

# **BEHIND THE MEDIA IN AMERICA: NEWS COVERAGE AND MEDIA BIAS; AS REFLECTED IN *NIGHTCRAWLER***

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*Nightcrawler* is a movie which is written and directed by Don Gilroy shows how media works. This movie tells about a freelancer cameraman named Louis Bloom who looks for footage of a news, records it and sell it to a news station. The aims of this thesis are to describe the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of the movie. The intrinsic aspects cover the narrative elements (theme, characters, setting, plot and conflict) and cinematic elements (camera distance, mise-en-scene and sound) while the extrinsic aspects cover how media works based on agenda setting theory, the news coverage and media bias in *Nightcrawler*. The writer used library research to support the data analysis obtained from some references, such as some related books, journals and articles. The result of this thesis is in the process of how the news produced, there are some modifications of information so the news will be more suitable with the value of where the company comes from. The process itself contains some editing process of how media covers an issue, which can lead into media bias.

Keywords : *media, agenda setting, news coverage, media bias*

## **IINTRODUCTION**

In modern era, the existence of media industry cannot be separated from social life. Media become the part of modern society not only to deliver any important message, but it also has the power in creating public opinion. The development of mass media in America has begun since 1780s with the appearance of American first

daily newspapers, *Pennsylvania Evening* and *Daily Advertiser*.

As the development of technology, mass media then becomes various, not only printed media such as newspaper or magazine but also electronic media such as television or internet. Among all of mass media, television became the most

influential media to human life. Based on survey done by BLS American Time Use Survey, A.C. Nielsen Co in February 18th, 2016, about 99% of American have television in their home and spend average 5 hours 11 minutes a day watching television (Statistic Brain (2016) *Television Watching Statistic*). Television becomes more popular than other media because of the way it presents the information is equivalent with the effectiveness of how a media delivers the information, like Brent D. Ruben mention in his book, *Communication and Human Behaviour* (1992):

whether message are presented via print or illustration, gesture or dress, film or microfiche, radio broadcast or the spoken words of a friend, can have a direct, and in some cases obvious, influence. (1992:145).

However, the written rule in American amendments which show the freedom of speech somehow makes media industry becomes too free in delivering the news. Media industry which is usually also close related with political things somehow also creates media bias effect. Media biased effect is the bias of journalist or newsmaker in mass media when selecting the events or information reported and how the information are covered. In this thesis, the writer uses *Nightcrawler* movie as the object

because this movie shows how television as part of mass media delivers its news. From this movie, the writer founds that news station or press has the power in shaping the news by the choice of stories and words to influence the audience (Liaugminas, 2002). Therefore the writer decided to use *Nightcrawler* movie and entitled the thesis: Behind the Media in America: News Coverage and Media Bias; as Reflected in *Nightcrawler*.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Theoretical background in this research will focus on behind the media in America: news coverage and media bias. In order to analyze the main topic of the research, the writer chooses to focus on the agenda setting theory, news coverage and the bias effect of media.

### **1. Agenda Setting**

Agenda setting theory is first introduced by Walter Lippmann in his book *Public Opinion*. Without using the term "agenda-setting," Walter Lippmann was writing about what we today call as "agenda-setting" theory. Agenda setting theory said that every minds of public issue in the world are shaped by the media. In his book, *Public Opinion*, Lippmann said that

The analyst of public opinion must begin then, by recognizing the triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action (Lippmann, 1922 : 17).

Lippmann theory describes that every issue or action can be big issue according to how our mind response and how society react to the issue. According to Lippmann in his introduction of his book, *Public Opinion*, "freedom of thought and speech present itself in a new light and raises new problems because of the discovery that opinion can be manufactured" (Lippmann, 1922 : xiv). Just like any rule which always have both good and bad side, freedom of speech also brings bad effect because it "blocks" the truth. People can speak every thought in their head without thinking about the real fact. Lippmann also said that "news stories also dominate by the emotions and hopes of the men and women who comprised the news organization rather than by the fact" (Lippmann, 1922 : xiv). Here we can see that the truth has no any effect to public opinion as long as the public likes the story, then fact will be in number second. According to Lippmann, news depends on stereotypes, standardization, routine judgment and a disregard for subtlety

(Lippmann, 1922 : xviii).

Because of the ambiguity between the border between the truth and news in media industry, Lippmann distinguished truth and news.

The function of news is to signal an event; the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and to make picture of reality on which people can act. what one normally gets is not truth but fact, and that fact is circumscribe by a variety of reporters, fear of libel, and that which is superficial (Lippmann, 1922 : xviii)

Walter Lippmann is not the only one who known with his agenda setting theory. In 1963, Bernard Cohen follows Lippmann in observing the press role and gets the same result like Lippmann's theory which is:

Press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. The world will look different to different people depending on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors and publishers of the paper they read. (Cohen, 1963 : 13)

However in 1972, Max McCombs and his college, Donald Shaw finally completes this theory and officially named it as "agenda-setting" theory. Max McCombs and his college, Donald Shaw in 1972 then complete agenda setting theory through their

observation in presidential election in 1968. According to McComb and Shaw in their book, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*:

Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. In reflecting what candidates are saying during the campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues-that is, the media may set the "agenda" of the campaign (McComb and Shaw, 1972 : 176)

## **2. Shaping Public Opinion**

Media is a source of information for the public. In its function of giving information, media has ambiguity. The ambiguity comes as the media is trapped within its purpose and its operational purpose. In operational purpose, media is an organization which runs as a business. Media needs to get benefits both material profit and prestige profit. However, based on its purpose, media is a message conveyor to public. In conveying the message, media has its ideal purpose to deliver the objective message without looking for profit.

As an organization, media has a purpose to gain profit. Media needs to get benefits both material profit and prestige profit. In this case, some mass media organizations, especially the big one, give more attention to prestige profit than material profit. The

prestige profit also includes the interest of having influence or power to society. The more prestigious media is the respectable it is and it can even spread its power towards society. Not only the big scale media but also the small scale media needs prestige profit to spread their power, even though the power is also in the smaller scale.

On the other side, media is a message conveyor organization. The purpose of media as a message conveyor media has to deliver the news based on the fact and free from any business purposes. However in the practice, media is trapped in different situation. The news released by media as an organization produce the fact which is designed so the audiences follow and agree with the flow of the news. Even though media wants to be objective in delivering the news, the fact is in the process itself the message should pass some bureaucratic system which resulting a news with certain interest purpose.

## **3. Media Bias**

Based on Liaugminas in her book *Media Bias is Serious Problem* (2002 : 21) media bias is the stance of journalist and the people behind the media in making and selecting the events and stories which will be reported or aired and how the news are covered.

Media bias appears because of the different perception between the audience and the news maker. Media is judged to be biased only if the content of the news does not suitable with the society expectation. However, media bias is not entirely bad because when the media is bias, it only means it serves the news from different point of view.

Basically, even though most people said that they prefer good news rather than bad news, but the fact is people mind gives better response and more attention to bad news rather than good news. This cause the mass media prefers controversial news because mass media is also an organization which needs profit. This causes media to produce the news which is not purely objective because it is shadowed by the interest of media to gain profit.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **1. Agenda Setting**

Television is one of the most effective media in shaping public opinion. Television is easy to access and many people watch television everyday. In *Nightcrawler* movie, TV news station also has a big role in shaping society mindset, just like Nina and Louis conversation:

Nina : I want you to contact me when

you have something.

Bloom: Something like this?

Nina : That's right

Bloom: Bloody

Nina : Well, that's only part of it. We like crime. Not all crime. Carjacking in Compton, for example. That isn't news, now is it? We find our viewers are more interested in urban crime creeping into suburbs. What that means is a victim, or victims, preferably well-off and white, injured at the hands of the poor or a minority.

Bloom: Just crime

Nina :No. Accidents play. Cars, busses, trains, planes. Fires.

Bloom: But bloody

Nina : Well, graphic. The best and learest way that I can phrase it to you, Lou, to capture the spirit of what we air is think of our newscast as a screaming woman running down the street with her throat cut.

Bloom: I understand

(*Nightcrawler*, 2014 : 00:20:12 - 00:20:58)

From the conversation it is shown that Nina taught Bloom about which news people prefer as the news. Nina said that their viewer like something bloody. However, this can not be separated from the role of the news itself. News always aired crimes and bloody things which makes the viewers, whether they like it or not, watch the news. News makes the viewer believe that crimes are something important and can be experienced by every people in every

situation.

Nina chooses Bloom's footage instead of the other footage because she thinks people will like to see the crime from the closer side. People like to see bloody things. In minute 00:19:21 of the movie, Nina said that they should air criminal-bloody news every day. Nina as the actor behind the scene of the news makes the decision based on her company motto to be shared to the viewer. Nina also said that their viewer show more interest in criminal news. However, that is happens because the news always air crime news and makes the viewer believe that crime news is the headline of the news. This scene shows Lippmann theory that news depends on stereotypes, standardization, routine judgment and a disregard for subtlety (Lippmann, 1922 : xviii).

Another example of agenda setting can be seen in the home invasion case. In that case, the news crews put big interest to the news because the victims of the case are white people and they are rich family.

Nina : Well, that's only part of it. We like crime. Not all crime. Carjacking in Compton, for example. That isn't news, now is it? We find our viewers are more interested in urban crime creeping into suburbs. What that means is a victim, or victims, preferably well-off and white, injured at the hands of the poor

or a minority.

(Nightcrawler, 2014 : 00:20:12)

This is really different with Nina's reaction when Bloom gives her a footage about what she think as unimportant case because it does not has sale value.

Nina : A car crash. Well, none of this is gonna knock anybody out. I can't use any of this in my rundown. Is this it?

Bloom: No, I have a stabbing in Corona.

Nina : Where's the plane crash at Foothill?

Bloom: I don't mind saying that I'm trying to bring you storie that happen here on the ground.

Nina : Two has it. It'll be their lead.

Bloom: Well, I hope that works well for them. Now, let me show you the stabbing in Corona

Nina : I don't give a goddamn about fucking Corona! You know how important this week is. This shit is fucking death to me!

Bloom: I understand your frustration. I was just trying not to be too hard on myself.

Nina : I sold you upstairs as some kind of fucking a sweeps savior. And I'm leading with a goddamn stabbing. In Corona!

Bloom: So, you want that, then?

Nina : I want you to get in the goddamn game! I want something people can't turn away from.

(Nightcrawler, 2014 : 00:56:10 - 00:56:57)

Even though the movie did not really show the result of the news to the society,

but from some scene we can predict that the reaction of society must be good. Good here means that society pay big attention to every news aired, because they believe that the news aired is important.

Nina : I can't spend a month's budget on a single story

Bloom: What if the story's not over? The people who did this escaped. They're still out there, walking around with the rest of us. If I had family and I lived in a home, that might make me nervous. I'd want updates on what was going on. With this footage, people would turn your channel for the story.

(*Nightcrawler*, 2014 : 01:11:17 - 01:11:32)

From the dialogue above, it can be seen that Bloom shows the perspective of people who do not know anything, suddenly become panic because of the home invasion case. Knowing that the home which should protect you now is not a safe place for you because of the gunmen who can attack you and your family, even in your home.

## 2. News Coverage

News coverage is about how media cover the news, or in other word what happen behind the screen until the news is aired. In *Nightcrawler* movie, it can be seen that the news footage should pass some

editing session before aired. This editing session makes the news cannot purely objective because the director put some “extra feeling” to strengthen the feel about the news.

Male editor : Right here

Nina : okay. Put the neighbor here, and the kids with their mother by the door. You can get it back from 2:16.

Male editor : yeah.

Nina : Then I want to lay in some nat-sound. Let's loop the neighbor's dog barking. And then try taking the crying kid from B-roll and dropping that in the background.

Male editor : got it.

(*Nightcrawler*, 2014 : 00:17:18 - 00:17:32)

Ben : A young woman, I'm guessing from this angle. A young woman on a sofa, there. All the faces, though, have been blurred out.

Nina : (on microphone) They've escaped. They're on the loose.

Lisa : That is the first of what we understand are three bodies in the home in Granada Hills and this was committed by a suspect, or suspects who are still out there.... thought.

Nina : (on microphone) repeat that

Ben : yes, scary, and very concerning, particularly given what we're looking at here, the savagery of what these pictures show, and now, look, there on the floor. Lisa, what is that? A bloodied article of clothing?

Lisa : it looks like a silk shirt. Maybe a woman's silk blouse

Ben : it's just so sad.

Director : stand to dissolve, two

Ben : obviously, there is the second body.

Nina : (on microphone) they've escaped. Repeat it

Ben : the person or people who committed all of this brutal home invasion robbery, they're presently unidentified and at large, still on the streets.

Nina : (on microphone) hit it again. Harder.

Ben : this has got to be a huge worry not only to the resident in this neighborhood, Granada Hills area as well

.....

Nina : (on microphone) build it

Lisa : yeah, you're just praying that that crib is empty because this is definitely a child's room

(*Nightcrawler*, 2014 : 01:14:57 – 01:16:29)

From both of the dialogues above, it shows Nina and the male editor are editing the footage video which will be aired in the news. They also arrange how the announcers deliver the news such as which point should be repeated or emphasized. From dialogue, it shows Nina add and subtract some effects which are supposed to give deeper impression which support the coverage of the news. This proves that the news is selected and packed based on the wish of the journalist for certain aim and purpose.

According to the theory in the previous

chapter, media has big role in shaping an issue to society. In *Nightcrawler* movie, how an issue is shaped by the people behind TV station can be seen clearly. In minute 00:19:08 - 00:19:37, it shows how Nina makes decision which footage will be aired according to the most interesting one.

Nina : That's the lead. I want to break it up and do a wrap-around from the scene. I want a walking stand-up, teaser at five, repeat on the half and I want the copy to start with a warning.

Frank : You're going to show this?

Nina : With a warning

Frank : It's excessive

Nina : We should have packages like this every day

Frank : People are eating breakfast

Nina : And they'll talk about it at work. Tie it in with the carjacking last month in Glendale. And the other one, the van in Palms. When was that? In March?

Man : March, yeah.

Nina : It's a carjacking crime wave. That's the banner. Call the victim's family, get a quote, mic it. You know what to do

Frank : Yeah

(*Nightcrawler*, 2014 : 00:19:08 - 00:19:37)

Another news coverage in the movie is when Nina wants to air a news footage about home invasion with terrifying scene. Even though Nina knows that the news station is under the broadcast standard, but she decides to air the footage because she knows



that it is a good issues. This shows that broadcast standard is only kind of formality because in the end, the station TV is the one will decide the content of the news itself.

Nina : Home invasion in Granada. He got there before the cops. We have 10 minutes to airtime. How much of this can we show?

Linda : You mean, legally?

Nina : No, morally. Of course, legally.

Linda : Have they been identified?

Frank : It just happened, so you have to assume no, and that's just one of the issues.

Linda : We can't broadcast their identities without notifying the next of kin.

Nina : We're not identifying them

Linda : You are by proxy, by showing their faces

Nina : We pixelate the face

Linda : Where did you get this?

Nina : Stringer

(*Nightcrawler*, 2014 : 01:08:21 - 01:09:25)

Both of dialogues above show the part of news coverage inside the news station industry. Nina is trying to wrap a horror excessive footage as if it is a normal crime happen every day. Even though the footage should be covered with some violence warning about the content of the news, Nina insists to air the news, no matter how. This scene shows that Nina insists to air the news not only because it is an important issue, but also because Nina knows that that kind of news will be big hit for her news station.

### 3. Media Bias

In the movie, the media bias happen when Bloom and Rick get the footage about home invasion. In the real video, Bloom accidentally shoots the face of the gunmen, but in minute 01:07:04 Bloom cut the video and keep the real one for himself. Bloom then hand and sale the edited video to the news station with the high price and take the chance to promote his company. Here, it shows that the news station choose to focus on the frame “home invasion” instead of digging on what is the fact behind the case because they know that the frame “home invasion” will be more profitable for them.

Even though the reaction of the society can be seen clearly in the movie, but it is predictable about the reaction of the society about the news. It can be seen in the scene in minute 01:18:31 when in a peaceful morning, your television suddenly full of home invasion news with the free gunmen who can be everywhere, it can be predicted how panic and chaos the society is. People will be panic and worried all the time. The other result to public can be seen in the scene when the police come to Bloom's apartment because of his footage in home invasion case. Bloom spreads the footage without waiting for the legal confirmation from the police about the case. Bloom

spreads the footage and makes the chaos to society since the news of home invasion becomes bigger than no one can imagine. Here, the news station decides to buy the footage without waiting the legal confirmation about the case and create their own story, makes the news become bias.

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(*Nightcrawler*, 2014 : 01:08:21 - 01:09:25)

Director : Twenty seconds to back. Ben and Lisa, 20 seconds to back. Set up a sting dig. Camera two and a two-shot.

Nina : Where's the banner?

Director : Did we decide on one?

Nina : Horror House. What did we talk about?

Director : Can you build that? Put it on CG-one. Back in 10 seconds. Nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. Sting it. Mic. Dissolve. Cue.

(*Nightcrawler*, 2014 : 01:13:26 – 01:13:50)

Announcer man : Hello everybody. This is KWLA with breaking news. Over the last half-hour or so, we've now received word of an apparent home invasion triple homicide in the Granada Hills area of the San Fernando Valley. Now, at present, the number of those dead...

(*Nightcrawler*, 2014 : 01:13:52)

Media bias can be seen from how KWLA like in the dialogues above, the news station where Nina works, deliver the news about home invasion case. KWLA more focus on the situation inside the home and the condition of the victim after the case and also the dangerous environment around the place which should be the safe neighborhood instead of focus on revealing the identity of the gunmen and their motive. Because of too focus on delivering the news only from one sided, KWLA seems like they create their own story based on their interpretation of the case and they forgets to be objective about an issue. As finally the case appear as the case of drug dealer gone wrong, KWLA insists to end the case with the “proper ending for their story” as the

home invasion case.

In minute 01:47:55 when the news is aired, Nina gives some instruction to emphasize that the news they aired is very important issue which everybody should know. The news announcers, through Nina instruction, makes people believe that the gunmen in home invasion case can be sit next to you without looking for or waiting for the right information from the police. When finally this issue becomes bigger, it becomes difficult for TV news to fix their mistaken information about the home invasion case. In minute 01:47:55, it shows that in the end, when they know that the fact behind home invasion case is a failed drug dealing, they decide to wrap the case as home invasion case, for the sake of their news rating.

Frank : Joel has got a source on the taskforce who says they found drugs at the Granada Hills house. Cocaine in wrapped package hidden in crawlspaces. Over 50 pounds. And he confirmed it with an investigator at the scene. It wasn't a home invasion. It was a drug robbery.

Nina : Give it to the noon crew

Frank : This is news

Nina : It detracts from the story

Frank : It is the story

Nina : The story is urban crime creeping into the suburbs. That's the story.

(*Nightcrawler*, 2014 : 01:47:55 - 01:48:22)

Overall, the agenda setting theory can be seen from the movie from how the media cover the news. In this movie, Bloom, as the representative of media, manipulates the news by setting up the condition of the crime scene to get the better shoot. He also edits and cuts some part of the footage before hands it to KWLA and the police. In the other hand, KWLA, as the news station which buy the footage from Bloom also implements editing process before it is aired. KWLA also air a footage it gets from Bloom before waiting from the legal confirmation from the police, which then lead into media bias to the society.

## CONCLUSION

From the analysis, it can be concluded that there are many factors behind a news before it is published. Agenda setting tells us about how an issue is used to create public opinion by the hand of reporters and TV news crews. The news we watch every day is not pure fact as we think before. When an issue or event is caught by media, it will be processed by the reporters and crews to create an issue which is suitable with the value of the company itself. In the process, it contains some editing and adding some extra opinions from the crews or reporters which

can make ambiguity of the truth itself. This is why the theory of agenda setting which explains about behind the scene of media cannot be separated with how media cover an issue which can lead into media bias.

However, even though media has the power to create public opinion or to spread some issues, the fact is we create the issues by ourselves unconsciously. People tend to be more interesting in bad news than good news, which makes media aired more bad news than good news. However, news coverage and bias media can not be separated. They affected each other. The way media creates news coverage somehow creates media bias. This happen because media can not be purely objective in delivering the news. An issue or topic need to pass some stage before aired which makes the issue direct the news maker's opinion.

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