“Soundbites and the media: the challenge of manipulation”
Katerina Voussoura, Freelance journalist, Athens, Greece.

Soundbites, or quotes, are essential in all forms of journalism (print, television, internet). Soundbites define a journalist’s story and render it more “comprehensive;” they add much-needed credibility to the story, setting it apart from “opinion articles.” Without soundbites, or quotes, the public can challenge a story’s authenticity and attribute it to the journalist’s biased, personal opinions. Yet soundbites are often tweaked or manipulated, challenging the concept of objective reporting. Instead of creating stories according to what their sources tell them, journalists seek soundbites that can “dress” a story that they already have in mind, often tweaking statements they are given. Two questions subsequently arise: how are soundbites manipulated and, more importantly, why?

Manipulating soundbites is easy: journalists often ask specific, targeted questions in order to elicit the answers they need for their stories. Taking it a step further, they often edit specific parts out of soundbites provided by their sources, which, when taken out of context, may sound very different, but are more suited to the story a journalist has in mind.

There are many reasons why journalists manipulate soundbites. In the more innocent version, it is often a case of limited space: having to squeeze an article into just a quarter of a newspaper’s A4 page often means that soundbites have to be drastically slashed to the absolutely necessary.

But, more importantly, the reason is that that there is no “free/objective journalism” as such. Journalists working for a newspaper, television network or other media, have to adhere to a certain policy and express the opinions and views of the media they represent - they also produce marketable stories that appeal to the public’s emotions. Nowadays news is a product, like any other: it has to be marketable and successful in beating competition. In the case of freelance journalists, the stakes are even higher, because the pressure to sell a story is even greater, which frequently leads to dramatisation and sensationalism at the expense
of objective reporting.
Last but not least, low-quality journalism creates a vicious circle. Journalists often propose to their employers stories that sound interesting, based on limited research. As a result, even when their sources prove them wrong and provide soundbites contradicting the initial, proposed concept, the story has already been sold to the newspaper or network: hence, it cannot change. Instead, it becomes even more vital to find the soundbites that will fit the original concept, regardless of whether the story is accurate or not.
All of the above will be illustrated with examples from recent coverage of the Greek economic crisis, by Greek and foreign journalists in Greece.