

# Objectivity in Journalism: A Philosophical Perspective

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## Abstract

The process of interaction between the reporter and the information he or she narrate as led to the expression that journalism is a form of manufactured reality. This paper expounds on the argument challenging the assumed objectivity of journalism and takes the position that while the notion of objective journalism still has some uses, it is often over stated or exaggerated for reasons connecting the professional self-interest of journalists. It concludes that journalism should not be approached as a descriptive discourse instead it should be approached as a performative discourse designed to persuade readers that what it describes is real. By successfully doing so, journalism transforms an interpretation into truth – into a reality the public can act upon. It also resolves that journalism does not derive its performative power from its contents (the facts), but merely from its forms and style.

**Keywords:** Journalism, Objectivity, Truth, News, News report

## Introduction

There is a debate among philosophers and mass communication scholars as to whether journalism which is essentially a chronicle of contemporary activities and events can be objective. Several scholars maintained with varying degrees of resonance that objectivity is more or less a strategic ritual by which scholars protect their professional prestige, seeking thereby to put themselves above challenge, ideological, professional or legal (Tuchman 1972, Dworkin, 1996). At one point, the debate boils down to the well-known dichotomy between news and opinion, connoting the maxim that facts are sacred but opinions are free. In other words, the journalist gathers information which is reported as news without imposing on it, his or her own interpretation or comment. In contrast to this, opinions or commentaries reflect the journalist interpretation of news which is supposedly sacred, objective, value free and impartial.

The debate on whether journalism can be objective at a philosophical level connotes the issue of whether there is any real difference between facts and opinion (Wiredu, 1980). While it would be extreme or even untenable to declare that objectivity of journalism is a complete myth, there is no doubt that hardly anyone this days takes seriously or accept without qualification, the notion that journalism even when is merely reporting “fact” can be considered objective. Indeed, some even maintained that journalism should not be objective but should be “partisan” or committed on the side of the underprivileged or the oppressed in the society.

The next section of the paper attempts a conceptual elaboration; a further section looks closely at the argument against the possibility of objective journalism, while the last section concludes by tying the issues together.

## Journalism and Objectivity: Conceptual Elaboration

Journalism as defined by Harcup (2008: 2) is a form of communication based on asking and answering the questions: “Who,” “What,” “Where,” “When,” “Why” and “How?” Harcup goes further to define a journalist as someone who informs society about itself and make public that which would otherwise be private. They also supply information, comment and amplify matters that are already in the public domain. McQuail (2000) defines journalism as ‘paid writing ...for public media with reference to actual and on-going events of public relevance’. Journalism can be regarded as a mode of enquiry that aims to feed the public with information as well as analysis of the information supplied as news. In its best conception it is a form of public service that spans various media such as newspapers, television, the internet, books, radio among others (Reuter, 2009: 1). Although, journalism has evolved differently in different historical and political context, it has come to be regarded as an important form of literary expression and modern communication. It should be realised that the debate on objectivity has to be conceptualized within specific media genres; considering for example, that the loosely governed digital media admit of less of professional rigour than newspapers or television. In broad terms however, the debate on objectivity applies to every media genres. Similarly, the advent of citizen journalism in which citizens participate more through the internet in the creation and processing of news has implication for the debate on media objectivity.

Objectivity in this context refers to the time honoured principles of impartiality, fairness and truthfulness in the handling and dissemination of news. In virtually every country with developed journalism practice, a code of ethics is drawn up in other to regulate the professional standard of journalism and such codes usually include journalistic objectivity by which is meant the obligation of journalist to report fairly, truthfully and accurately (Broersma, 2011). Objectivity as a principle of journalistic practice can be further understood by contrasting it with blatantly biased one sided or partisan reporting, sometimes known as the yellow press. It

should be realised too that objectivity was not a serious canon of journalistic practice before the twentieth century. In United State for example, the 19th century is regarded as one of media partisanship characterized by in the words of one observer “a media market dominated by smaller newspapers and pamphleteers who usually had an overt and often radical agenda, with no presumption of balance or objectivity” (Wikipedia, 2014).

### **The Case against Objective Journalism**

It is argued first of all that to the extent that there is nothing like a settled account of event or circumstances. The notion of objectivity is an impossible ideal. This point can be illustrated by the expression that television cameras portray the angles at which they are pointed. Thus, underline the fact that the same event can be captured pictorially from several different angles. To amplify the point is to see that the points of angle of narration as well as the modality of narration are entirely determined by the reporter and not by a code external to the journalist.

Obviously, the same event can be reported in a thousand and one ways with none of them been false or nonfactual. In this sense therefore, objectivity in the sense of an account uninfluenced by the reporter prejudices or preconceptions is difficult to find. Furthermore, the notion of objectivity in journalism is contested by the journalist reliant on sources, usually established sources by which a news report is crafted. The question to ask is; is one source “more truthful” than another and who determines the accuracy or otherwise of sources?

There is also the view that objectivity is very often a reflection if not an ideological carrier of conservative ideological interest. As Schudson (1978:160) observes:

*... ‘objective’ reporting reproduced a vision of social reality which refused to examine the basic structures of power and privilege. It was not just incomplete, as critics of the thirties had contended, it was distorted. It represented collusion with institutions whose legitimacy was in dispute.*

In other words, objectivity of journalism became a mask for serving established power structures and status quo forces since the debate took place within a limited definition of what constitute objectivity as well as which interest are served by it. This point of view is similar to that expressed by radical critics of the American Media such as Noam Chomsky (1989) who while not disagree with the pluralism of the American media go on to suggest that the pluralism occurs within a narrow and limited range of socio economic ideas and options namely those which serve capitalism. As Chomsky expressed it:

*“The media do contest and raise questions about government policy but they do so almost exclusive within the framework determined by the essentially shared interest of the state corporate power. Divisions among elites are reflected in media debate, but departure from their narrow consensus is rare”.*

It is within the narrow parameters outlined by Chomsky in the statement quoted above that the debate on media objectivity takes place. In other words, it is thunderously silence about whose interest are served by media objectivity and whose interest are ignored by it. To put it concisely, a report can be “objective” within the given framework of intra elite or established interest but may fail to say a word about interest that are affected implicitly by the report but do not appear in the story because they are non-elite interest. As mentioned previously, claims to objective journalism rest on what an author as described as “implicit truth claims” which are buttressed by the layouts of newspapers which “carefully differentiate between opinion/editorial policies and news reports implying that it has filtered subjective view point and evaluation out of news report”(Hackett and Zhao, 2008:109).

However, such claims have been criticized as previously mentioned on the number of grounds not least for example, on the impossibility of apprehending the real world as it is. In other words, news is a construction of reality as perceived by news gatherer or reporter. The reporter brings to the news gathering business a mental map or framework that is socially, ideologically, and culturally determined. It is through the lenses of this mental map or cognitive framework that the reporter makes a decision about what to highlight or what to ignore; what to trivialise or what to mainstream. This process relating to the interaction between the reporter and the information he or she narrate as led to the expression that journalism is a form of manufactured reality. A related point concerning the shaky foundations of positivism or empiricism was made famously by Thomas Kuhn (1962) in his book “The Structure of Scientific Revolution”. Kuhn argues that science progresses through the rise and fall of scientific paradigms; these paradigms provide the framework, theories and optics through which scientist process “scientific facts”. In the same manner, the journalist does not approach the events he or she report outside of an implicit framework by which he orders, preselect narrative angles and sequences. It is in this sense that objectivity of journalism has been describes as a strategic ritual created to boost the prestige and acceptability of the news business.

Luyendijk criticizes journalistic failure as well, he addresses a more fundamental question when he states, ‘We must focus not on what could be done better, but on what could not be done better. If journalists did a better job, we would still have filtered, distorted, manipulated, biased and simplified coverage’ (Luyendijk, 2008). In other words, he challenges the routines and conventions of professional journalism and questions

whether it can give an accurate representation of reality at all. He advocates transparency in reporting – the media should make their position and choices explicit and thus make the public media wise – and wants to introduce “structural ambiguity” to journalism. In their coverage, journalists should make it clear that it is impossible to know certain things and they are merely presenting the interpretation of reality they consider most likely. However, Luyendijk is somewhat inconsistent when he calls for the invention of new genres to cope with the epistemological limitations of journalism. He mainly detects this professional incompetence in non-democratic countries, and somehow seems to accept the professional routines in democratic societies. As long as information is verifiable, it is possible to give an accurate representation of reality. Of course this is easier in democratic countries than in police states. Davies’s exposé, though, illustrates that on a practical level, it is not that easy, and on a philosophical level there are even fewer differences (Kester, 2008; Luyendijk, 2006, 2008). Journalism is viewed as a descriptive discourse, it will always fail. Most press critics view journalism within a framework of gatekeeping studies that interpret journalism as pre-eminently a process of news selection. As Mark Fishman concludes, ‘This is because most researchers assumed that news either reflects or distorts reality and that reality consists of facts and events out there which exist independently of how news workers think of them and treat them in the news production process’ (Fishman, 1980: 13). However, critics like Davies and Luyendijk, who challenge the adequacy of reporting as a process of selection and a process of verifying true facts, adhere to the notion of journalism as a descriptive discourse as well. Davies blames the structures journalists work in which ‘positively prevents them discovering the truth’ (Davies, 2008: 28). Luyendijk holds that journalism mainly tries ‘to arrive at a verifiable picture of reality’ (Kester, 2008: 505). The only problem is that due to practical difficulties, not all the facts are absolutely verifiable.

However, this paradox of journalism, this claim to tell the truth knowing it is actually impossible, seems to be an essential part of it. As observed by a scholar.

*“In a sense, journalism is like magic. The magician knows he will not actually saw the woman in two. The audience knows he won’t. But they both hate the smart ass who gets up in the middle of the show and breaks the illusion by shouting, ‘It’s just a trick!’ And then starts to explain how it works: They are not really her feet, they are just fake shoes, the girl curls up so he saws through empty space . . .”* (Broersma, 2011)

Equally devastating to the claims of journalistic objectivity is the argument about the use of language which is the journalist main tool. Language itself pre-structures or delimits narratives considering that obviously different languages may “frame” narratives or stories differently. In this respect, Dyer-Witthford (2008: 119) has argued that “the power of language understood broadly not only has verbal language but also as all systems of science through which human beings endowed the world with meaning to help us organize our perceptions of the world”. Arising from this therefore, he goes on to assert and quite correctly that “language does not directly, neutrally, and transparently transmit the supposedly inherent meaning or truth of events; rather, language in some sense helps to construct the world”. This point is particularly relevant to the reportorial enterprise whose main vehicle is language.

To give concrete examples, the decision to describe a group of protesters as freedom fighters or terrorists, to label a scene of bedlam as chaotic or as a mild melee are purely discretionary and is not given by the text. It is true however, that the choice of words of the reporter when subjected to scrutiny or discourse analysis may give away his or her point of view. The point at issue however, is that language, its use or abuse is implicated in the debate about objectivity. What this suggests is that claims to truth or fairness, balance and objectivity are relative and not absolute since the power of language to nuance or mobilized meaning interferes with any such claims. Related to this is the issue that journalist explicitly or implicitly usually narrate or tells stories through frames which can be regarded as organising techniques which privilege some details above others in order to produce meaning. In the language of cultural theory, frames or cues are regarded as preferred readings which the journalist even while quoting different sources more or less imposes on the text. Television news is especially susceptible to frames because of the use of visual symbols which can highlight or draw attention to certain words and events. In the aftermath of what has become known as 9/11, which refers to the bombing of the New York stock exchange on September 11, 2001. The Cable News Network (CNN) reported the eventful days which followed 9-11 by the use of colours such as black which suggested that the nation was at war and was mournful. Referring to the power of news frames to structure narration and give preferred readings (Dyer-Witthford, 2008:119).

The cultural context of objectivity; in every society where journalism is practiced there is usually a set of codes which is expected to guide a journalist in the practice of the profession. These codes of conduct are not just neutral codes but they are determined historically and ideologically. In journalism, the codes of conduct usually emphasises fairness, objectivity, truthfulness and accuracy. Different cultures have different criteria for measuring objectivity; the issue is therefore, culture bound because of cultural differences and variations (Dworkin, 1996). Consider the claim that I know that abortion is wrong and report same as a journalist, my audience might naturally understand me as claiming, in that way, that I have compelling reasons for believing

that abortion is wrong, reasons that I have no doubt justify that conclusion. That claim, is evidently an I-proposition-it insists that the fact that abortion involves the deliberate killing of an innocent human being is an unchallengeable, obviously compelling, reason for condemning it. The further claim that I have reported abortion as objectively wrong can also be understood as only a clarification of my original moral claim. I might conceivably think that the wrongness of abortion is objective and universal, but this is only presumed base on my culture and moral or religious values because it may not be wrong in certain kinds of communities- those whose religious life supports an entirely different conception of the sacredness of human life.

### Conclusion

The concept of objectivity in journalism is contested by the journalists' reliance on sources, usually established sources by which a news report is crafted. The issue here is that how can one determine the accuracy or otherwise of the source. Another contestable point is that journalists gather and select or filter news based on certain frameworks that is socially, ideologically and culturally determined. It is believed that it is through the lenses of this cognitive framework that the journalist makes the decision about what to highlight or what to ignore, what to trivialise or what to mainstream through use of words, pictures, colours, and layouts among others. As discussed in this case, objective journalism cannot be achieved, this view is supported by Luyendijk (2008) who asserted that "If journalists did a better job, we would still have filtered, distorted, manipulated, biased and simplified coverage".

Despite the case that has been made against objectivity which is indeed a strong one, we must not throw away the baby with the birth water. In other words, we cannot totally discard the search for objectivity even though as an ideal. Though, the impossibility of a mimetic and purely objective representation of reality is accepted, this discussion concludes that, to go beyond the insupportable limitations of journalism, we should not approach journalism as a descriptive discourse instead it should be approached as a performative discourse designed to persuade readers that what it describes is real. By successfully doing so, journalism transforms an interpretation into truth – into a reality the public can act upon. It also resolves that journalism does not derive its performative power from its contents (the facts), but merely from its forms and style.

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