

Connecticut Debate Association

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Online Tournament

Resolved: The news media should strive to be moral rather than objective.

Invisible men

The Economist, Books & Arts, Jul 18th 2020 edition

How objectivity in journalism became a matter of opinion

In America, political and commercial strains have led to questions about its value and meaning

Have you heard the news? It's about the news. As correspondents covered the widespread protests on the streets of America in recent months, many were engaged in a parallel protest of their own—against their employers. On private Slack channels, public Twitter feeds and in op-ed columns, journalists revolted. Editors apologised, promised change and in some cases were sacked, their downfall promptly written up in their own papers.

The immediate cause of this rebellion is race: how it is reported and how it is represented among staff. More than 150 Wall Street Journal employees signed a letter saying that they “find the way we cover race to be problematic”. Over 500 at the Washington Post endorsed demands for “combating racism and discrimination” at the paper. Journalists at the New York Times tweeted that a senator’s op-ed advocating a show of military force to restore order “puts black @nytimes staff in danger”.

But at the heart of many of these arguments is another disagreement, about the nature and purpose of journalism. As a Bloomberg employee is said to have remarked at a recent meeting, reporters are meant to be objective, but to many the distinction between right and wrong now seems obvious. A new generation of journalists is questioning whether, in a hyper-partisan, digital world, objectivity is even desirable. “American view-from-nowhere, ‘objectivity’-obsessed, both-sides journalism is a failed experiment,” tweeted Wesley Lowery, a Pulitzer-winning 30-year-old now at cbs News. The dean of Columbia Journalism School described objectivity as an “inherited shibboleth” in a message to students. The Columbia Journalism Review pondered: “What comes after we get rid of objectivity in journalism?”

Objectivity hasn't always been a journalistic ideal. Early American newspapers read a bit like today's blogs, says Tom Rosenstiel of the American Press Institute (api), an industry group. Benjamin Franklin's Pennsylvania Gazette and Alexander Hamilton's Gazette of the United States were unashamedly partisan. As they sought wider audiences in the 19th century, newspapers became more concerned with what they called “realism”. Some of this was provided by the Associated Press (ap), founded in 1846, which supplied stories to papers of diverse political leanings and so stuck to the facts. As the news pages became more even-handed, publishers established editorial pages, on which they could continue to back their favoured politicians.

Hot takes and alternative facts

Only in the 1920s did objectivity truly gain currency. “A Test of the News”, by Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, found that the New York Times' coverage of the Russian revolution was rife with what today might be called unconscious bias. “In the large, the news about Russia is a case of seeing not what was, but what men wished to see,” they wrote. At the same time, as communism advanced, Joseph Pulitzer's view of the centrality of journalism to democracy—“Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together”—gained adherents. These lofty aims overlapped with commercial ones. Advertisers wanted less partisan coverage to sit alongside their messages.

And so objectivity became journalism's new lodestar. As Lippmann put it, the journalist should “remain clear and free of his irrational, his unexamined, his unacknowledged prejudices in observing, understanding and presenting the news.”

A century later, four trends have put this principle under strain. (The Economist, a British publication, has grappled with most of them.) One is Donald Trump's rise and the challenges it has posed to traditional reporting. Some of his statements can be accurately described as lies, or as racist. But such words are so seldom used of sitting presidents—except by partisans—that writers and editors have reached for euphemisms. After Mr Trump told four non-white congresswomen to “go back” to the “crime-infested places from which they came”, the Wall Street Journal called his words “racially charged”; the Times plumped for “racially infused”.

The Trump era has also exposed problems with journalistic notions of balance. Giving equal weight to both sides of an argument is an easy shortcut to appearing objective. Yet this “bothsidesism” has sometimes come to seem misleading. At an impeachment hearing in December, “the lawmakers from the two parties could not even agree on a basic set of

facts in front of them,” reported the Times. Which facts were real? Readers were left to guess.

A second cause of doubts about objectivity is the changing make-up of the American newsroom. Amid more diverse recruitment, the share of the Times’ editorial staff who are white is falling; the proportion who are women is rising. Not only has this sharpened sensitivity to odd phrases like “racially infused”; it has also made some wonder if the “objective” viewpoint is in fact a white, male one. The “view from nowhere” is just the view of “a white guy who doesn’t even exist”, Dan Froomkin, an outspoken media critic, has argued.

Concerns like these might in the past have remained on the shop floor. But a third factor—the rise of social media—has given dissenters a megaphone. It has also highlighted the contrast between the detached style journalists are meant to adopt in print and the personal approach many employ online—something bosses seem unsure whether to encourage or deter. Readers, for their part, are bathed on the web in highly partisan content that whets their appetite for more opinionated news. The division between news and comment, clear on paper in American journalism, dissolves on the internet. A study for the api in 2018 found that 75% of Americans could easily tell news from opinion in their favoured outlet, but only 43% could on Twitter or Facebook.

Keeping up appearances

The final reason for the turn against objectivity is commercial. The shift away from partisanship a century ago was driven partly by advertisers. Today, as ad revenues leak away to search engines and social networks, newspapers have come to rely more on paying readers. Unlike advertisers, readers love opinion. Moreover, digital publication means American papers no longer compete regionally, but nationally. “The local business model was predicated on dominating coverage of a certain place; the national business model is about securing the loyalties of a certain kind of person,” wrote Ezra Klein of Vox. Left-leaning New Yorkers may switch to the Washington Post if the Times upsets them. The incentive to keep readers happy—and the penalty for failing—are greater than ever.

These pressures are changing the way newspapers report. Last year ap’s style book declared: “Do not use racially charged or similar terms as euphemisms for racist or racism when the latter terms are truly applicable.” Some organisations have embraced, even emblazoned taboo words: “A Fascist Trump Rally In Greenville” ran a headline last year in the Huffington Post. Others are inserting more value judgments into their copy. A front-page news piece in the Times this month began:

President Trump used the spotlight of the Fourth of July weekend to sow division during a national crisis, denying his failings in containing the worsening coronavirus pandemic while delivering a harsh diatribe against what he branded the “new far-left fascism”.

Disenchanted with objectivity, some journalists have alighted on a new ideal: “moral clarity”. The phrase, initially popularised on the right, has been adopted by those who want newspapers to make clearer calls on matters such as racism. Mr Lowery repeatedly used the phrase in a recent Times op-ed, in which he called for the industry “to abandon the appearance of objectivity as the aspirational journalistic standard, and for reporters instead to focus on being fair and telling the truth, as best as one can, based on the given context and available facts.” The editor of the Times, Dean Baquet, called Mr Lowery’s column “terrific” in an interview with the “Longform” podcast. Objectivity has been “turned into a cartoon”, he said. Better to aim for values such as fairness, independence and empathy.

Back in the 1920s, Lippmann might have agreed with much of this. He saw objectivity not as a magical state of mind or a view from nowhere, but as a practical process. Journalism should aim for “a common intellectual method and a common area of valid fact”, he wrote. That does not mean using euphemisms in place of plain language, or parroting both sides of an argument without testing them. Indeed, when journalism has erred in recent years, it has often done so by misinterpreting objectivity, rather than upholding it. The most persuasive calls for moral clarity today articulate something close to Lippmann’s original conception of objectivity.

The danger is that advocates of moral clarity slide self-righteously towards crude subjectivity. This week Bari Weiss, a Times editor, resigned, criticising what she said was the new consensus at the paper: “that truth isn’t a process of collective discovery, but an orthodoxy already known to an enlightened few whose job is to inform everyone else.” Earlier Mr Rosenstiel warned, in a largely supportive response to Mr Lowery’s column, that “if journalists replace a flawed understanding of objectivity by taking refuge in subjectivity and think their opinions have more moral integrity than genuine inquiry, journalism will be lost.”

As reporters learn more about a subject, he adds, the truth tends to become less clear, not more so. Recognising and embracing the uncertainty means being humble—but not timid. ■

The Media’s Self-Censors

The Wall Street Journal, By Daniel Henninger, June 10, 2020

The pre-liberal idea of settling disagreements with coercion has made a comeback in the United States.

In 1789, America's Founding Fathers, acutely aware of the political bloodbaths that had consumed Europe for centuries, created a system in which disagreements would be arbitrated by periodically allowing the public to turn their opinions into votes. The majority would win the election. Then, because political disagreement never ends, you hold more elections. Aware of the natural tendency of factions and majorities to want to suppress opposition opinion, the Founders created a Bill of Rights for all citizens, including what they called, with unmistakable clarity, "the freedom of speech." Nothing lasts forever, and so it is today in the U.S., where the pre-liberal idea of settling disagreements with coercion has made a comeback.

In the past week, the editorial page editor of the New York Times, the editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer and the editors of Bon Appétit magazine and the young women's website Refinery 29 have been forced out by the staff and owners of their publications for offenses regarded as at odds with the beliefs of the current protests.

It is impossible not to recognize the irony of these events. The silencers aren't campus protesters but professional journalists, a class of American workers who for nearly 250 years have had a constitutionally protected and court-enforced ability to say just about anything they want. Historically, people have been attracted to American journalism because it was the freest imaginable place to work for determined, often quirky individualists. Suddenly, it looks like the opposite of that.

The idea that you could actually lose your job, as the Inquirer's editor did, because of a headline on an opinion piece that said "Buildings Matter, Too" is something to ponder. It sounds like a made-up incident that one might expect in a work of political satire, such as George Orwell's "Animal Farm."

The issue here is not about the assertion that racism is endemic in the U.S. The issue is the willingness by many to displace the American system of free argument with a system of enforced, coerced opinion and censorship, which forces comparison to the opinion-control mechanisms that existed in Eastern Europe during the Cold War.

In 2006, the movie "The Lives of Others" dramatized how the Stasi, the omnipresent East German surveillance apparatus, pursued a nonconforming writer, whose friends were intimidated into abandoning him. To survive this kind of enforced thought-concurrence in the Soviet Union or Communist Eastern Europe, writers resorted to circulating their uncensored ideas as underground literature called samizdat. Others conveyed their ideas as political satire. In Vaclav Havel's 1965 play, "The Memorandum," a Czech office worker is demoted to "staff watcher," whose job is to monitor his colleagues. You won't see Havel's anticensorship plays staged in the U.S. anytime soon.

Other writers during those years of thought suppression sometimes wrote in allegory or fables. In Russia, writers called it "Aesopian language." We're not there yet. Instead many writers and media personalities here have chosen to participate in keeping opinion and even vocabulary inside restricted limits.

Some will object that it is preposterous to liken them to a communist party. But social media has become a partylike phenomenon of ideological and psychological reinforcement. It avoids the poor public optics of China's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and '70s, when dissidents were paraded in dunce caps. Today, endlessly repeated memes on social-media platforms, such as "silence is violence," reduce independent thought to constant rote reminders. Instead of the Stasi, we have Twitter's censors to keep track of dissidents.

Alarmed parents saw years ago that platforms such as Facebook were being used to humiliate and ostracize teenage girls. It is disingenuous to deny that this same machinery of shaming has been expanded to coerce political conformity. It is also disingenuous to deny that this ethos sanctions the implicit threat of being fired from one's job as the price for falling out of line just once. It's beginning to look like nonlethal summary execution.

The Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse argued in 1965 that some ideas were so repugnant, which he identified as "from the Right," that it was one's obligation to suppress them with what he called "the withdrawal of tolerance." Marcuse is a saint on the American left.

The ingeniousness of this strategy of suppression and shaming is that it sidesteps the Supreme Court's long history of defending opinion that is unpopular, such as its 1977 decision that vindicated the free-speech rights of neo-Nazis who wanted to march in Skokie, Ill. But if people have shut themselves up, as they are doing now, there is no speech, and so there is "no problem."

Free speech isn't dead in the United States, but it looks like more than ever, it requires active defense.

Survey Says: Never Tweet

The New York Times, By Ben Smith, Jan. 31, 2021

The tensions in newsrooms over reporters' social media presence are not just about politics.

David Carr, the legendary Timesman who made this column a destination, told me back in 2012 that he kept a "helicopter on the roof" of The New York Times Building in case he needed to escape. After all, he had been taking

shots at media moguls, including, occasionally, his own bosses. That helicopter, he said, was his Twitter account, and it gave him the power, if needed, to flee The Times and take his followers — more than 300,000 when he died in 2015.

Twitter has occupied an uncomfortable place between journalists and their bosses for more than a decade. It offers journalists both a newswire and a direct line back into the news cycle. But it has also set off a tug of war between the voice of the brand and of the individual.

More staid newsrooms, like The Wall Street Journal and Reuters, have to varying degrees barred journalists from breaking news and developing big voices on the service, while some newer and more ideological outlets, like Vox and The Intercept, encourage and benefit from their journalists' social media presence. Caught in the uncomfortable middle are the defining American news brands — The Times, The Washington Post, CNN and NBC — where managers alternate between sending irritated emails and biting their tongues, and journalists marvel and complain at the question of who gets away with what on Twitter and who gets in trouble. One of those who crossed that hazy line was a freelance editor at The Times, Lauren Wolfe, who was recently fired.

"I sometimes feel like every editor in chief has a phone on their desk with an open line to every other editor in chief and collectively they're one bad tweet away from — 'OK, that's it, let's shut this whole thing down,'" said Janine Gibson, the head of digital platforms and projects at The Financial Times in London. "You feel like you've escaped if you can have a day on Twitter when you're not involved in some massive row."

President Trump's extreme behavior at the end of his term seemed to bring about a temporary truce in some of the battles over Twitter. Even the most old-fashioned editors had little problem calling out the president's blunt lies, or describing the viciousness of the mob that assaulted the Capitol. But the arrival of President Biden, and his promise of restoring normalcy, generated a wave of stern reminders that journalists need to keep their opinions to themselves.

Newsrooms themselves are struggling to determine their own identities in a polarized nation and a subscription economy. And many of the battles over Twitter are really battles over journalism itself, and over whose perspective and judgment is central in an era when the country and the industry are wrestling with big questions of race and gender and power.

The easy, and often silly, part of this is a kind of squeamishness at individual voices that clash sharply with the brand. Olivia Nuzzi, a reporter for New York Magazine, recalled that when The Washington Post offered her a job in its Style section in 2018, its editors promised her the freedom to be herself on the page and said they wouldn't expect her to conform to a stuffy newspaper ethos.

She didn't quite trust that assurance, she recalled, and so, as she considered the offer, she "tried to test their limits by tweeting increasingly insane stuff." The tweets were mostly profane, if fair, reactions to statements by Mr. Trump. And sure enough, the day after a particularly colorful response to a White House statement on Saudi Arabia, a top editor wrote to warn her that her tweets, were she a Postie, "would have necessitated our having a conversation." The editor attached a document titled "profanity social media for olivia.pdf," which, she said, factored into her decision not to take the job.

But the deeper questions are about what it means for journalists to be, and seem, fair. There's an argument raging about whether news organizations, and their reporters, ought to keep their opinions to themselves to avoid being seen as biased. Many top editors still seem to believe that the less said on social media, the better. The other side, as Wesley Lowery of CBS recently argued, is that readers should be asked to trust in "an objective process" of journalism that separates both reporters' views and readers' biases from judgment about their published work. (He also told me that, while Twitter is occasionally a valuable reporting tool, he mostly thinks that everyone would probably be better off if they stopped tweeting. "If I ran a newsroom," he said, "I'd both tell my people I wasn't going to come after them for stupid tweets and also basically beg them to tweet as little as possible.")

This often feels like a moral or ethical debate, sometimes played out in caricature on Twitter itself. But the question of how to get your readers to trust you, in my view, isn't really moral; it's tactical, and empirical. Part of the reason reporters use social media is about sources. Some reporters elicit information from sources by keeping their cards close to their chests. Others develop sources on social media by broadcasting their views and finding allies. But newsroom conversations about bias and trust tend, oddly, to leave out the audience. So last week, I persuaded a polling firm, Morning Consult, to survey Americans on, more or less, the question of whether we should all shut up on social media. The findings were mixed. Asked directly whether "journalists have a responsibility to keep their opinions private, even on their personal social media," a majority of those polled agreed, by a ratio of almost two to one.

But the details of the poll of 3,423 people, with a margin of error of two percentage points, show deeper division. Given the choice between two alternatives, 41 percent agreed with the statement, "I trust journalists more if they keep their political and social views private," while 36 percent agreed with the opposite statement, "I trust journalists more if they are open and honest about their political and social views."

The responses weren't uniform across groups. More of those who identified themselves as Black than those in other groups said they'd trust journalists more if they knew what the journalists thought, while conservatives were more likely than liberals to trust journalists who keep their views private.

Other survey responses suggested that, perhaps, just perhaps, journalists are living on a more Twitter-obsessed planet than normal people. When the pollsters showed a version of a tweet from Ms. Wolfe that caused her Twitter trouble, the muddled response made it clear that ordinary Americans had no idea what the fuss was about.

Newsrooms might benefit from acknowledging that some of what appears to be debates about Twitter is more about their own corporate identities and choices. Ms. Wolfe told me that while she thought The Times had been unfair in how it characterized her dismissal, she also didn't object to the paper's choosing to have a social media policy. "The solution for me is to not work at a place where I have to pretend that I don't have opinions," she said.

The other, and perhaps more ominous, tension for the big newsrooms is the one that Mr. Carr spotted in 2012. Social media has shifted the balance of power in the same direction it has long been moving in everything from entertainment to sports: away from management and big brands, and toward the people who used to be called reporters, but now sometimes get referred to as "talent." Reporters have every incentive to build big social media followings. It's a path to television contracts, book deals, job offers and raises. And that can be in tension with what their employers want. (In case you're interested, here are the Times reporters with more than 500,000 Twitter followers, ranked: Maggie Haberman, Marc Stein, Andrew Ross Sorkin, Jenna Wortham, Peter Baker and Nikole Hannah-Jones.)

The new social media stardom has also created a sense in newsrooms that there are different sets of rules for different people. As I've reported about newsroom tensions in this column over the past year, one thing that keeps coming up is a sense that stars get away with a kind of social media presence that low-profile workers would get in big trouble for. Some of this is justifiable. "There has to be some flexibility" in how social media policies are enforced, The Times's executive editor, Dean Baquet, told me in an email last week. "Some people have jobs that give them more flexibility because they live in the world of commentary or opinion," he said.

But some of these tensions just reflect the shifting balance of power, and the fact that journalistic institutions are increasingly having to reckon with the power of their stars. American newspapers, in particular, used to benefit from the fact that journalists were mostly interchangeable to readers and easily replaced. Social media stars can bring with them a devoted audience, credibility and revenue from talent-first media businesses like events and podcasts. But they also create a situation where their employer may need them more than they need their employer, an uncomfortable dynamic in many newsrooms.

"Star reporters and anchors get away with so much more than lower-ranking reporters do," said Yashar Ali, an independent reporter whose huge Twitter following means, he said, that he gets hundreds of requests from other journalists every day to tweet about their stories. "It's largely because the heads of news organizations treat their stars as well as they can and they see not complaining about tweets as another perk."

I suspect that successful news organizations of the future will find ways to align these dynamics: to share in their employees' success and to add enough value that their stars stick around. Twitter's recent acquisition of a newsletter company, Revue, could point in that direction. Revue has been focused on tools for publishers, as well as for individuals, and you could imagine a situation in which both journalists and publishers can share in the value of that promotion.

In the meantime, I will conclude simply by thanking you for reading me each week, and, if you do, for subscribing to The Times. And please follow me on Twitter at @benyt.

Ben Smith is the media columnist. He joined The Times in 2020 after eight years as founding editor in chief of BuzzFeed News. Before that, he covered politics for Politico, The New York Daily News, The New York Observer and The New York Sun.

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Journalistic objectivity is a considerable notion within the discussion of journalistic professionalism. Journalistic objectivity may refer to fairness, disinterestedness, factuality, and nonpartisanship, but most often encompasses all of these qualities. First evolving as a practice in the 18th century, a number of critiques and alternatives to the notion have emerged since, fuelling ongoing and dynamic discourse surrounding the ideal of objectivity in journalism.

Definitions

Sociologist Michael Schudson suggests that "the belief in objectivity is a faith in 'facts,' a distrust in 'values,' and a commitment to their segregation".^[3] Objectivity also outlines an institutional role for journalists as a fourth estate, a body that exists apart from government and large interest groups.^[4]...

Journalistic objectivity requires that a journalist not be on either side of an argument. The journalist must report only the

facts and not a personal attitude toward the facts.[5] While objectivity is a complex and dynamic notion that may refer to a multitude of techniques and practices, it generally refers to the idea of "three distinct, yet interrelated, concepts": truthfulness, neutrality, and detachment.[6]

Truthfulness is a commitment to reporting only accurate and truthful information, without skewing any facts or details to improve the story or better align an issue with any certain agenda.[6] Neutrality suggests that stories be reported in an unbiased, even-handed, and impartial manner. Under this notion, journalists are to side with none of the parties involved, and simply provide the relevant facts and information of all.[6] The third idea, detachment, refers to the emotional approach of the journalist. Essentially, reporters should not only approach issues in an unbiased manner but also with a dispassionate and emotionless attitude. Through this strategy, stories can be presented in a rational and calm manner, letting the audience make up their minds without any influences from the media.[6]...

Criticisms

Some scholars and journalists criticize the understanding of objectivity as neutrality or nonpartisanship, arguing that it does a disservice to the public because it fails to attempt to find truth.[6] They also argue that such objectivity is nearly impossible to apply in practice—newspapers inevitably take a point of view in deciding what stories to cover, which to feature on the front page, and what sources they quote.[6] The media critics Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky have advanced a propaganda model hypothesis proposing that such a notion of objectivity results in heavily favoring government viewpoints and large corporations.[6] Mainstream commentators accept that news value drives selection of stories, but there is some debate as to whether catering to an audience's level of interest in a story makes the selection process non-objective.[6]

Alternatives

Some argue that a more appropriate standard should be fairness and accuracy (as enshrined in the names of groups like Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting). Under this standard, taking sides on an issue would be permitted as long as the side taken was accurate and the other side was given a fair chance to respond. Many professionals believe that true objectivity in journalism is not possible and reporters must seek balance in their stories (giving all sides their respective points of view), which fosters fairness.

Crowdfunding

Recently, many scholars and journalists have increasingly become attuned to the shifts occurring within the newspaper industry, and general upheaval of the journalistic environment, as it adjusts to the new digital era of the 21st century.[36] In the face of this, the practice of crowdfunding is increasingly being utilized by journalists to fund independent and/or alternative projects,[36] establishing it as another relevant alternative practice to consider in the discussion of journalistic objectivity. Crowdfunding allows journalists to pursue stories of interest to them or that otherwise may not be covered adequately for a number of reasons.[37] Crowdfunding supports journalists by funding necessary components like reporting equipment, computers, travel expenses if necessary, and overhead costs like office space or paying other staff on their team.[37] A key component of crowdfunding and a significant motivator for journalists to use it is the lack of corporate backing.[37] This means that the journalist has the autonomy to make editorial decisions at their sole discretion but there is equally no financial support.

Advocacy journalism is a genre of journalism that adopts a non-objective viewpoint, usually for some social or political purpose.

Some advocacy journalists reject that the traditional ideal of objectivity is possible in practice, either generally, or due to the presence of corporate sponsors in advertising. Some feel that the public interest is better served by a diversity of media outlets with a variety of transparent points of view, or that advocacy journalism serves a similar role to muckrakers or whistleblowers.

Access journalism refers to journalism (often in interview form) which prioritizes access—meaning media time with important, rich, famous, powerful or otherwise influential people in politics, culture, sports, and other areas—over journalistic objectivity and/or integrity.

Typical features of access journalism include:

- absence of demanding accountability towards the questioned respondent
- avoiding controversial topics so as to maintain access to the respondent
- pre-approved questions, no gotcha questions, softball questions
- sometimes even respondent's control over how the interview will be edited and which parts will be aired

Access journalism, in some cases, is similar to infomercials, or advertising disguised as news. The venture of doing the interview can be symbiotic—beneficial for both the journalist and the celebrity, since it can synergically bring more attention to both of them, and further notability, influence, media exposure, current relevance, etc. for both of them.
