

DISCOVERING THE NEWS

*A Social History of
American Newspapers*

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INTRODUCTION

THE IDEAL OF OBJECTIVITY

AMERICAN JOURNALISM has been regularly criticized for failing to be "objective." Whether it was Democrats in 1952 complaining of a one-party press biased against Adlai Stevenson or the Nixon-Agnew administration attacking newspapers and television networks for being too liberal, the press has repeatedly been taken to task for not presenting the day's news "objectively."

But why do critics take it for granted that the press *should* be objective? Objectivity is a peculiar demand to make of institutions which, as business corporations, are dedicated first of all to economic survival. It is a peculiar demand to make of institutions which often, by tradition or explicit credo, are political organs. It is a peculiar demand to make of editors and reporters who have none of the professional apparatus which, for doctors or lawyers or scientists, is supposed to guarantee objectivity.

And yet, journalists, as well as their critics, hold newspapers to a standard of objectivity. Not all journalists believe they should be objective in their work, but the belief is widespread,¹ and all journalists today must in some manner confront it. But why? What kind of a world is ours and what kind of an institution is journalism that they sustain this particular ideal, objectivity? That is the problem this book addresses. I shall not ask here the familiar question: are

newspapers objective? I shall ask, instead, why that question is so familiar.

The question assumes special interest when one learns that, before the 1830s, objectivity was not an issue. American newspapers were expected to present a partisan viewpoint, not a neutral one. Indeed, they were not expected to report the “news” of the day at all in the way we conceive it—the idea of “news” itself was invented in the Jacksonian era. If we are to understand the idea of objectivity in journalism, the transformation of the press in the Jacksonian period must be examined. That is the task of the first chapter, which will interpret the origins of “news” in its relationship to the democratization of politics, the expansion of a market economy, and the growing authority of an entrepreneurial, urban middle class.

There is an obvious explanation of why the idea of news, once established, should have turned into nonpartisan, strictly factual news later in the century. This has to do with the rise of the first American wire service, the Associated Press. The telegraph was invented in the 1840s, and, to take advantage of its speed in transmitting news, a group of New York newspapers organized the Associated Press in 1848. Since the Associated Press gathered news for publication in a variety of papers with widely different political allegiances, it could only succeed by making its reporting “objective” enough to be acceptable to all of its members and clients. By the late nineteenth century, the AP dispatches were markedly more free from editorial comment than most reporting for single newspapers.² It has been argued, then, that the practice of the Associated Press became the ideal of journalism in general.³

While this argument is plausible, at first blush, there is remarkably little evidence for it and two good reasons to doubt it. First, it begs a key question: why should a practice, obviously important to the survival of the institution of the wire service, become a guiding ideal in institutions not subject

to the same constraints? It would be just as likely, or more likely, that newspapers would take the availability of wire service news as license to concentrate on different kinds of reporting. If the AP style became a model for daily journalists, one would still have to account for its affinity with their interests and needs. But this brings us to the second, still more serious problem: objective reporting did *not* become the chief norm or practice in journalism in the late nineteenth century when the Associated Press was growing. As I will show in the second and third chapters, at the turn of the century there was as much emphasis in leading papers on telling a good story as on getting the facts. Sensationalism in its various forms was the chief development in newspaper content. Reporters sought as often to write “literature” as to gather news. Still, in 1896, in the bawdiest days of yellow journalism, the *New York Times* began to climb to its premier position by stressing an “information” model, rather than a “story” model, of reporting. Where the Associated Press was factual to appeal to a politically diverse clientele, the *Times* was informational to attract a relatively select, socially homogeneous readership of the well to do. As in the Jacksonian era, so in the 1890s, changes in the ideals of journalism did not translate technological changes into occupational norms so much as make newspaper ideals and practices consonant with the culture of dominant social classes.

But into the first decades of the twentieth century, even at the *New York Times*, it was uncommon for journalists to see a sharp divide between facts and values.⁴ Yet the belief in objectivity is just this: the belief that one can and should separate facts from values. Facts, in this view, are assertions about the world open to independent validation. They stand beyond the distorting influences of any individual’s personal preferences. Values, in this view, are an individual’s conscious or unconscious preferences for what the world should be; they are seen as ultimately subjective and so without legitimate

claim on other people. The belief in objectivity is a faith in "facts," a distrust of "values," and a commitment to their segregation.

Journalists before World War I did not subscribe to this view. They were, to the extent that they were interested in facts, naive empiricists; they believed that facts are not human statements about the world but aspects of the world itself. This view was insensitive to the ways in which the "world" is something people construct by the active play of their minds and by their acceptance of conventional—not necessarily "true"—ways of seeing and talking. Philosophy, the history of science, psychoanalysis, and the social sciences have taken great pains to demonstrate that human beings are cultural animals who know and see and hear the world through socially constructed filters. From the 1920s on, the idea that human beings individually and collectively construct the reality they deal with has held a central position in social thought.⁵

Before the 1920s, journalists did not think much about the subjectivity of perception. They had relatively little incentive to doubt the firmness of the "reality" by which they lived. American society, despite serious problems, remained buoyant with hope and promise. Democracy was a value unquestioned in politics; free enterprise was still widely worshipped in economic life; the novels of Horatio Alger sold well. Few people doubted the inevitability of progress. After World War I, however, this changed. Journalists, like others, lost faith in verities a democratic market society had taken for granted. Their experience of propaganda during the war and public relations thereafter convinced them that the world they reported was one that interested parties had constructed for them to report. In such a world, naive empiricism could not last.

This turning point is the topic of my fourth chapter. In the twenties and thirties, many journalists observed with growing

anxiety that facts themselves, or what they had taken to be facts, could not be trusted. One response to this discomfiting view was the institutionalization in the daily paper of new genres of subjective reporting, like the political column. Another response turned the journalists' anxiety on its head and encouraged journalists to replace a simple faith in facts with an allegiance to rules and procedures created for a world in which even facts were in question. This was "objectivity." Objectivity, in this sense, means that a person's statements about the world can be trusted if they are submitted to established rules deemed legitimate by a professional community. Facts here are not aspects of the world, but consensually validated statements about it.⁶ While naive empiricism has not disappeared in journalism and survives, to some extent, in all of us, after World War I it was subordinated to the more sophisticated ideal of "objectivity."

Discussion of objectivity as an ideal (or ideology) in science, medicine, law, the social sciences, journalism, and other pursuits tends to two poles: either it seeks to unmask the profession in question or to glorify it. It is either debunking or self-serving. Debunkers show that the claims of professionals about being objective or expert or scientific are really just attempts to legitimate power by defining political issues in technical terms. This is often true. But, first, why is "objectivity" the legitimation they choose, and, second, why is it so often convincing to others? When professionals make a claim to authoritative knowledge, why do they base the claim on their objectivity rather than on, say, divine revelation or electoral mandate? Debunking by itself does not provide an answer.

The opposite stance is to Whiggishly identify objectivity in journalism or in law or other professions with "science," where science is understood as the right or true or best path to knowledge. This is the point at which science, generally

understood as opposed to ideology, threatens to become ideology itself. But that, in a sense, is just what interests me here—not the internal development of science as an institution or a body of knowledge and practices, but the reasons the *idea* of science and the *ideal* of objectivity are so resonant in our culture. Even if science, as we know it today, is in some sense getting us nearer to truth than past systems of knowledge, we can still inquire why twentieth-century Western culture should be so wise as to recognize this. And that is a question that glorifications of science and objectivity do not answer.

It should be apparent that the belief in objectivity in journalism, as in other professions, is not just a claim about what kind of knowledge is reliable. It is also a moral philosophy, a declaration of what kind of thinking one should engage in, in making moral decisions. It is, moreover, a political commitment, for it provides a guide to what groups one should acknowledge as relevant audiences for judging one's own thoughts and acts. The relevant audiences are defined by institutional mechanisms. Two mechanisms of social control are frequently said to underwrite objectivity in different fields. First, there is advanced education and training. This is supposed to provide trainees with scientific knowledge and an objective attitude which helps them set aside personal preferences and passions. Thus the training of physicians enables them to sustain detached attitudes at times when persons without such training would submit to panic or despair at the human agony they face. Law students are taught to distinguish "legal" questions (generally understood to be technical) from "moral" issues (generally understood to be outside the proper domain of legal education and legal practice).

A second basic form of social control is insulation from the public. Technical language or jargon is one such insulating

mechanism. Others may be institutional. For instance, legal scholars argue that courts are able to be more objective than legislatures because judges are institutionally further removed from the pressures of electoral politics than are legislators. Objectivity in the professions is guaranteed, then, by the autonomy of professional groups—the collective independence of professions from the market and from popular will, and the personal independence of professionals, assured by their training, from their own values.

In this context, the notion of objectivity in journalism appears anomalous. Nothing in the training of journalists gives them license to shape others' views of the world. Nor do journalists have esoteric techniques or language. Newspapers are directly dependent on market forces. They appeal directly to popular opinion. Journalism is an uninsulated profession. To criticize a lawyer, we say, "I'm not a lawyer, but—" and to question a doctor, we say, "I'm no expert on medicine, but—" We feel no such compunction to qualify criticism of the morning paper or the television news. I do not subscribe to the view that journalism is thereby inferior to other professional groups; I simply mean to identify the problem of objectivity in the case of journalism. How is it that in an occupation without the social organization of self-regulated authority there is still passionate controversy about objectivity? Of course, one answer is that the less a profession is seen to be self-evidently objective, the more passionate the controversy will be. But this is not answer enough. Why, in journalism, where none of the features that guarantee objectivity in law or medicine exist or are likely to exist, should objectivity still be a serious issue? Why hasn't it been given up altogether?

By the 1960s, both critics of the press and defenders took objectivity to be the emblem of American journalism, an improvement over a past of "sensationalism" and a contrast to

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the party papers of Europe. Whether regarded as the fatal flaw or the supreme virtue of the American press, all agreed that the idea of objectivity was at the heart of what journalism has meant in this country. At the same time, the ideal of objectivity was more completely and divisively debated in the past decade than ever before. In the final chapter, I will examine how changing subject matter, sources of news, and audience for the news precipitated this debate in journalism. Government management of the news, which began to concern journalists after World War I, became an increasingly disturbing problem with the rise of a national security establishment and an "imperial" presidency after World War II. In the Vietnam war, government news management collided with a growing "adversary culture" in the universities, in journalism, in the government itself, and in the population at large. The conflagration that followed produced a radical questioning of objectivity which will not soon be forgotten and revitalized traditions of reporting that the objective style had long overshadowed. The ideal of objectivity has by no means been displaced, but, more than ever, it holds its authority on sufferance.

I originally conceived this work as a case study in the history of professions and in the genesis of professional ideology. I saw objectivity as the dominant ideal that legitimates knowledge and authority in all contemporary professions. If I could excavate its foundations in one field, I could hope to expose its structure in all. While this book has not entirely outgrown that ambition, it came to be moved equally by another. I grew fascinated by journalism itself and convinced there were important questions, not only unanswered but unasked, about the relationship of journalism to the development of American society as a whole. Where standard histories of the American press consider the social context of journalism only in passing, this work takes as its main subject the relationship between the institutionalization of modern

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journalism and general currents in economic, political, social, and cultural life.

With two such ambitions, I know my reach has exceeded my grasp. If I have not achieved as much here as I would like, I hope nonetheless to have engaged the reader's interest in the quest and the questions.