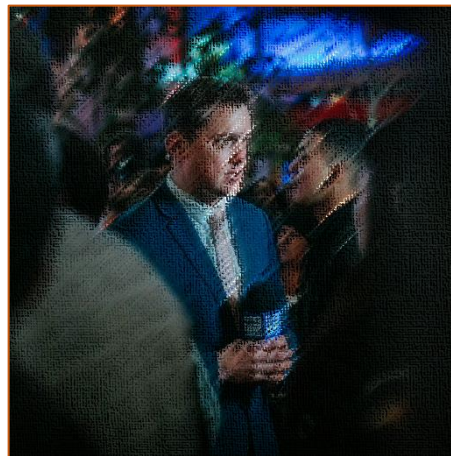




Objectivity in Journalism: Ethical Requirement or Impediment?

Journalists have long been thought of as simple reporters of reality - they go out into the world, see what is happening, and straightforwardly relay that information to the public. Stephen J. A. Ward, a media ethicist and founding director of the Center for Journalism Ethics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, refers to this traditional conception of journalism as “the professional objective model” where journalists are expected to “provide unvarnished facts in a very neutral manner” (Alter, 2019). However, since popularity in partisan news outlets and opinion-based op-eds or talk shows has risen dramatically in the last several decades, the traditional view of journalism as only a neutral transfer of facts has recently come under scrutiny. While some welcome a new understanding of journalism, one which allows for the inclusion of a journalist’s personal voice, others believe eschewing the ideals of objectivity and neutrality is dangerous.



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Despite assumptions that the professional objective model has always been the standard of journalism, Matthew Pressman, an assistant professor of journalism at Seton Hall University and the author of *On Press: The Liberal Values That Shaped the News*, provides a history of the news media which reveals this assumption to be far from true. He explains that at their inception, American newspapers were actually “proudly partisan,” but after a long series of mergers and closings in the 1920s, surviving paper companies had to change this approach in favor of appealing to a wider audience. Because “overt partisanship in the news pages would alienate large parts of the target audience,” journalists soon adopted neutral voices in their reporting so they could sell more papers and keep their businesses open (Pressman, 2019).

Though the country is not facing the same economic hardships as it was back then, the same argument can be made today that appealing to a broader audience is ultimately desirable - not just to keep a news company afloat, but to provide a space where broad sections of the public can receive the exact same information and use it to form their own interpretation of events. Even if it hasn’t been the standard forever, those who hold the professional objective model in high regard nonetheless believe it is one we should keep because “the injection of opinion and insinuation deprives viewers and readers of a neutral set of facts upon which to make their own decisions and opinions” (Solomon, 2018). In other words, for a journalist to include their own voice is to risk exerting influence over their audience, whereas the publication of “only facts” allows for the consumers to make judgements for themselves, not be *told* what to think by a reporter. As journalist George Reedy used to tell his students before his passing: “You don’t use a bullhorn filled with opinion and emotion when a flashlight’s illumination of facts will do” (Solomon, 2018).



Given recent advancements in technology, these points may be even more consequential today than they were before the 1920s. As most Americans now own a smart device, have access to news coverage 24/7, and even have the ability to communicate with strangers online, supplying unbiased coverage could be the best way to encourage dialogue among diverse people. In fact, the casual acceptance of non-objective journalism may already be negatively affecting civil discourse and citizen unity, evidenced by the proliferation of echo chambers on social media. As people engage in confirmation bias, seeking out comforting partisan news pages on sites like Facebook, they only see one-sided stories and engage only with members of that community who already share the same opinions. Thus, rather than seeking out neutral stories and connecting with people unlike themselves, they become entrenched in their beliefs and estranged from others. Perhaps if biased journalism didn't exist, neither would such technology-fueled polarization.

In contrast, there are those who believe strict objectivity should not be a priority in journalism. On a philosophical level, it has been argued that neutrality or objectivity in judgment doesn't actually exist and therefore is an impossible standard to meet. Regardless of their profession, reporters are still human beings who have unique experiences and stakes in political processes. To be held to a level of superhuman objectivity is unfair for anyone, but perhaps even more concerning for minority journalists reporting on issues that affect them directly. As trans reporter Lewis Wallace has argued: "I can't be neutral or centrist in a debate over my own humanity" (Li, 2020). Even when news *appears* to be objective, freelance writer Jack Mirkinson urges consumers to "look at the questions people ask [or] the stories people *choose* to write. All of these things are inherently suffused with opinion and political judgment" even if the journalist doesn't outright put forth their beliefs (Li, 2020).

Moreover, the professional objective model is said to be problematic on a practical level as well. The expectation to only report facts essentially reduces a journalist to a stenographer and may even deprive the audience of additional knowledge they need to make an informed judgement (Pressman, 2019). Even professional practices concerning opinions and accounts runs into trouble when it reaches for objectivity because it can "give false equivalence to ideas that do not deserve equal amounts of time" (Driftwood, 2016). As Christopher Meyers notes:

Truthful journalism establishes the context that makes accurate facts meaningful by discerningly providing multiple perspectives and by recognizing that a strict adherence to balance – in the sense of giving equal weight and credence to all sides on a contentious issue – can mislead more than inform. See, for example, coverage of climate change in which equal space is given to deniers (Meyers, 2020).

Allegra Hobbs, a staff writer for *Study Hall*, further argues that the question of what deserves to be covered in journalism can be exacerbated by unequal power dynamics, saying: "There is no such thing as journalistic objectivity, and attempts to maintain it often result in



reporting that is overly generous to the powerful” (Li, 2020). In this sense, to simply report what powerful people say and do, without providing context or analysis, only “lets the public be imposed on by the charlatan with the most brazen front” (Pressman, 2019). If those who advocate for the professional objective model are correct that the public is at risk of influence when reading reporter opinions, why wouldn’t they be equally at risk of influence by the words of those being reported on?

Overall, perhaps the ethical debate surrounding objectivity in journalism is impossible to solve because, in its current form, it is unclear and misguided. Kamrin Baker, editor in chief of *The Gateway*, argues that the focus should not be on neutrality, but on transparency, saying: “As long as journalists are transparent about their experience when disseminating information, there should be no shame in being equal parts human and Fourth Estate” (Li, 2020). On a similar note, in his book *Ethical Journalism in a Populist Age: The Democratically Engaged Journalist*, Ward suggests that objectivity itself is not the problem, but *where* it is expected to be positioned, asserting: “Journalists are advocates for dialogic democracy... [they] are in the business of advocating for a certain type of society. How are we objective then? We’re objective not in our goals; we’re objective in our methodology” (Alter, 2019). In the end, what *is* clear is that as communication technologies become more advanced, disinformation spreads, and polarization increases in the United States, the truth of our very reality will become more contested. As the very idea of what a fact is comes into question, American journalists will continue to face scrutiny for what (some of) the public deems unobjective, biased reporting.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the central values in tension when debating the merit of journalism’s professional objective model?
2. How might you approach the concern of neutrality when covering stories on topics in which certain simple or complex facts are in dispute by different parties (such as the existence of climate change)?
3. Do you agree or disagree that objectivity is possible to achieve? If not, do you see any value in attempting it anyway? What are the risks of maintaining an ideal of objectivity, and what are the risks of giving it up?
4. Freelance culture writer Rebecca Long has said: “If ‘being neutral’ means obscuring facts to make hard truths more palatable for readers, it isn’t worth it to me” (Li, 2020). What is your reaction to this quote? How does “*hard truth*” compare to “*the truth*”?

Further Information:

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