

OBJECTIVITY CONTROVERSY IN NEWS REPORTING: ANY VIABLE ALTERNATIVE?

Abstract:

The usefulness of objectivity as a cardinal ethical principle guiding news reportage is daily being discredited. In fact, objectivity has been at the base of mass media criticisms as most media audiences complain of absence of objectivity in media reports often accusing reporters of injecting their personal bias and subjective opinions in their stories. The changing character of news in general has also raised some issues and questions on how news should be reported and presented. These coupled with the nature of events and the changing world has put question marks on the efficacy of objectivity in mass media reportage. The belief now is that public interest is no longer served by the journalists' claim to objectivity in reporting certain issues or events. Some media houses now prefer such principles as accuracy, balance, fairness and neutrality in news reportage. A close look at these principles shows that each of them is as flawed as objectivity if not worse. The big question is: if objectivity is discarded, what other principle can adequately replace objectivity? This paper takes a critical look at the issues involved and makes some far-reaching recommendations.

Introduction:

One of the most contentious, if not controversial issues in the present day reportorial job is the question of objectivity. The roles of the media as the fourth estate of the realm empower media professionals to choose what the public should consume as news. The agenda-setting and gate-keeping functions of the mass media ensure this and as Okpoko (2001, p. 96) rightly noted, "those who control the flow of communication have the ability to exercise power over people..." But this power to select and publish what the news-hungry public consumes carries with it some ethical responsibilities. The journalists in performing these roles are expected to be objective, fair, accurate and balanced in their reports. In the historical traditions of journalism the world over, adherence to the principle of objectivity has always been considered as one of the ultimate goals of media professionals. Any reporter worth the name prides himself as an objective reporter of news and to be accused of lack of objectivity is viewed almost as a heresy. Objectivity is seen as the norm, a creed among reporters.

Unluckily, things have now changed and the efficacy of principle of objectivity in news reportage is being seriously questioned if not totally discredited even by journalists themselves. The mass media reporters are daily assailed with allegations of bias and injecting of subjective opinions into news stories. A scan through 'the letter to the editor' column of any newspaper easily attests to these complaints of lack of objectivity in the news contents. According to Pew Center Research (1999) findings, "journalists increasingly agree with public criticism of their profession and the quality of their work. Overwhelmingly, news media professionals say the lines have blurred between commentary and reporting and between entertainment and news. A growing number of reporters, editors and news executives also say that news reports are full of factual errors and sloppy reporting."

The number of rejoinders that complain of biased reports has increased exponentially. The complaints in the electronic media equal that of the print if not even more. The issue has become so bad that, "in 1996, the Society of Professional Journalists removed the term 'objectivity' from its ethics code (Columbia Journalism Review, 7-8/03). This, according to Boykoff and Boykoff (2004, p.4), "reflects the fact that many contemporary journalists find the concept to be an unrealistic description of what journalists aspire to,

preferring instead words like 'fairness,' 'balance,' 'accuracy,' 'comprehensiveness' and 'truth.' In terms of viewpoints presented, journalists are taught to abide by the norm of balance: identifying the most dominant, widespread positions and then telling 'both' sides of the story."

Accordingly, this study critically analyzes objectivity as principle guiding news reportage, the major criticisms of objectivity, the possible replacements of objectivity and makes recommendations.

The accusation of lack of objectivity in mass media is indeed not new but the crescendo of public outcry against it has reached disturbing level in recent times. Objectivity is dismissed by many news-consuming public as a mirage, a fond, unattainable hope. Hedges (2010, p.1) roundly condemned objectivity as:

Convenient and profitable vehicle to avoid confronting unpleasant truths or angering a power structure on which, news organizations depend for access and profits. This creed transforms reporters into neutral observers or voyeurs. It banishes empathy, passion and a quest for justice. Reporters are permitted to watch but not to feel or to speak in their own voices. They function as "professionals" and see themselves as dispassionate and disinterested social scientists. This vaunted lack of bias, enforced by bloodless hierarchies of bureaucrats, is the disease of [American] journalism.

The reason for this change is threefold. The first deals with the different meanings attached to the concept by different scholars and media experts. The second is the vested interests of man in topical socio-economic and political issues in his immediate and distant environments that make it difficult if not impossible for him to be completely detached, unbiased and fair on such issues in the society. Third is the use of the Internet in news production and dissemination which has thrown up all kinds of challenges and innovations. Williams agrees that:

Newspapers have traditionally been expected to maintain fair and impartial methods of storytelling. But that concept is possibly more theory than absolute practice, especially in contemporary society. Readers' interests have changed, as have the variety of media platforms, most notably the inclusion of the Internet with its near-instantaneous snippets of information from all around the globe.

Objectivity and its major criticisms

It is called for, to begin the discussion on the contending opinions on issue of objectivity with the meaning of the term because of the different ways it has been conceptualized and the differing meaning each of them has given it. This therefore, begs the question: What is objectivity? We shall give as many definitions and views of objectivity as we possibly can to help us come to a reasonable working concept.

Collins Dictionary (9th edition) defines objective simply as, "undistorted by emotion or personal bias." *Cambridge Dictionary* says that to be objective means: "Not influenced by personal feelings or opinions; considering only the facts." *Longman Dictionary* of

Contemporary English says that to be objective is: "Not being influenced by own feelings or opinions when you have a judgment to make or decision."

Note that the three contemporary dictionaries cited above agree completely that objectivity means absence of '*personal biases, feelings, influence or opinion*' in writing as it may apply to news reporting and writing. The issue is that if objectivity is limited to these dictionary definitions of the concept, things would have been less complex. While the above are the accepted dictionary definitions of the concept, scholars, critics and even media professionals themselves view it in a more complicated form.

In most countries the world over, objectivity in news reportage means a middle path between two extremes in an issue: that is a little to the right and a little to the left. This implies that the tenet of objectivity is abused to the extent to which the report tilts towards one side. This means maintaining a certain level of detachment on the part of the reporters. In his work, *Discovering the News*, Schudson (1978), argues that, "the belief in objectivity is a faith in 'facts, distrust in 'values,' and a commitment to their segregation."

This was probably why Myrick [2002] says that the definition of objectivity as a word expressing or dealing with facts or conditions as perfect as perceived without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices or interpretations - is so clear and uncomplicated that it would look gratuitous or superfluous to begin an article with it. He adds however, that, "on closer examination, objectivity is easier to define than it is to attain in practice. Were that not the case, there would not be the unending allegations of biased reporting leveled against the news media."

In the article entitled *7 Principles of Objectivity*, Shraga [2007, p. 1-2] identified seven different ways by which the media men violate the principle of objectivity in news reportage using the Israeli-Palestine conflict as case in point. An abridged part of the work which serves as linchpin for this work reproduced below says: "Whatever the reason, if truth is to prevail, we can't just 'read' the newspaper. Be discerning and become part of the process. Otherwise, you're just a passive object of someone else's agenda. As Mark Twain once said, 'If you don't read the newspaper, you are uninformed; if you do read the newspaper, you are misinformed.' How can readers discern the truth between the lines? Listed here are common methods employed by the media - intentionally or not - to influence public opinion. By being aware of these methods, we can avoid becoming a pawn in the media war. Here are the "*7 Violations of Media Objectivity*":

Violation No.1: Misleading definitions and terminology

By using terminology and definitions in a way that implies accepted fact, the media injects bias under the guise of objectivity. For instance, in March 2001, two separate acts of terrorism occurred a few days apart, providing the opportunity to compare the media's selective use of terminology. The BBC's article on an IRA car bomb in London carries the headline 'BBC bomb prompts terror warning,' and the word 'terror' (or its derivatives) is used 5 other times in the article. The IRA alerted police ahead of time, and one man was slightly injured in the blast.

But after a Palestinian suicide bomber killed three Israeli civilians (without prior warning) in Netanya, the BBC purposely avoided the label 'terrorist,' and instead used the far milder term 'militants.'

Violation No. 2: Imbalanced reporting

Media reports frequently skew the picture by presenting only one side of the story. For instance, in February 2001, Deborah Sontag of the New York Times and Suzanne Goldenberg of the Guardian (UK) both reported on the opening of a new exhibit in the West Bank town of Ramallah dedicated to the memories of 100 Palestinian 'martyrs.' Curiously, both reporters used nearly identical language in their reports:

SONTAG: 'Israeli critics would say that the exhibit, '100 Martyrs - 100 Lives,' glorifies death and encourages the cult of the shaheed, or martyr.'

GOLDENBERG: 'Israeli critics would argue that the exhibit glorifies violent death, and promotes a cult of martyrdom.'

Issues of plagiarism aside, what is most disturbing is the way both Sontag and Goldenberg assume what Israelis critics 'would say' - had the reporter bothered to ask. Media watchdog smartertimes.com, wrote about the Sontag piece: 'Israeli critics "would say" that, if they had actually been called or quoted by the Times, rather than having their criticisms assumed. Funny how the Arabs in the article are interviewed and allowed to speak for themselves, rather than having their views summarized by a reporter estimating what they 'would say' had the reporter bothered go to the effort to ask.'

Violation No. 3: Opinions disguised as news

An objective reporter should not use adjectives or adverbs, unless they are part of a quotation. Also, the source for any facts and opinions should be clear from the report, or alternatively it should be stated that source is intentionally undisclosed. Even so-called 'opinion pieces' must bear a modicum of objectivity. James Hill, the managing editor of the Washington Post Writers Group, writes: You have to hold columnists to the same standard as anyone at the newspaper. If a column writer is making egregious errors in the process of stating his or her opinion, eventually it's not the columnist who's doing that, it's the paper that's doing that.

For instance, on February 7, 2001, 'The Early Show' co-host Bryant Gumbel interviewed former Middle East envoy Dennis Ross about what Ariel Sharon's election victory meant for the peace process. Gumbel abdicated his role of objective journalist by repeatedly asking Ross leading questions, loaded with venomous descriptions of Sharon. Gumbel said: 'But does he [Arafat] even have a chance with - with Sharon, when many objective observers view him as - as not only a racist, a terrorist, a murderous war criminal?'

Violation No. 4: Lack of context

By failing to provide proper context and full background information, journalists can dramatically distort the true picture. For instance, a BBC photo depicts two Palestinians, hands tied behind their backs, and kneeling on the ground. Standing over them is an Israeli soldier with a rifle pointed at their heads.

There is no context identifying this photo, just the benign caption 'Tension has been high around the Jewish settlements.' But who are the Arabs in this photo? Did they just

murder Jews in cold blood? Or were they innocently buying bread at the local market? BBC does not say. And why is the soldier pointing the gun? Is he guarding dangerous prisoners until reinforcements can arrive? Or is he about to blow off their heads at point-blank range? BBC lets the implication stand for itself.

Violation No. 5: Selective omission

By choosing to report certain events over others, the media controls access to information and manipulates public sentiment. For instance, ever since the violence began, media outlets routinely refer to the Intifada as being ‘sparked by Ariel Sharon’s provocative visit to the Temple Mount.’ This is despite the admission by Palestinian Minister of Communications Imad el-Falouji that the Palestinian Authority pre-planned the outbreak of violence as reported in the semi-governmental Beirut ‘Daily Star’ (March 3, 2001):

Violation No. 6: Using true facts to draw false conclusion.

Media reports frequently use true facts to draw erroneous conclusions. For instance, in February 2001, when Ariel Sharon was elected Israeli prime Minister, the *Christian Science Monitor* tried to delegitimize the voters’ choice by claiming that voter turnout ‘was an unprecedentedly low 60 percent,’ and claiming that “at least 62 percent of eligible Israeli voters did not vote for Sharon.’

In reality, only despotic countries like North Korea or Syria report 99 percent voter turnout. Truly free elections mean that citizens are also free not to vote. In the United States, only 51 percent of eligible voters participated in the 2000 presidential elections. This means that President George W. Bush received fewer than 25 percent of the eligible votes; additionally he did not even win the popular vote.

Violation No. 7: Distortion of facts.

In today’s competitive media world, reporters frequently do not have the time, inclination or resources to properly verify information before submitting a story for publication. For instance, in reporting on violence of Joseph’s Tomb CNN writes: ‘Meanwhile, at least people, mostly Palestinians have died during several fierce clashes at Joseph’s Tomb during the past week. The lone Israeli soldier to die during the clashes bled to death in the tomb as rescuers tries for hours to reach him’.”

Apart from the seven points identified above, journalists also can be subjective in their placement of story and space allocation (in the print) or air time (in the broadcast media). Sometimes they use discriminatory placement of stories in a newspaper on a contentious matter to hide their biases. In such an instance, the favoured party gets front page coverage with large headlines so as to will attract wide public notice while the other side gets their views tucked inside the pages where it would attract less attention. In a typical case of such subtle bias, the favoured party gets generous newspaper space or air time as the case may be while the disfavoured party gets miserable space or time. This may be why Carey (2009, n.p.) dismisses the quest for ‘objectivity’ in American journalism as having always been based on an ethnocentric conceit. According to him:

It pretended to discover Universal Truth, to proclaim Universal Laws, and to describe a Universal Man. Upon inspection it appeared however, that its Universal Man resembled a type found around Cambridge,

Massachusetts, or Cambridge, England; its Universal Laws resembled those felt to be useful by Congress and Parliament; and its Universal Truth bore English and American ascents.

In view of the above, the question is: does objectivity really exist. Is it a myth or just a fond hope? Not a few analysts believe that objectivity has no real existence. This is the opinion of Weinberger (2009, p.2) when he submitted that:

Outside the realm of science, objectivity is discredited these days as anything but an aspiration, and even that aspiration is looking pretty sketchy. The problem with objectivity is that it tries to show what the world looks like from no particular point of view, which is like wondering what something looks like in the dark.

Also, Dele Giwa implied this while writing on the hijacking of TWA plane by Shi'ite militiamen in 1985. He condemned the then world leaders particularly, the late Ronald Reagan (of the United States) of being misinformed about the issue of terrorism and consequently, their poor handling of the incident. He argued forcefully that: It is like the issue of objectivity; it depends on where you stand. One man's objectivity is another man's subjectivity. One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.

On the flipside are those who do not just believe in the existence of objectivity but that journalists are objective reporters of news. They argue that the reporters are not biased as much as people are led to believe. To them, certain factors beyond the control of the reporter make a story look or sound biased. In the frontline of the defence of journalists on the issue of lack of objectivity in news reportage is Chuck Klosterman, a senior reporter with *Washington Post*. He says:

Everybody seems to be concerned that journalists are constantly trying to slip their own political and philosophical beliefs into what they cover. This virtually never happens. And I am not being naive when I say this; it really doesn't happen. There are thousands of things that affect the accuracy of news stories, but the feelings of the actual reporter is almost never one of them. The single most important impact of any story is far less sinister: Mostly it all comes down to (a) who the journalist has called, and (b) which of those people happens to call back first. (Washingtonpost.com)

Similarly, in her work in, 'In Defence of Objectivity Revisited,' Lichtenberg (2000, p. 238-239) argues that, most critics of objectivity are actually criticizing the concepts associated with objectivity or specific practices which are thought to be objective and therefore we cannot abandon objectivity completely." She points out that: "Critics of objectivity often take three forms: saying journalism is not objective, should not be objective, and cannot be objective. Though many critics try to make more than one case at a time, they are logically inconsistent. If objectivity is impossible, why complain that journalists are not objective?"

Lucid as the above argument may sound, it still begs the question: what determines a reporter's choice of source? On political issues, for instance, would the reporter not just call the politician whose opinions, he believes will rhyme with his (the reporter's) views? Besides, who writes and slants the views of the source? What stops the reporter from

stressing those areas of the answer that favour his personal biases more than others? There are a thousand and one loopholes in the reportorial process through which a reporter can inject his personal biases without making it obvious.

With objectivity so roundly discredited, some principles have been brought forward as possible replacements even though each of them has its own weakness. Some of them are:

Neutrality

In journalistic parlance of perhaps, days gone by, *objectivity* is understood as being synonymous with neutrality. This brand of objectivity, it must be pointed out, must be distinguished from *objectivity* in philosophy or the sciences, which is a definition of a statement that is not dependent on one's approval or his biases. According to Wikipedia:

This concept finds its full use in the pure sciences which describes a statement that is not dependent on one's approval. The equation '2 + 2 = 4' is a classical example. This concept finds its full use in science.

It adds that, "journalists and the public often tend to identify objectivity in its absence. Not many journalists would make a claim to total neutrality or impartiality; however, some strive toward a certain modicum of detachment from their own personal biases in their news work. It refers to the prevailing ideology of newsgathering and reporting that emphasizes eyewitness accounts of events, corroboration of facts with multiple sources and 'balance.' It also implies an institutional role for journalists as a fourth estate, a body that exists apart from government and large interest groups."

Some others (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) further hold that neutrality should mean reporting things without bias, as if one just came to Earth from another planet and had no preconceived opinions about our behaviour or ways. Or perhaps like foreign correspondents in their first assignment in a new country of posting though in this case, their head office must have filled them in with some important background information of the people and their culture. This form of journalism is rarely practiced, although some argue it would lead to radical changes in reporting. (Noam Chomsky, *The Journalist from Mars*).

Still others (like Leonard Downie) hold it to mean that journalists should have something like a *neutral point of view*, not taking a stand on any issues on which there is some disagreement. Instead, journalists are simply to report 'both sides' of an issue. For example, *Washington Post* executive editor Leonard Downie, Jr. says that *The Post* maintains a code of ethics that forbids reporters and editors from all 'political activities' except voting. Downie himself has even decided to stop voting as he became the ultimate gatekeeper for what is published in the newspaper"

But, much as the principle of neutrality has been projected as the antidote to the discredited objectivity, it has its fair share of shortcomings. A school of thought tends to believe that the reporter should inject his personal biases in his reports when such will be in the better interest of the society. In fact, some even believe that there are issues that do not call for neutrality at all. Contributing to this debate, Seelye (of *The Times*) cited in Williams (2008, p.2) wrote:

One of the worst things the old media do, the author, liberal pundit and founder of HuffingtonPost.com said, is present two sides of a story as if the two sides had equal value, creating false neutrality that often does not exist. They fall back, she said, on 'the illusion of neutrality instead of ferreting out the truth.

Arguing this point of view further, Redhunter (2008, p.1) has this to say: "*Neutrality* is properly defined as 'not engaged on either side; *specifically*: not aligned with a political or ideological grouping.' *Objectivity* is properly defined as a: 'relating to or existing as an object of thought without consideration of independent existence-used chiefly in medieval philosophy' b: 'of, relating to, or being an object, phenomenon, or condition in the realm of sensible experience independent of individual thought and perceptible by all observers: having reality in independent of the mind'. Note the difference; being neutral means not taking sides, not favoring one over the other, or even admitting that you are on one side or the other. Objectivity however, means that you can admit that you want one side to win, but you will report on a fair and balanced manner. In other words, you will tell the truth no matter what it is." He further clarified his argument thus:

Imagine that you are given a research project. You are tasked with answering the question: "Why did certain Germans join the SS and murder Jews in the Holocaust?" Certainly no one in their right mind could be neutral with regard to the Holocaust...

Fairness and Accuracy

Some other journalists yet argue that the interest of objectivity is best served if the concept is taken to mean 'fairness and accuracy in news reporting. Among the notable journalists and authors in this group are Ida Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens, (Muckraking); Tom Wolfe (New Journalism); Hunter S. Thompson, (The Underground Press of the 1960s), and many others. According to Wikipedia, these people and others like them believe 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.

Fairness and accuracy are not without flaws of their own. How fair is a story that gives a negative side of a story front page attention while the positive side is carried in a small space in the back page of the same newspaper?

This was what the press did to Dan Quayle, a former United States vice-president when he was the running mate to George Bush [Snr]. According to Gruenfeld (1997, p. 2):

It became a national pastime for the press to catch Quayle doing something stupid. The media dutifully edited the man's entire life down to five minutes filled with every stupid thing he'd done. A big one was when he misspelled 'potato' in front of a class full of kids doing a

spelling bee. It raised a hullabaloo in the media; never mind that Quayle knew very well how to spell potato; the spelling bee test card he'd been given by the school with all the correct spellings had the wrong spelling printed on it.

The teachers who gave him the flashcard are supposed to know how to spell words they test the kids with. Who then gets the blame for the wrong spelling on a bee flashcard? The teachers of course! But that little piece of the story got buried on the back pages of the same newspapers that blasted the vice president on page one, at least those papers that bothered to print it at all. Which were precious few. (Lee Gruenfeld, 1997).

The question is: where is fairness in all these? Is there fairness in the summation of everything he was and did to just five minutes of negative reports or in simply placing a favourable story in the back page by just a few of the same media that lambasted him for an honest mistake?

Second, fairness seems to demand that journalists present competing points of view on a social issue as though they had equal social significance or weight, when actually they do not. This has been the main flaw with the principle of fairness. Besides, there is no guarantee that there will always be only two sides to an issue or conflict. In fact there could be up to twenty or more, in fact, as many sides as there are interests in the matter. In this case, how can all the sides or interests be fairly covered?

Balance

At the onset of the serious doubt about the efficacy of objectivity as an abiding principle of journalistic reportage, the principle of balance was embraced as perhaps, a better alternative. According to Entman cited in Boykoff and Boykoff (2004, p. 2), "balance aims for neutrality. It requires that reporters present the views of legitimate spokespersons of the conflicting sides in any significant dispute, and provide both sides with roughly equal attention."

But balance in journalistic reporting has become as controversial and as contentious as other principles used in media reporting. Not only are journalists touting it as unnecessary, some others say it is even unhelpful to the profession. This is because balanced coverage does not always mean accurate reportage. Silverstein (2008, n.p.) denounces the principle of balance in this way:

...balanced coverage plagues journalism and leads to utterly spineless reporting with no edge. The idea seems to be that journalists are allowed to go out to report, but when it comes then time to write, we are expected to turn our brains off and repeat the spin from both sides. God forbid we should attempt to fairly assess what we see with our own eyes. 'Balanced' is not fair, it's just an easy way of avoiding real reporting...and shirking our responsibility to inform readers.

At the heart of the criticism of balance is the fact that it deals mostly with 'the who' and 'the how' of a news story and not the all-important 'why'. The five news elements of who, what, where, when, and how are often present in a news story conspicuously omitting 'why' which may sound controversial if made public.

Transparency

Another principle that has just been recently pushed as the replacement for objectivity is transparency. It is chiefly promoted by David Weinberger and a few others. Weinberger (2009, p.1) submits that: "Objectivity used to be presented as a stopping point for belief: if the source is objective and well informed, you have sufficient reason to believe. That was part of high-end newspapers' claimed value: You can't believe what you read in a slanted tabloid, but our news is objective, so your belief can come to rest here. Credentialing systems had the same basic rhythm: You can stop your inquiry once you come to a credentialed authority who says, 'You can believe me.'

But he counters by arguing that: "We thought that that was how knowledge works, but it turns out that it's really just how paper works. Transparency prospers in a linked medium, for you can literally see the connections between the final draft's claims and the ideas that informed it. Paper, on the other hand, sucks at links. You can look up the footnote, but that's an expensive, time-consuming activity more likely to result in failure than success." He further states: "In the Age of Links, we still use credentials and rely on authorities. Those are indispensable ways of scaling knowledge that is, letting us know more than any one of us could authenticate on our own. But, increasingly, credentials and authority work only for vouchsafing commoditized knowledge, the stuff that's settled and not worth arguing about. At the edges of knowledge—in the analysis and contextualization that journalists nowadays tell us is their real value—we want, need, can have and expect transparency. Transparency—the embedded ability to see through the published draft—often gives us more reason to believe a report than the claim of objectivity did." He therefore, concludes thus:

In fact, transparency subsumes objectivity. Anyone who claims objectivity should be willing to back that assertion up by letting us look at sources, disagreements, and the personal assumptions and values supposedly bracketed out of the report. Objectivity without transparency increasingly will look like arrogance. And then foolishness. Why should we trust what one person—with the best of intentions—insists is true when we instead could have a web of evidence, ideas and argument?

Profound as the above argument may sound, it still begs the question: How transparent is transparency? This was the opinion of an anonymous blogger in response to Weinberger's argument. It said: "...transparency is only meaningful when the linking is done correctly and with intellectual honesty. If you read one piece that agrees with your opinion and one - or 47 - that goes against it, you're free to link to the one that agrees, or maybe that and one that disagrees, but which you can easily rebut. Then, comes the diligence and intelligence of the reader on top of that. And it's a rare occurrence when your universe of

knowledge coincides with a writer's to the degree that you only have to check the things he or she chooses to link to.

Also, there are assumptions and judgment calls there just as there are with journalists, and they will continue to go unspoken to varying degrees by varying people. So if you link me to your facts you're still not linking me to your assumptions, cultural and otherwise, or your judgments. So the elements that make up your subjectivity are as hidden as those that undermine a journalist's objectivity. The onion has many layers. What you're really talking about doing is trading the claim of objectivity that a reporter gives you for the (supposedly) openly claimed and known subjectivity of a commentary writer. And you've also got the professional policing of the journalists versus the community policing of those linking on the web..." (www.hyperorg.com).

A Case for Objectivity

A summation of the above arguments will clearly show that indeed, objectivity is under very serious credibility problem. Not a few people, journalists included, believe that objectivity has outlived its usefulness and should be discarded. Our findings also reveal that objectivity suffers from three main planks: the nature of journalistic business, the human nature and social construction. The business of journalism serves the public interest more than any other business because much of what we know about other people and places outside our immediate environment is what the media tell or show us. During the period of the cold war, the media painted very disgusting pictures of events in the Soviet Union and her allies in our head. Much of the misgivings the people the over the world still harbour against the so-called 'evil empire' came from these. It is therefore, doubtful if many people including those in authority would have known all these much less feel bad about them without the mass media. However, in doing these, the media are expected to show responsibility, objectivity and a respect for truth. Therefore, the licence to publish carries with it certain duties including to be reasonable and responsible. This is where the problem has always been.

In dismissing and discrediting objectivity, it is only reasonable for us to look at those constraints of objectivity. First, the business of journalism is a very peculiar one that is at the mercy of the public domain. Whatever journalists do is news because of the peculiar nature of their job which is to produce the news. In the business, different interests have to be properly aligned to be successful. To begin with, journalism is first and foremost a business. Murdock and Golding (2000, p.11-31).believe "the mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations which produce and distribute commodities." The implication of the above statement is quite obvious: that profit-making is one of the strongest motives for establishing a media house and if in the process of breaking-even and making some profit, the tenets of objectivity are broken once in a while, so be it. This means that news coverage will tilt more towards where the business interests of the owners lie than where the interest of objectivity is.

In this case, three issues rise clearly to prominence. First is the pressure from owners and advertisers, the second is access and third, patriotism. If truth is to be told, we can say that advertising sustains the mass media industry and in absence of it, it will be difficult for the industry to survive and if it does, it will be difficult for about 20 percent of the populace to have access to individual media contents. Should this be the case, the essence of the whole

idea of the mass media becomes useless. So if advertisers, who are in reality, the financiers of the mass medium bring pressure to bear on the owners, it will take more than the need to be an objective medium to resist them.

Besides the pressures from advertisers, the personal idiosyncrasies of owners, sometimes clearly entrenched in the editorial policy of the media house could lead to subjectivity in reporting certain issues. For instance, Fox news are not worried that they are a *traditional channel*. The implication of admitting to being a traditional channel simply means that this medium has political bias since the traditional media are popularly so perceived. Second, the issue of access to source of information is of primary concern to the mass media reporters. Most times media contents are slanted to favour a given side (mostly government of the day) simply because of the need to retain a vantage position to the source of news. It is a well known truth that most governments all over the world hardly tolerate or condone journalistic crusading or independent-minded reporters including media houses. Official and non-official pressures are brought to bear on such reporters and their media houses until either they fold up or toe the line as others. This is especially the case in most Third World countries. Hedges (2010, p.2) underscored this fact thus:

Reporting, while it is presented to the public as neutral, objective and unbiased, is always highly interpretative. It is defined by rigid stylistic parameters. I have written, like most other reporters, hundreds of news stories. Reporters begin with a collection of facts, statements, positions and anecdotes and then select those that create the "balance" permitted by the formula of daily journalism. The closer reporters get to official sources, for example those covering Wall Street, Congress, the White House or the State Department, the more constraints they endure. When reporting depends heavily on access it becomes very difficult to challenge those who grant or deny that access. This craven desire for access has turned huge sections of the Washington press, along with most business reporters, into courtiers. The need to be included in press briefings and background interviews with government or business officials, as well as the desire for leaks and early access to official documents, obliterates journalistic autonomy.

Third is the issue of patriotism. Most journalists inject subjective opinions in their stories just to underline their love for their fatherland. They see some of their works in time of conflict as their own token contribution to the on-going conflict. This perhaps, is why one of Fox news reporters while reporting Operation Matador (which the US marines launched in Syrian border with Iraq to check cross border activities of terrorists) referred to the US marines as 'Our Boys.' By calling the marines 'our boys', the reporter was clearly subjective but he feels that since he was not carrying a gun against the terrorists in Syria like his other countrymen who are risking their lives, he at least owe them a patriotic duty of reporting in that way. Objectivity in this case, to him, does not matter.

Human nature is a complex one. Man by nature is biased. The saying: 'Self-preservation is the first law of nature' attests to this. In all activities, man has shown selfish interests and his willingness to protect such interests. In governance, business, religion, education, sports, and others, man has always strived to protect his interest even if such

activity earns him the label of bias. Take football as a case in point. Football referees are known to have, in many cases, willfully taken bad decisions. Whatever may be their reasons, self-interest is one of them. Partiality, bias, subjectivity, lack of objectivity is not a media affair alone. It traverses all professions throughout the world. To be biased is simply natural to man.

Social construction is another controversial issue confronting objectivity. Social construction by the belief of many is theory-laden. However, at the base of this in journalism is the issue of truth – saying the truth in the mass media. It is difficult to know the truth as opposed to facts of a news story. As we know, the facts of a story can and are often different from the truth of the story. This is why we agree with Chase (2006) that: “the problems of journalism are, at base, philosophical problems. They involve questions of definition and function: What is news? What is truth? How can one know the truth? Lippmann (1922) agreed that, “journalism does not point us toward truth since there is always a vast divide between truth and news. Ethical questions open journalism to the nebulous world of interpretation and philosophy, and for this reason journalists flee from ethical inquiry like a herd of frightened sheep.”

Conclusion

In view of the above expositions, we conclude that given the human nature and the nature of journalism as a profession, objectivity is still irreplaceable. There is no other principle that can be used that does not have its own flaws just as objectivity. Again, if journalism continues to be owned and filled by people with both business and other selfish interests to fulfill, whatever principle that is adopted will still suffer the fate of objectivity. It is because of this that we conclude by adopting the position of Anarcissie, (an anonymous blogger in response to the article ‘the Creed of Objectivity Killed News’, www.hyperog.com) that:

As far as genetically-specified human nature goes, there is a balance between self-interest, communal interest, and altruism. It is clear that highly social animals such as humans are, could not survive and prevail unless they were strongly motivated to act in other than self-interested ways, and this is what we observe. Unfortunately humans at their most altruistic often act even more destructively than the self-interested, as witness the deeds of the great leaders of the 20th century, all of whom professed and probably believed in the highest ideals. Moreover, we have constructed political systems which gives preference to certain kinds of socio-pathic behavior, so that many of these destructive impulses are institutionalized.

We all must realize the truth of the above statement if are realists and not idealists. There is nothing wrong with objectivity as a media principle. It is the actors and the society at large that have created the problems associated with objectivity. This is why objectivity or lack of it can be observed in most human undertakings. Judges with their powers to adjudicate in disputes, interpret the law, inflict punishment including restriction of human freedom and give redress to an injury have often been found wanting in these respects due largely to lack of objectivity. What is therefore, necessary is to make most of the situation the journalists find themselves in the interest of the same society they serve.

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