

An assessment in the
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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Mr Murry was seriously injured in a hit and run accident in London on the 7th of March, 1995. He was then flown two hundred miles away to Leeds for medical attention, because of a shortage of beds. I have decided to look at the coverage of his plight, printed on the 8th of March, whilst he was still alive, although critically ill, rather than examine reports following his death, when the whole incident became a major political issue. Even at this stage, however, the two articles are still good examples of how two styles of journalism can differ, illustrating the political preferences of the two papers.

The first immediate difference at reading the two articles is the size. The Independent offers three columns to the story, with four interviews. The Daily Telegraph gives the story just two columns and with only two interviews. This does not mean that The Independent does more interviewing at the expense of reporting, sacrificing the facts for interpretations. Indeed The Independent, out of the two articles, is the one that goes into the greatest detail. It is difficult to say whether they have gone into more detail in an attempt to embarrass the government, or if The Daily Telegraph have opted to leave out minor details to help save face.

Sometimes the detail clearly shows political bias. The Daily Telegraph reported that the unit Mr Murry should have been taken to, was “ closed to admissions because of an outbreak of gastric flu” with the nearest available bed in Leeds. The Independent, on the other hand informs the reader that the intended unit, at Brook hospital in Woolich, where the flu epidemic has broken out, is “ itself threatened with closure.”

As for the journey to Leeds, The Independent really does clearly attempt to embarrass government health policy, “ using a booklet called Guide to Emergency Care Centres in Britain, surgeons at Queen Mary’s called other neurosurgical units... They found the fastest available bed was at Leeds General Infirmary.” This gives the whole operation a farcical element to it and shows a lack of professional organisation. Needless to say The Daily Telegraph opted to leave out such trivial details.

It is quite surprising that two articles on the same story did not interview the same people. The two sources The Daily Telegraph use are different from the four offered by The Independent. Both papers offer a professional medical opinions on Mr Murry, as at this stage his health, rather than the competence of the National Health Service, was still the central issue. Indeed two of the four interview in The Independent were spokesman of the two hospitals Mr Murry was sent to. The Daily Telegraph offers the views of the consultant brain surgeon who operated on Mr Murry, Mr Phil van Hille.

Surprisingly, out of these medical interviews, The Daily Telegraph is the only one that comments he would have stood a better chance had he received immediate medical attention. In The Independent’s interviews, the two men are speaking on behalf of their respective hospitals and thus refrain from giving their opinion.

The remaining interviews are by far, more political interviews. The medical interviews had been more a case of reporting than anybody’s interpretation, as they were just adding facts to the story. The remaining interviews do offer an interpretation on the events. Neither paper, however decided to give a

balanced view, by interviewing two sources of differing political persuasion. Instead they both adopt one side with which they stick.

For The Daily Telegraph, this means the Department of Health. The comment is made by an official spokesman at this stage, rather than a minister, as it has yet to explode into a major political issue. Nevertheless the spokesman makes an extremely interesting comment, “ we have asked the regional health authorities to investigate the case which gave rise to the Leeds airlift.” This suggests that the Department is passing all responsibility and with it any blame, on to the regional health authorities. Even at this stage it seems the government wish to claim their innocence. The paper offers no other opinion from any other political source.

The Independent, on the other hand, makes no attempt to ask for the opinion of the Department of Health. Instead they offer interviews with two men, whose main interest in Mr Murry’s case, is in their opposition to the government’s health policies.

The Labour M. P. for Woolwich, John Austin Walker, who is actively campaigning to keep the threatened Brook hospital open, describes the situation as “ appalling”. He also vows to take the issue up with the Health Secretary. The other source is Geoff Martin, campaigns director for the pressure group, London Health Emergency. He directly attacks government health policy, “ it makes a complete nonsense of the policy of closing specialist units in London and the South East.” The Independent then, allows for two men of similar convictions to air their grievances. There is no balance and thus the paper is far from being “ independent”.

In the days following the 8th of March, the story became of greater political significance, following the tragic death of Mr Murry. Reports therefore became allot more political in their nature. Nevertheless, it is clear to see that at this stage both papers show some political bias. Both fail to give a balance in interviews, and differ in contents from each other. In the end both papers offer a different political conclusion to the story, showing their political leanings.