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"The Touchstone of Our Sanity": Discussing Objectivity in Journalism Using Interdisciplinary Elements

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Abstract:

Objectivity is a contentious topic in journalism, important to address in a newswriting classroom because of the profession's mission of representing reality. While often discussed within the discipline, other fields also provide examples of definitions and observations that may help journalism educators find additional ways to approach the subject. They also offer the potential for introducing relevant, related topics along the way.

Keywords: Journalism, Journalistic Objectivity

When a group of U.S. journalism deans met for a seminar with Umberto Eco, that renowned Italian author derided American journalism for its "lack of passion," and classed it generally as "bland, gutless, and unwilling to take a stand." Eventually, one of his guests offered a response. "Professor Eco," he said, "you need to know that objectivity is our ideology" (Dennis, in Dennis and Merrill 2006, p. 146).

It was a fine riposte, but the word *objectivity* (as the dean quoted above himself acknowledged) can be problematic. Used in a journalism context, it requires careful handling, as cogent arguments can be made against its attainment in news. Additional challenges are likely to emerge in discussions in some partisan, politicized, and cross-cultural settings.

Nonetheless, the concept remains key in the newswriting classroom, where conveying an understanding of objectivity, and the limitations on its realization, is usually part of teaching about the reporting process. Often vigorously discussed among journalism professionals and educators, objectivity has also been a topic of debate in other fields. And these provide additional elements, grounded in established intellectual territory, that help support classroom dialogue about the concept in a newsgathering context. They also help further discussion of the mission and values of journalism, itself highly interdisciplinary.

A Nuanced Topic

The term *journalism* is broad, and includes journalistic opinion, which involves informed editorial subjectivity. But the concept of objectivity becomes especially important when discussing reporting – the gathering and presentation of news, which is often the basis for the public perception of reality. The need for care in this context is a relatively recent development. Until perhaps the later 20th century, those practicing the craft in the US, for example, had no trouble describing their approach as objective (Dennis and Merrill, 2006, p. 140).

Several factors have helped make objectivity a more nuanced topic among journalists and journalism educators. One was the rise of postmodernism, with its emphasis on relativism, its tendency to cast reality as consisting of "multiple contingent truths," and its assertion that much empirical research is value-laden (Bishop, pp. 994-995). New journalistic movements also emerged that disregarded conventional wisdom about objectivity in reporting; interestingly, many "claimed to be more objective than traditional objectivity" (Dennis and Merrill, 2006, pp. 141-142; see also Dennis and Rivers, 2011).

Exacerbating this trend in America was the corporatization of much mainstream journalism (see e.g. Underwood, 1995; Harper and Yantek, 2003; O'Shea, 2011; McChesney and Nichols, 2010; and McChesney and Pickard, 2011); the resulting shift away from expensive-to-gather news toward reliance on cheaper opinion and commentary (for a related discussion, see Bruni, 2014); and the rise of the Internet as a no-holds barred forum, sometimes featuring dubious information (see e.g. Webb, 2012). In America at least, these factors accompanied and likely accelerated a general decline in confidence in the press that pollsters have tracked since the 1980s (see Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 10). By the early 2000s, partisanship in U.S. journalism was seen as common, and constituted to some professionals a significant concern (see e.g. Goodwin, 2004; and Shaw, 2004). By 2014, observers began to refer to "the Balkanization of the news media" (Friedman, 2014, p. 8).

Representing Reality

To some, such partisanship may at least reflect a form of honesty, for today in academic settings it is generally held that, to quote Taflinger (1996) "Objectivity is not a possible goal in human interaction, and that includes journalism." The concept has been increasingly portrayed in information media settings as passé or irrelevant (for discussion, see Campbell, 2004, pp. 160-161). Amid increased wariness about the veracity of news, transparency on the reporter's part concerning his or her own politics has been described as "the new objectivity" (David Weinberger, quoted in Sullivan, 2013, p. SR12). The author of one recent book critiquing the US news media – part of an ever-expanding literary field – suggests that the public "should reward news outlets that *are* transparent about the personal opinions of their journalists," and encourages the latter to publicly disclose their political views (Groseclose, 2011, pp. 254-255).

Certainly a critical approach to objectivity in reporting is appropriate in both academic and professional journalism circles. Even the most conscientious reporters generally work under intense deadline pressure and at the mercy of sources and their availability; few people, from passersby to public officials, necessarily want to go on the record on a controversial subject, for example. Indeed, any given report might be measured in degrees of imperfection, and few if any professional journalists would claim to present transcendental truth in their work (for related discussions, see e.g. Merrill, 1997, pp. 113-117; and Lippmann, 1961 edition, pp. 338-365; see also Proudfoot and Lacey, 2012, pp. 415-419).

But without a sense that reality exists and should be capably presented, journalism would differ little from areas such as advertising, public relations, and propaganda. Nor is reporting the only career path in an open society where objectivity, or at least impartiality, are key qualities. Philip B. Corbett, the *New York Times*' associate managing editor for standards, observes: "We expect professionals in all sorts of fields to put their personal opinions aside, or keep them to themselves, when they do their work — judges, police officers, scientists, teachers. Why would we expect less of journalists?" (quoted in Sullivan, 2013, p. SR12).

There are also valid social arguments against abandoning efforts to present news with objectivity in mind, however daunting it may be. Lippmann (2012 edition) warned that people "who have lost their grip upon the relevant facts of their environment are the inevitable victims of agitation and propaganda. … Without protection against propaganda, without standards of evidence, without criteria of emphasis, the living substance of all popular decision is exposed to every prejudice and to infinite exploitation" (pp. 18, 21). A later observer, Corrigan (1999) likens objectivity in journalism to other worthy-but-elusive ideals such as "world peace, racial harmony, universal human rights, and religious tolerance," and argues that none should be abandoned because of difficulty in attainment (pp. xvi-xvii).

Journalistic Objectivity

Among reporters, the term *objectivity* is often used to convey *fairness* or *neutrality*. Something that is *fair* is, to cite a dictionary definition, "marked by impartiality and honesty; free from self-interest, prejudice, or favoritism"; that which is *neutral* is "not engaged on either side; specifically: not aligned with a political or ideological grouping" (Merriam Webster, 1997, pp. 417, 781). Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) observe that American journalists' interest in objectivity was part of a deliberate move to mitigate reporting bias – which they acknowledged as a problem – by employing more methodical approaches (pp. 72-75). The effort also recognized that complex stories might require the inclusion of a variety of sources and viewpoints, a point noted in recent journalism textbooks discussing coverage of diverse and multicultural communities (see, e.g., G. Foreman, 2010, pp. 288-312).

Dennis notes that a modern reference to *journalistic objectivity* might be summarized as "separating fact from opinion"; "presenting an emotionally detached view of the news"; and "striving for fairness and balance" with the intention of providing "full information to the audience" (Dennis and Merrill, 2006, p. 140). Many reporters consciously try to do this every day. However, Dennis adds that some observers have faulted this approach, one criticism being that, on controversial subjects, it may assume "that complex situations can always be reduced to a balanced presentation with two alternative views" (Dennis and Merrill, 2006, pp. 142).

Often in the background of such criticism is an ongoing argument about the role of the reporter: Is it to determine truth, or to present multiple viewpoints and hence allow readers/viewers to make up their own minds? In practice, journalists may well try doing both within a single report. Unsettled and complex issues may well call for multiple perspectives to be folded into a story. However, as Tuchman (1972) notes, many "facts" in a report may reflect the perceived "common sense" or conventional wisdom of the audience. In these cases, there is no apparent need for attribution, qualification, verification, or presentation of an alternative (discussed in Muhlmann, 2008, p. 11).

Contextual Objectivity

A given audience's conventional wisdom about reality figures in media-related discussions of *contextual objectivity*, which is a term that originated in quantum mechanics (Berenger, 2005; and Berenger and Taha, 2013). Media scholars have particularly employed the term when discussing war reporting. El Nawawy and Iskandar (2002) use it to refer to the shading that news often receives in its encoding – what rates as "assassination" as opposed to "targeted killing," for example – for specific audiences. They write that: "Contextual objectivity can be seen in every broadcast in every media outlet in the world, not just Al-Jazeera and the U.S. networks." The question for networks during war, they add, is how they can "strike a balance that provides audiences a true representation of real events while still appealing to public opinions and sensibilities" (pp. 201-202).

The same authors elsewhere (2004) write that:

> Contextualization demonstrates a situational position, a way by which collectivism among participants within the same "context" — whether cultural, religious, political, or economic — is realized and engaged. It is precisely this contextualization that aggravates and complicates the pursuit of "objective" coverage within the news media setting. Contextualization further confuses attempts at evenhandedness and efforts to cover all sides of a story. Particularly in times of war, it is the context within which a reporter operates that makes communication with the 'enemy' unacceptable (p. 320).

The news media, they add, "have a dual role as both informants and a mirror for society, hence, they are held to a rather stringent policy by their viewers. They must meet their dual duties of being balanced (objectivity) while reflecting the views of their public constituency (contextualization)" (p. 321. See also e.g. Harb, 2008; Hundleby, 2009; Al-Najjar, 2011; and Higgins and Smith, 2011).

Some External Views

Definitions of *objectivity* from some areas outside journalism tend to emphasize the concept as involving accuracy and lack of bias, often reflecting reliance on empirical and repeatable standards. However, some also acknowledge that disagreements exist over the universality and/or applicability of methods.

To cite one example, Derksen and Gartrell (1992), in an entry on "Scientific Explanation" in the *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, describe "being *objective"* as meaning "that observers agree on what they have observed." They write:

> For example, a group of scientists observing the behavior of objects when they are dropped would agree

> that they saw the objects "fall" to the ground. For this observation to be objective (1) there must be an agreed-upon method for producing it (dropping an object); (2) the observation must be replicable (more than one object is released and they all "fall"; and (3) the same results must occur regardless of who performs the operation and where they perform it (objects must behave the same way for all observers anywhere in the world.) Scientific operations must be expressed clearly enough that other people can repeat the procedures. Only when all these conditions are met is it possible to say that an observation is objective. This form of objectivity is called "intersubjectivity" and is crucial to scientific explanations (p. 1715).

The entry adds that the "second use of the word *objective* in science means that scientific explanations are not based on the values, opinions, attitudes, or beliefs of the researcher. In other words, scientific explanations are 'value-free'" (p. 1715). However, existence of the latter condition, the authors note, has been challenged in some schools of thought (pp. 1716-1719; see also Lett, 1996, pp. 1142-1143).

Another reference work entry – on "Objectivity in Ethics" from *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – makes evident the complexity of the concept, describing several different types of objectivity. One that parallels some discussions within journalism involves *objectivity as truth*. Of this, the author writes:

> In one sense, what is objective is what is so independently of one's particular attitude or position. But this idea can be specified in different ways. In one sense, a particular ethical judgment is objective if and only if it is correct, where this is an evaluation of the judgment itself, not of how it is formed or sustained. If ethical judgments are beliefs, then it is natural to think that they are correct if and only if they are true (Kolodny, 2006, p. 3).

This basis of objectivity seems to favor an understanding that only *one* truth (not multiple perspectives on it) actually exists. It is echoed in part of Lett's (1996) entry on "Scientific Anthropology" in the *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*:

> Scientific objectivity implies two things: first, that the truth or falsity of a given factual claim is independent of the claimant's hopes, fears, desires or goals; and second, that no two conflicting accounts of a given phenomenon can both be correct (p. 1142).

Thus a reporter practicing *journalistic objectivity* – providing multiple viewpoints on a non-settled issue – might uphold fairness and neutrality, but not necessarily be practicing *objectivity* as defined above.

Verification

With that said, some of these views on objectivity from outside journalism are invoked in the term *journalism of verification* (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001, pp. 70-93). This sees journalism as a process that requires reporters to explain *how* they got their facts together. At its most basic, this involves providing attribution for quotes and other data, and noting the limitations of a story (such as when someone refused comment or when data was not available). Kovach and Rosenstiel's thesis that "The essence of journalism is a discipline of verification" (p. 71) indicates that a reporter's work should meet the same criteria as a scientific operation.

Analogous to this is the term *publicly verifiable*, which Lett (1996) uses in the aforementioned entry on "Scientific Anthropology" in the *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*. While acknowledging that absolute objectivity is unrealizable or unattainable, Lett adds that the process of public verification – "that the procedures employed in the collection of the evidence be replicable by independent observers" – is meant to render "the biases of individual scientists… irrelevant" (pp. 1142-1143).

Accordingly, journalists practicing verification-conscious versions of their craft would be expected to treat data like a scientist or social scientist should; notably today there is increasing discussion of "data-based journalism" and "data journalism" (see, e.g. V. Foreman, 2012, and Rogers, 2014).

Balance and Falsehoods

Under any circumstances, reporters (like scientists and social scientists, among others) may also be expected to refute certain statements, or refuse to present them at all, given "the journalist's responsibility in discerning true from false news" (Mellor, 2005, pp. 88-89, citing Nabi, 1989). In such an approach, objectivity in the sense of discovering truth is the journalist's mission, and not necessarily something to be left to the audience.

However, at times legal realities and professional ethics encourage reporting "balance." Journalists covering crime, for example, usually defer to courts as to what constitutes "truth" related to the guilt or innocence of suspects; they may risk lawsuits for wrongly "convicting" a suspect themselves. Similarly, reporters covering courtroom stories may feel an ethical duty to include responses one side makes to another's charges. This generally also applies to stories about public controversies, especially political ones involving candidates in the period before an election.

Still other factors have influenced recent aspects of "balance" in American political coverage. Some news outlets responded to budget cuts by abandoning comprehensive reporting in favor of simply providing arenas for partisan squabbles (see, e.g., Bruni, 2014). Though undoubtedly cheaper, to some professionals this constitutes an abdication of the journalist's role as arbiter over facts. Goodwin (2004) writes that the "tired formula of turning the cameras or news pages over to two partisans so they can duke it out only adds to the burden of viewers and readers. They are now expected to find the truth that presumably lies somewhere between two lies. Used to be, that was the job of journalism" (p. 6). In this regard, another observer (Chinni, 2004) holds that "routinely presenting opposing points of view regardless of the facts is often a lazy substitute for reporting. It means assertions don't have to be checked or even filtered. … Who needs journalism if truth is just a matter of opinion" (p. 9). From another viewpoint – in this case a text discussed in a scholarly work on Arab news media – "objectivity as presenting two opposing opinions is beside the point, assuming that one of the two opinions is misleading or false, because then the media would be helping to promote this opinion" (Mellor, 2005, pp. 88-89, citing Nabi, 1989; cf. Mill, 1978).

Real or alleged distortion of reality in the name of balance or fairness is sometimes referred to as *false balance* or *false equivalence.* Defining the latter term, Fournier (2013) writes that it means "to describe a situation as having logical and apparent equivalence when in fact there is none." (For related discussions, see e.g. Montopoli, 2004; Fallows, 2013; and Poniewozik, 2013). The late philosophy professor and Boston University President John Silber has been described as having been a "longtime foe of false equivalence." A combative figure, Silber was often engaged in controversy on- and off-campus, and was known to clash with reporters. A former editor of Boston University's *Daily Free Press* has recalled how "a quarter of a century ago, some of the biggest battles we waged (publicly and privately) centered on what Silber considered to be one of journalism's big cop-outs – the 'he said, she said' narrative that forms the basis of most reporting. At least as he explained it to me, journalists have a duty not just to lay out the facts, and not just to serve up quotes, but also to search for, and write about, the truth of the matter. Surely it was his background in philosophy – he studied Kant, for example – that made him push in this direction" (Cohen, 2012).

However, the former editor also acknowledges that, in the circumstances he was reporting on, sometimes "it was impossible for me at the time to know who was telling the truth, or whether anyone could know the truth" (Cohen, 2012). This observation hits at a reality of journalism, and beyond: truth can be hard to discover. And as another philosopher warns, silencing a voice may be silencing truth (Mill, 1978, pp. 15-52).

Information vs. Interpretation

Even when facts in a report are correct, other issues may arise. Merrill, who developed the TUFF (Truthful-Unbiased-Full-Fair) model of ethical and professional reporting, himself acknowledged that its elements could be paradoxical (Merrill, 1997, pp. 174-189). For example, a journalist's article about a sexual assault might be accurate (i.e. truthful), but if it names the victim it may not be considered fair (Kayode, 2011, p. 148). This power that journalists have in selecting what facts they include can be described as *gatekeeping*. Accordingly, this initial screening – determining what is relevant to a reporter's representation of reality – can also be viewed as a form of interpretation of that data.

With that said, professional journalists are expected to put data into contexts their background knowledge provides (see e.g. O'Shea, 2011, pp. 340-341). As Bruni (2014) writes: "News has always been paired with analysis, and a certain degree of assumption and conjecture rightly enters into the laudable attempt to make sense of things." But as that author notes, critiquing the "grandstanding" that often follows initial news reports, problems have arisen when "impassioned interpretations eclipsed actual information‖ (p. SR3).

Other disciplines have had their own debates over the role of interpretation vs. information. One such example comes from the humanities area of history, which has similarities to journalism, the latter having been likened to "the first rough draft of history" (Phil Graham, quoted in Halberstam, 2000, p. 161). At the core of this discussion were the lectures of British historian E.H. Carr (1961) delivered at

Cambridge University, in which he critiques reliance on purely empirical approaches. He observes, among other things, that historians' power of selection of their facts forestalls any pretense to objectivity. (Journalism's critics have, as noted above, marshaled similar arguments about reporters.) Carr faults those who apply the values of their own era to historical facts, but also argues that the latter are in eternal flux due to the progress of interpretation (pp. 7-10, 24, 159, and *passim*). He remarks at one point that "objectivity in history does not and cannot rest on some fixed and immovable standard of judgment existing here and now, but only on a standard which is laid up in the future and is evolved as the course of history advances. History acquires meaning and objectivity only when it establishes a coherent relation between past and future" (p. 173).

A response to this came from Cambridge University professor of history G.R. Elton (2002 edition), arguing that facts could indeed be separated from their interpretation. The problem with suggesting that "history is what historians write, not what happened," Elton continues, is that it was "dangerously close to suggesting either that it does not much matter what one says because (interpretation being everything) there are always several reasonably convincing interpretations of any given set of events, or that history is altogether unknowable, being merely what happens to be said by a given historian at a given moment" (p. 51).

It is important to note that while Elton defended empiricism, he did not discount the importance of competent interpretation. But he might have agreed with Lippmann (2010 edition), who warned against "the loss of contact with objective information. Public as well as private reason depends upon it. Not what somebody says, not what somebody wishes were true, but what is so beyond all our opining, constitutes the touchstone of our sanity" (p. 19).

Conclusion

Academic fields outside of journalism studies provide examples of definitions, arguments, and other elements that may help fuel classroom discussions about the pursuit and attainment of objectivity. These shed different and useful lights on the basic concept, sometimes introducing cautions akin to those applied to journalism-related uses of the term. They can also lead into related topics involving areas such as methodology, balance, and interpretation.

While this piece has cited examples drawn from disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and history, these do not, of course, represent the full range of interdisciplinary resources available to a journalism educator. Nor are these the only disciplines outside of journalism that offer useful models and parallels. Moreover, objectivity is not the only journalism-related topic that might gain from an interdisciplinary approach to source materials. Scholars in business studies, for example, have written on topics such as organizational learning that speak to the role of information in fixing problems (see e.g. the discussion of works by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön in Larsson and Nohrsted, 2002, pp. 116-117). Others have written on the democratizing role of information distribution, another topic that parallels journalism's traditional mission (see e.g. Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006, 31-32).

Objectivity will remain contentious not only in journalism, but also to practitioners and educators in other fields. Introducing journalism students to discussions about objectivity and related concepts drawn from other disciplines broadens their approach to what will be a career-long issue. It also lets them know that they will not be alone.

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