, 2018c).

The value and enactment of empathy

That such definitions of empathy have been so carefully articulated in journalistic discourse, particularly in non-academic publications, suggests the backdrop against which journalists have been advocating a more central place for empathy in journalistic work. At least in the American context, this may be best understood in terms of the longstanding value of objectivity in journalism and its eschewal of emotion. The privileging of objectivity, says Schudson, "guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts. Objective reporting is supposed to be cool, rather than emotional, in tone" (2001, p. 150), lest journalists suggest that their reporting is slanted or commentary-laden. Thomas likewise states, "Emotion is rarely seen as a positive thing in journalism; it has tended to be associated with sensationalism and pandering, threatening the impartiality norm to which many journalists feel beholden" (Thomas, 2021, p. 80). Calling for empathy in journalism is thus a fraught proposition, says Smith-Rodden, as "some suggest it flies in the face of revered values of objectivity" (Smith-Rodden, 2019, p. 77). While the proscription against emotion in journalism certainly may not be universal (see Glück, 2016), those advocating a more empathetic approach to journalism have treaded carefully in delineating what empathy does, and does not, mean.

What is empathetic journalism, then? For some, it represents a commitment to recognizing the humanity of the people affected by the stories that they report on. As one journalism professor put it:

> "I'm a good journalist when I can empathize, when I can truly grasp the predicament of my subjects. And if I'm blind to that, then I'm failing in some way as a journalist," he says. "It's critical for journalists never to lose sight of their own humanity and that means understanding and empathizing and connecting on a human level, not just as instruments of stories." (Patrick Lee Plaisance, quoted in Harland, 2008)

While connecting with others "on a human level" is perhaps something that people from all walks of life, regardless of their occupation, might do well to aspire to, the materials I examined suggest a number of specific ways in which empathy is thought to be of value to journalism in particular.

One is that, at the stage where a journalist is acquiring information for a story they are working on, an empathetic stance can help a journalist approach sources to elicit talk from them. This is especially true with sources whose background or life condition is very different from that of the journalist— in relation to factors such as race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and combinations thereof—and when the journalist has little or no first-hand experience of the problems faced by the very people whom the journalist would like to interview. In the U.S., a middle-class, white journalist, for instance, may have a hard time connecting with Black, lower-class people and may even be viewed by them with suspicion. Smith-Rodden recounts one such case, where a budding journalist was met with "hours of rejection, evasion, and door-slams" before finally finding someone who would talk with her (Smith-Rodden, 2019, p. 76). While the slamming of doors is rather extreme, in other cases journalists may find sources—particularly those in positions of vulnerability—to be on guard and reluctant to talk openly.

Empathy is thus envisioned as an important tool to help journalists deal with the problem of disconnect between journalists and their sources. In this sense, rather than looking at empathy as a fundamental human capacity, it is regarded more as something that "needs to be performed to accomplish a work task" (Glück, 2016, p. 895). In this vein, a webinar conducted by a *Washington Post* journalist offered participants practical advice about how to use empathy "to connect with sources whose life experiences might differ from yours" ("Bring Empathy to Your Reporting to Cultivate Sources," 2020). According to Bradshaw, an empathetic approach can help prod a journalist to try to understand the suspicions that a person may hold toward the journalist, not the least of which being that the journalist may act morally detached and end up twisting whatever the person says in order "to fit a story that's already written in his or her mind" (Bradshaw, 2020). Utilizing empathy at this information-gathering stage of journalistic work thus involves demonstrating sensitivity and establishing trust (cf. Marta, 2019).

During an interview, an empathetic approach can involve simple behavioral techniques "like putting your pen down to let someone cry or looking into his eyes as he speaks" (Bui, 2018c) or purposely "using verbal and nonverbal communication—nodding or leaning in, restating what people say—that shows they're working to understand the other person's perspective" (Keith Woods cited in Bui, 2018b, see also 2018a). Beyond

such simple performative displays of empathetic behavior, Kessler (2022) emphasizes above all else listening. While journalists of course conduct their own research before going out to meet and talk with sources, an empathetic approach to listening, says Kessler, means looking at those individuals as the experts about what it is they are discussing and, in conjunction with this recognition, relinquishing control over where the conversation goes:

> But, perhaps more important, our understanding, our cognitive empathy, rests on the often ignored skill of listening, on giving others the opportunity to take the conversation where *they* want to take it, not where we want to direct it. We can, in short, shut up. Silence is a very powerful tool—not stony silence, not a temporary and uncomfortable pause, but inquisitive and inviting silence, a silence that beckons. (Kessler, 2022)

Such listening, as portrayed by Kessler, allows the person to say, from their own perspective, what they think is important and how they themselves frame their thinking about the issue at hand, rather than merely responding in a much more restrictive manner to questions posed by the journalist and framed by the journalist's perspective (see also Rummler, 2021).

A second value attributed to empathy lies in the ability of empathetic journalism to influence audiences. In the simplest sense, journalism that embraces an empathetic approach not only in the gathering of information from sources but also in representing those individuals in news articles or other journalistic works can, if done well, contribute to audience engagement. Journalistic works that include rich, nuanced depictions of individuals can at times vicariously transport readers or viewers into the story, whereby one becomes "so engaged in a story that it feels as if you inhabit that space and time, and feeling so connected to the characters that their joys and sorrows spark a physical reaction in you" (M. B. Oliver et al., 2012; see also Sillesen et al., 2015). In reporting on tragedy, says Mendonsa, "the best journalists I know try to climb down into that situation and use their gifts of empathy to allow raw emotion to channel through them. It's not easy and not always pleasant but it leads to the type of understanding and soulful storytelling that not only draws viewers in but keeps them there with you, soaking in the information as they invest in the story" (Mendonsa, 2017).

Beyond drawing in and perhaps building up an audience, empathetic journalistic works are also seen as having the ability to draw audiences *closer to* the people depicted.

Empathetic journalism, it is said, can help journalists move past judgmental cliches and stereotypes associated with certain segments of the population (e.g., "welfare cheats," "apathetic youth," and "illegal immigrants"), resulting in a deeper understanding of an issue and more nuanced representations of the people involved in or affected by it (see Bradshaw, 2020). Empathy in journalism thus serves as "a path to proper comprehension of human events" (Smith-Rodden, 2019, p. 74). Particularly when it comes to marginalized groups in society, empathetic journalism works to humanize members of those groups, making it easier for others in society to identify with them, and in effect inviting the audiences of journalistic works to empathize with them (Varma, 2020). In a discussion of the place of social empathy in journalistic accounts of poverty, Thomas states that socially empathetic journalism works to "reduce the emotional distance between people of different social circumstances" and to thereby expand people's capacity to imagine the lives of those in circumstances different from their own (Thomas, 2021, p. 79).

Thus, rather than empathy in journalism being seen solely as a tool for journalists to utilize for obtaining information from sources, it is also envisioned as a vehicle for drawing different segments of society closer to one another. And this, in turn, is linked to various potential benefits for society: changing societal attitudes toward stigmatized groups (M. B. Oliver et al., 2012), fostering a stronger sense of shared humanity and a more compassionate citizenry (Thomas, 2021), and helping ensure that people recognize those unlike themselves as fellow members of a democratic society (Schudson, 2013). Even while definitions of empathy in the journalistic literature explicitly mark it off as distinct from notions such as sympathy and compassion, which suggest feelings and concern for others, the idea of journalistic empathy at the same time would appear to be infused with a strong sense of social morality.

Conclusion

One surprising finding from my examination of the various journalistic materials I collected for this article is that while, overall, they devote significant attention to the definition of empathy, the place of empathy in journalism with respect to collecting information, and the value of empathetic works in terms of how they may influence audiences, very few addressed the matter of exactly how journalists should craft empathetic works using the information collected or what those works should actually look like. It is obvious that some subject matter is more suited to empathetic reporting than other subject matter: e.g., there is little room for empathy in a routine report on the

financial markets (Glück, 2016). Blank-Libra (2017) astutely analyzes some examples of empathetic and non-empathetic literary journalism, a genre of journalistic writing that goes beyond the straightforward, generic telling of facts and allows for creativity in telling a news "story." Schudson (2013) hints that good empathetic journalism, unlike the type of "human interest" stories where a profile of an interesting or unusual individual would stand by itself as the story (e.g. Lopez & Orr, 2017), should show how the person's experiences are connected to a broader issue. But beyond this, the articles I reviewed had little specific to say about how empathy is to be manifest in published or aired journalistic work. This could well be, in part, because such discussion may be better suited to hands-on instructional settings such as journalism school classes and professional workshops. Such venues certainly exist, such as a "Journalism of Empathy" class taught at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University (*Journalism of Empathy*, 2023), but were beyond the scope of the present article.

A related issue, finally, is whether the emergence of empathy as a prescriptive construct in journalism is heading in the direction of a kind of standardization, with certain notions of and beliefs related to empathy, and well as sets of practices related to the enactment of empathy, over time becoming predominant, taught and followed with a high degree of uniformity by journalists in a wide variety of contexts. Similar movements regarding empathy appear to be taking shape in other spheres of practice. The Roots of Empathy program, for instance, which got its start in Canada in the 1990s, follows what is now a well-established method to teach empathy skills to children aged 5-13; today, the program is being used in schools and other institutions in a number of other countries as well (*Roots of Empathy*, n.d.). Likewise, empathy skills are increasingly being taught to doctors and others in patient-oriented positions in the healthcare industry (e.g., Wündrich et al., 2017). Whether journalism will move further in this direction, and what implications this may have for journalism itself and society more generally, remains to be seen.

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