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Objectivity in the News: Finding a Way Forward

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Many media critics believe news reports are inevitably biased and have urged journalists to abandon the objectivity norm. I show that the main arguments for inevitable bias fail but identify factors that make producing objective news difficult. I indicate what the next steps should be to understand bias in the news and to combat it.

INTRODUCTION

For well over a century, mainstream news media in the United States (and to some extent elsewhere) have been guided by the professional norm of providing objective news reports. (For a summary of that work, see Schudson, 1978; Schiller, 1981; Mindich, 1998; Donsbach & Kleet, 1993; Ward, 2004; Streckfuss, 1990.) As one media historian notes, this development occurred "precisely when the impossibility of overcoming subjectivity in presenting the news was widely accepted and . . . because subjectivity had come to be regarded as inevitable" (Schudson, 1978, p. 157; see also Goldberg, 2002; Baker, 1994; Shafer, 2003). Belief in inevitable bias is now deeply entrenched among many media scholars and practitioners who will nevertheless explain why many journalists still adhere to the norm by agreeing that news reports can be objective to a degree. This position is paradoxical. If news can be objective to degree n , for any $n < 100$, then surely it can be objective to degree $n + 1$. However, if it cannot be objective to any degree, much actual journalistic behavior seems inexplicable.

The best explanation for continued adherence to the norm *is* that objectivity comes in degrees, *including* 100%. Of course, backing up that claim requires revisiting the objectivity debate. There are much deeper reasons for doing so anyway. A lack of clarity has allowed spurious arguments for inevitable bias to become entrenched in public discourse on the media. Even some of our best and brightest are victims of this confusion:

As far as I'm concerned, when in 1993 Molly Ivins achieved the ripe middle age of forty-nine, she disposed of the objectivity question for all time: "The fact is that I am a forty-nine-year old white, female, college-educated Texan. All of that affects the way I see the world. There's no way in hell that I'm going to see anything the same way that a fifteen-year-old black high-school dropout does. We all see the world from where we stand. Anybody who's ever interviewed five eyewitnesses to an automobile accident knows there's no such thing as objectivity." (Navasky, 2005, p. 409)

All observations are subjective. Writers freed of artificial objectivity can try to determine the whole truth about their subject and then tell it whole to the world. Their "objective" counterparts have to sort their subjective observations into two arbitrary piles: truths that are objective as well, and truths that are just an opinion. (Kinsley, 2006)

Intuitively compelling? Maybe. Valid? Clearly not. Even if Einstein's being a white, male, German-born Jew affected how he saw the world, and even if all of his observations were subjective, no one concludes that $E = MC^2$ is just Einstein's opinion or that it is based on an arbitrary choice among his subjective observations. Just because human beings inevitably have subjective points of view, it does not follow that news reports are inevitably subjective. At the very least, more premises are needed.

Clearing up this confusion is not an academic issue. Objective news is the *sine qua non* for the pursuit of any other journalistic aim that rests on using reason, such as promoting rational public debate. The effects news reports have on public attitudes also justify the effort put into producing it (Das et al., 2009). Belief in the inevitability of bias turns the need for epistemic responsibility among those shaping public discourse into a private virtue; enables the proliferation of factoids and truthiness, leaving the public confused, skeptical, and vulnerable to manipulation; and undermines efforts in journalism education to address genuine sources of bias. I disagree that media scholars and practitioners "need to stop arguing about whether truth-telling and objectivity are possible to achieve" and "get on with the pursuit of pragmatic objectivity" (Black, 2008, p. 30). It is disingenuous to think this can be done while still propagating the idea that objective news is impossible. If bias is inevitable, we should know exactly why; if it is not, we are motivated to eliminate it. Agreeing to disagree lets us quietly distance ourselves from the confusion about news objectivity.

Thus, one aim of this article is to critically assess the main theoretical arguments for the inevitability of bias in news. Although the arguments fail, they point to justified worries about cognitive flaws that make producing objective news difficult. The second aim is to suggest how awareness of these flaws should change both the nature of the debate and how journalists are trained. These aims are mutually reinforcing. If one is already convinced that objective news is impossible, scientific evidence of biases in human reasoning merely confirms this prior conviction. Yet a significant reason for the failure of the theoretical arguments lies in the unfounded sweeping claims they make about human cognition. It *is* a psychological fact that various forms of bias in human reasoning are common; it does *not* follow that bias in the news, or in general, is inevitable. The cognitive details matter.

PART I: WHAT IS OBJECTIVE NEWS? SOME PRELIMINARY CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Standard accounts of the objectivity norm in journalism tend to bundle epistemological aims and conventional practices. Mindich's (1998) widely known account includes (1) detachment (use of neutral language), (2) nonpartisanship (inclusion of all relevant sides of a story; fairness), (3) the inverted pyramid style of writing (presentation of facts in order of importance), (4) naïve empiricism (factual accuracy), and (5) balance (lack of distortion, such as by omission of relevant facts). Although factual accuracy and naïve empiricism are not the same, they are often used as synonyms in traditional discussions of news objectivity when this concept involves an epistemological sense of "objective." Naïve empiricism (also called direct realism) is an epistemological view that claims that sense experience provides unmediated access to the external world. Indirect realism claims that sense experience is mediated in some way. The question is whether, if indirect realism is true, the mediated nature of sense experience renders it useless to provide objective verification. This is a debatable question. It is also common to link objective news with metaphysical realism, the claim that there is an external world that exists and has its properties independent of human minds, concepts or interests. While I believe there is no necessary connection between objective news and metaphysical realism, I must set aside discussion of this issue for reasons of space. As long as you are not a solipsist (and no journalists I know of are), I am not begging any questions.

On my view, all but (4) are inessential to the objectivity norm, just as using a microscope is inessential to objectivity in science. (3) is stylistic. (1), (2), and (5) are practices for achieving (4) or which reflect the difficulty of achieving it. When factual accuracy is lacking, these practices are empty: objective news is

often caricatured by copying these conventions without bothering with factual accuracy (Navasky, 2005, pp. 410–411; Manjoo, 2008).

Factual accuracy alone is essential because news is essentially a form of testimony in the epistemological sense: it is a means for acquiring belief about states of affairs not experienced or otherwise known firsthand. Thus, an objective news report is one that provides its consumers with testimonial knowledge or justified belief about some aspect of the world, especially human-related events. So the norm of news objectivity essentially involves just two epistemic norms: factual accuracy and justified interpretation. To be factually accurate is to contain objectively verified facts. To provide justified interpretation is to frame a story based on objective editorial judgments. Objectively verified facts are statements that can be believed as true on the basis of evidence anyone at any time should accept. (The adage “When in doubt, leave it out” reflects this norm.) Such evidence typically includes observation and consistency with other justified facts. Objective editorial judgments are those based on reasons (discussed below) that would lead any competent editor or reporter to make the same judgment. If these standards are met, a news report can provide testimonial knowledge or justified belief. *How* the standards are met is a matter of evolving journalistic methods, not part of the norm itself (Ward, 2004; Kovach & Rosensteel, 2001). Literary conventions are also not relevant.

Note that objective justification is not proof to the point of certainty. Beliefs based on objective evidence are not *incorrigible*; they are *rational for anyone to have*. This is why objective news reports can contain statements that turn out false as events unfold; why beliefs based on objective reports may not count as knowledge; and why a report’s objective status does not depend on a news consumer’s belief that it is objective.

Doubts about whether news reports can ever be objective often focus on statements (or descriptions) that express or imply value judgments, preferences, biases, or personal opinions (values, for short). Values may be conversationally or pragmatically implied via the use of terms with widely accepted negative or positive connotations (hence the practice of using “neutral” language). Value statements are impermissible in an objective news report not because they express values but rather because they are not widely accepted as being objectively justified. This point bears emphasis. The inclusion of a statement in an objective news report implies it is supported by sufficient objective evidence. Value statements express or imply normative or evaluative judgments, and there is no consensus now on how such statements or judgments might be objectively verified, or even whether they can be. For example, human beings have generally accepted methods for objectively verifying statements about the height of Mt. Everest or the probability of a city’s running a budget deficit, but not for a statement about the moral permissibility of torture (Harman, 1997). As a result, including a value statement automatically appears to many as asserting a claim

that has no objective support, simply because value statements as a class are not widely accepted as being objectively justified or even objectively justifiable. Journalists leave it out because it belongs to a class that as a whole is in doubt.

Unlike value statements, what we may call factual statements *are* widely accepted as being objectively justifiable and as being objectively justified in particular cases. Even factual statements that are not objectively justified must be left out of an objective news report; a report containing them is just as nonobjective (subjective) as one containing value statements is presumed to be. We would not call such a report value-laden—only insufficiently sourced. While we often say that a news report is not objective (is subjective) if it *contains values*, or equate *being nonobjective* with *being value-laden*, these concepts are not equivalent.

It follows that descriptions of a commitment to objective news as involving a professional allegiance to the fact/value distinction are misleading (Schudson, 1978, pp. 5–6). Partisan journalists are committed to the fact/value distinction if they use factual premises in a rational argument for a viewpoint. Rather, it involves a professional allegiance to the objectively verified/unverified distinction, which is orthogonal to the fact/value distinction.

There are two final, preliminary points. First, the claim of *inevitable* bias establishes a standard whereby the presence of just one statement that is not objectively verified or justified—in particular, any value statement (or a description implying one)—undermines a report’s claim to objectivity. This standard likely reflects the roles of trust and reliability in testimonial knowledge (Hardwig, 1991). The standard leaves room for news reports to be objective to a degree. Why we *cannot* reach 100% is what arguments for inevitable bias must show. Given this standard, of course, one might well ask whether coverage of, for example, genocide or official corruption can exclude values, and even whether it should. The latter objection appears to confuse the values one may want a *reporter* to have with the epistemic status of the report itself. I address this in a moment. The former is just a way of asking *how* reports include values; arguments for inevitable bias provide answers to this question.

Finally, the issue is not whether objective news is logically possible. Of course it is: there is no logical contradiction involved in this claim. The relevant sense of possibility is what is possible for us given our cognitive capacities as they actually are. The issue is also not whether we can purge *ourselves* of values, a confusion that is evident in some work on the topic (Newfield, 1974), but whether the values held by a journalist influence the objectivity of news reports (Schudson, 1979, p. 8; Mindich, 1998, p. 133). If adopting a particular psychological attitude (sometimes called “objective” in a nonepistemic sense of the word) makes it easier for us to follow certain journalistic practices, that is just a psychological fact about us. It says nothing about the objectivity of a

news report, which may be produced by a human, a robot, or a robotic human. Objective news is one thing, emotionally detached journalists another.

PART II: THE MAIN ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE POSSIBILITY OF OBJECTIVE NEWS

A good place to begin examining the main arguments for inevitable bias is by stating formally the reasoning revealed in Ivins' and Kinsley's remarks:

1. We can only observe the world from our own (subjective) perspectives.
2. Therefore, objective news is not possible.

Although we can share, alter, and entertain multiple perspectives, the point of the premise is that we cannot observe the world in a neutral or nonperspectival manner. As noted above, the argument is invalid. What additional premises would make it fly?

Obviously, nothing follows about objective news from the fact that I see the world from a point in space and no one can see what I do unless they stand in that very spot. So the premise is a metaphorical way of claiming that I observe the world from a *cognitive* perspective (or "worldview" or "personal lens": Mindich, 1998, p. 5). This is a cognitive hypothesis: it asserts that prior knowledge and belief are inevitably involved in observation. What is lacking is a specific claim that values, not just any beliefs, are involved, plus a link between this claim and the way we obtain objective verification. The argument from value-laden observation (VLO) fills in these gaps:

1. We can only observe the world via our own cognitive perspectives.
2. Such observations are therefore value-laden.
3. Values are not objective.
4. So value-laden observations cannot provide objective verification.
5. So objective news based on such observations is not possible.

The central idea is straightforward. Observation (perception) is a source of objective justification if anything is (Boghossian, 2006). If observation is inevitably dependent on the values in our cognitive perspectives, and if all those values are subjective, statements justified by observation are not objectively justified. If sound, (VLO) would rule out objective news as routinely practiced. Although premise 3 is debatable, I will grant it for the sake of argument and focus on premise 2.

By introducing the term "value-laden," premise 2 specifies that the problem arises from our (nonepistemic) normative beliefs. In other words, although the

term "value-laden" in (VLO) may prompt the use of "is value-laden" as a synonym of "is not objectively justified," (VLO) does not claim observation cannot provide objective justification *by definition*. It is a claim about humans' contingent cognitive makeup. However, what is "value-ladenness"? *Pace* Ivins, it is *not* the claim, familiar from psychological studies of eyewitness testimony, that people can be very unreliable in their eyewitness reports and often offer up pure conjecture with a feeling of utter certainty (Loftus, 1979; Wells & Loftus, 1984). Five eyewitnesses to an accident can be 100% reliable and in total agreement and their observations will still be "value-laden." Nor is it a claim about the many empirically documented forms of bias in judgment (discussed below). Such flaws compound the intentional distortions (spinning, lying, etc.) that confound the search for objective evidence but do not make objective verification impossible. They entail that we hold more false beliefs than we might. But (VLO) is going for *inevitability*.

Instead, the concept of "value-ladenness" is rooted in arguments from philosophy of science regarding the *theory-ladenness* of observation (Hanson, 1961). Compare what a radiation oncologist observes when looking at a patient's MRI and what I observe. We share the same basic cognitive systems that transduce light hitting the retina into visual experience. If theory-ladenness is true, (i) the scene my visual system generates from this input differs from that of the oncologist and (ii) this difference is due to the differences in our background knowledge (theories or concepts). So where the physician sees cancerous tissue, I see fuzzy black blobs. The claim is *not* that we see the same thing and then *interpret* these common perceptions differently in the light of the theories or concepts we hold. It is that the contents of our visual experiences—what humans literally see—differ if our theories or conceptual repertoires differ. Post-observation interpretations may *also* differ, but that is a separate matter.

Premise 2 adopts this idea and inserts "values" for "theories" in (ii) above: the contents of observations are constrained by values, not (or not merely) by the nonnormative knowledge, theories or concepts humans possess. Premise 2 claims the perspectival nature of observation is a *value-dependent-perspective*: a difference in *values* necessitates a difference in observation. Thus, if a reporter for the *Jerusalem Post* values a Jewish homeland in Israel and a reporter for Al-Jazeera denies this value (or affirms its negation), this difference in their *values*, not their *concepts*, which these contradictory value judgments share, constrains their observations. Given a particular border-crossing event, the *Post* reporter literally sees an Israeli soldier entering Gaza and the Al-Jazeera reporter literally sees an armed oppressor entering Gaza. Each possesses the relevant concepts to describe the event in the same way, but they will not describe it the same way because they no more see the same thing than they would if they were literally (spatially) worlds apart. It follows that their observations *cannot* objectively justify their news reports. Their observations will not give anyone at

any time a reason to believe their reports; they will only give people who share their values a reason to believe them.

If value-ladenness is true, objective verification via observation would be ruled out, bias would be inevitable, and objective news based on observation would be impossible. Actually, value-ladenness takes down not just objective news, but nearly all testimony. Your belief that it's raining after stepping outside into falling precipitation is not objectively verified either; it is not rational for anyone else to believe it's raining on the basis of your observation. It may not be clear which of your values lade your observation, but if premise 2 is true at least one does. So why should we think premise 2 is true?

In cognitive science, the concept analogous to theory-ladenness is cognitive penetrability—the idea that the contents of perceptual states (such as visual experiences) are subject to top-down (cognitive) influences (Fodor, 1984; Churchland, 1988; Prinz, 2006). For example, subjects report hearing complete words when played recordings of words in which the first letter is not spoken. This evidence is taken by researchers to indicate that knowledge of words (phonetics and semantics) influences our auditory system; what subjects report hearing includes information that is not in the auditory input. No one, however, claims hearing an 'r' where there is not one in an audio recording amounts to filtering one's acoustic input through one's *values*. In general, the nature and extent of top-down influence on sense experience is unknown. In particular, we lack research showing that *values* exert top-down influence on observation—that, for example, a subject's belief that gay marriage is morally permissible influences what she reports seeing when presented with a visual stimulus. Maybe they do. But premise 2 has no such support now, and neither does (VLO)'s conclusion.

We *do* have robust empirical evidence from social cognitive psychology of bias in making judgments or interpretations of what we observe. *Prima facie*, this evidence supports a second popular argument against the possibility of objective news, which focuses on the role of editorial judgment in framing news reports rather than on the observational evidence that supports statements in them. Schiller (1981, 1 and fn.1) expresses this line of reasoning:

The knowledge that news exemplifies and animates values is, in part, a product of the research instituted by the Chicago School of urban sociologists . . . According to this perspective, all news is selective, the result of a myriad of daily decisions, judgments, and routine organizational and institutional constraints.

Given that every news hole is finite (even 24/7), producing news requires editing: not every event counts as news and not every aspect of a newsworthy event is newsworthy. A report's inclusion in an edition or program, its length, content and organization, and the content and organization of the whole edition or program also require editorial judgment. The idea is that the framing that results from

editorial judgments is inevitably subjective because the judgments are. If so, a report would not be objective *even if* every statement in it is objectively verified. This argument from nonobjective editing (NOE) may be stated thus:

1. Producing news requires editing.
2. Editing inevitably involves nonobjective judgments.
3. So the results of such judgments will be nonobjective.
4. So objective news is not possible.

As noted, objective editorial judgments are based on reasons that would lead any competent editor or reporter to make the same judgment. Premise 2 denies such judgments are possible. On one reading, it may be editorial judgments can never be wholly based on objective reasons; on another, it may be there are no objective reasons to base them on.

Before discussing these readings, I should note (NOE) also trades on ambiguities that make it seem stronger than it is. While the term "judgment" popularly connotes *value* judgment, not all judgment is value judgment. Humans judge whether one book is heavier than another based on relative weight, and whether a person is likely to perform a task well (or at all) based on knowledge of their past actions. More important, to call a news story (or any description in it) an "interpretation" of the facts is to call it a theory. If, as popular connotation has it, an interpretation or theory *just is* a subjective tale, then merely calling a news story an interpretation turns the claim of inevitable bias into a trivial conceptual truth. Intelligent design theorists make a similar move when they call evolution "just a theory." Both claims are misleading for the same reason: like any theory, some interpretations are highly confirmed and some are not. In short, all news stories involve interpretation or framing, that is, editing, but this fact is the start of the discussion, not the trump card some seem to think it is.

The first reading of premise 2 (which Schiller seems to hold) claims that values inevitably influence editorial judgments. There is no doubt that poor or biased editorial choices are often made. Mindich (1998) provides a compelling case study in which it took an outsider, Ida B. Wells, to break the story of the segregation and terrorizing of black Americans in the South before the civil rights era. Editors and reporters omit important facts, bury the lead, and miss stories all the time. Of course, some failures are due to ignorance, when omniscience is neither necessary nor sufficient for objective editorial choice. We also seem to have evidence for premise 2 from the many studies in social psychology showing bias in human judgment. Humans tend to look for evidence that confirms our beliefs, assume other people are a lot like ourselves, and not notice our lack of talent or ability. It is plausible to think our judgments regarding the relative importance of facts and other interpretive judgments reflect our personal values (Kahnemann & Tversky, 1982).

Let us look at this psychological literature more closely. In that context, the term “bias” does not mean “prejudice” or “personal value.” Biases are influences that cause judgments to depart from some objective standard or to violate some normative criterion (Pronin, 2006). For example, studies show subjects tend to overrate their own abilities (and underrate the abilities of others) relative to a standard within an experimental paradigm; that is, they are biased towards overrating their abilities, and the bias is thought to be a general motive of self-enhancement or ego-protection. In the same sense of “bias,” humans are biased towards underestimating how much time a task will take (a planning fallacy), overestimating the likelihood of a historical event after knowing it has occurred (hindsight bias), and judging that others are biased while we are not (a bias blind spot). Judgments that particular news reports are biased may themselves reflect one or another of these cognitive biases.

The biases studied in social cognitive psychology *do* include biases in the common sense of the term: there is robust empirical evidence that prejudices (stereotypic beliefs about other groups) and political party affiliation influence particular judgments (such as who is right in a conflict). Asserting now that *all editorial judgments depend essentially on personal values* is not justified by these studies. Nor is anecdotal evidence sufficient. For we also have anecdotal evidence of uniformity of editorial judgment despite differences in values (e.g., coverage of 9/11). If editorial choice were always biased by personal values, one would not predict editors with opposing values to ever make the same editorial judgments.

What we can say is that social cognitive psychological research is urgently needed to identify the sorts of personal values that may influence editorial judgments, the sorts of editorial judgments they may influence, and the circumstances in which such influence is likely to occur. However, even this research would at best reveal specific influences that make objective editorial judgment difficult, not diktats of nature or nurture that make it impossible. Within media ethics, we urgently need a close critical examination of the extant empirical literature to determine which known biases are most plausibly at work in journalistic contexts. An obvious source of concern is confirmation bias: the tendency to seek out or overrate the strength of evidence that confirms our judgments and downplay or not seek disconfirming evidence (Festinger, 1957). We are also biased towards overweighting salient information. Armed with this knowledge, we could develop effective strategies and skills to prevent their influence (Burgess, Ban Ryn, Dovidio, & Saha, 2007). Notably, this is not a matter of being humble about one’s skills or exercising skepticism or disciplined honesty, as Kovach and Rosensteel (2001, p. 85) quaintly suggest. Human cognitive biases often operate nonconsciously, and we are biased to judge ourselves unbiased.

On the second reading of premise 2 of (NOE), editorial judgments cannot be objective because there are no objective reasons on which to base them. Editorial judgments are conditional judgments: they are made on the basis of various constraints. The claim is that these constraints do not provide objective reasons for the choices they constrain. Some constraints on editorial choice are specific: the nature of the event, who and how many people are affected, its relation to past events of that type, the context in which it occurs. Others are general: how busy the news cycle is, the interests of the likely consumers of the report, the nature of the news medium. The claim now is not that personal values are always among the bases of editorial judgment—that was the first reading—but that these other bases are not objective either. Other constraints include publisher, political or advertiser pressure and self-censorship. Such constraints may always be present in general but do not necessarily affect every report. Typos are similarly inevitable in general, but not every news report must have them.

Thus, premise 2 is implausible. The fact that editorial judgments are conditional judgments does not make them subjective. Asking “Important to whom?”, for example, merely emphasizes that consumer interests are one standard constraint on editorial choice. Facts about news consumers explain why we see reliable differences between the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Seattle Times*, and *The Miami Herald* in coverage of immigration and celebrities, the Pacific Rim, and Cuba, and between the world, national, and state wires of The Associated Press (which are often edited by the same people filling different editorial slots at different times, presumably carrying their personal values with them). News reports in *The New York Times* and *The Wall St. Journal* reliably differ in ways one would expect given their readers, regardless of the personal values of editors in either newsroom (which are likely to enter into one’s choice of where to work). The other standard constraints provide even less reason to think editorial judgments based on them are subjective. There is in fact a great deal of uniformity across media in what appears in any given news cycle. Uniformity may be driven by competition, but the underlying presupposition in many cases is that the story is newsworthy.

A definitive test of the objectivity of editorial judgments would be an analogue of replicability in science, where only independently replicated results are *prima facie* accepted as worthy of credence. If at least some editorial judgments were replicated when editors with different values exchanged places, this would be *prima facie* evidence of the possibility of objective judgment: it would show that any competent editor basing her judgments on those constraints would make the same judgments. Kovach and Rosensteel (2001, p. 79) suggest a related test (regarding evidence-gathering, not editing) in their proposed “principles of a science of reporting”:

[The Rule of Transparency—"Be transparent as possible about your methods and motives"—] is the same principle as governs scientific method: explain how you learned something and why you believe it—so the audience can do the same. In science, the reliability of an experiment, or its objectivity, is defined by whether someone else could replicate the experiment. In journalism, only by explaining how we know what we know can we approximate this idea of people being able, if they were of a mind to, to replicate the reporting. This is what is meant by objectivity of method in science, or in journalism.

(See also Serafini, 1987) Prior to such a test, however, to claim that all editorial choice must be subjective is simply pounding the table. We have as much anecdotal evidence for thinking some editorial choices are objective as we do for thinking that some are not.

One might reply that editors must value responding to these constraints, in particular, the interests of news consumers, and all editorial judgment rests on this personal value at least. This is false. No one, not even an editor, needs to value people or their interests in order to make judgments based on people's interests. Editors do what their jobs require. Of course, journalism is an unlikely career choice for misanthropes, but that is another issue.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have defended the possibility of objective news from arguments that values inevitably prevent objective justification of their contents or objective editorial frames. If I am right, working journalists, professional or amateur, are justified in their adherence to this goal as something that is practically attainable. There may always be difficulties, and there is much work to be done to eliminate the influence of personal values and nonconscious biases of various kinds, but it does not follow that every news story is tainted by personal bias. The claim that there *must* be bias *somewhere* in *every* story must rest on an argument for inevitable bias. As we saw, those arguments fail. We need not be certain we have attained the goal. If the facts in a story are highly confirmed and their organization objectively justified, we are also justified in our belief that it is objective.

I have not claimed that objective news is the only goal journalists *ought* to (or *do*) have, let alone that journalists who have that goal always reach it. I do claim that those who have this goal have it because they can reach it, and that they sometimes do reach it. News stories in major and local media outlets provide examples every day.

That said, the context of competing goals in which objective news is produced provides further reasons for why it is hard to achieve. The fundamental problem revealed by these contextual factors is a lack of motivation that stems from

our attitude towards knowledge, including testimony. In a word, journalists overestimate the demand for objective news. General knowledge is not our highest priority. This attitude shows up in various ways, all of which affect the production of objective news.

First, objective news is expensive, monetarily and psychologically. Discovery and verification in science are expensive, but we are willing to pay for them because the outcomes promise to satisfy specific strong needs and desires (e.g., health, security, attention). Discovery and verification in journalism are also expensive (though not nearly as much), but there is no more obvious sign of the low relative value of their outcomes—general, often nonlocal, knowledge—than our unwillingness to pay for them. Today's frantic search for a business model for old and new media alike amounts to this: what general knowledge do people want enough that they will pay for it as a matter of course? This leads to the psychological expense. There is a steep psychological cost to evaluating facts that do not conform to our prior beliefs, especially our prejudices. We may not like what science tells us either, but the cost of ignoring it can be high. Objective news has no such priority. The rise in opinion journalism in recent years is likely due in part to the fact that it is cheaper in both these ways.

Second, objective news is boring, especially relative to opinion. Standard descriptions of objective news are strikingly unappealing. Mindich (1998, p. 109) characterizes early Associated Press reports as "bland gruel, without the spice and piquancy of partisan criticism and local dialect," while Schudson (1979, pp. 77–87) notes the "dull discipline" of objective news editing imposed on reporters who sought literary careers. Objective news must catch and keep the interest of a public that has plenty of other demands for its attention. That there exists this tension between objective news and appeal also reflects our attitude towards general knowledge. We like it the way we like fresh vegetables: we know they are good for us, but we would rather have something else. Tuchman (1972, p. 660) quotes sociologist Ruth Jacobs as noting that her editor's first rule was to "get the facts" and his second was "don't let the facts interfere with the story."

Third, objective news is personally unsatisfying. General knowledge is by definition not about you, and the work that goes into its discovery and verification, like what goes on in a laboratory, is invisible to the public. Few nonjournalists read bylines. Extensive wire service reporting may garner only a mention of the service's having contributed to a news report that runs with a local reporter's byline. This can make the simple pursuit of objective news—as opposed to also making one's name by capitalizing on that pursuit in public ways—problematic for anyone with an ego, and the journalism profession has its share of large egos.

I hope this examination of the arguments for inevitable bias has shown why journalists are justified in adhering to that goal and how much more

we need to do to achieve it. Training and practices that involve evidence-gathering and editorial judgment should reflect the fact that news journalism is practical epistemology. Science students know they are entering a knowledge-producing business, and their training is driven by epistemology: *inter alia*, they learn how to generate and critically assess alternative hypotheses and derive testable predictions from them. Just so, journalism students who are entering the knowledge-generating part of the profession should spend far less time honing literary skills and far more time on critical thinking. *All* media critics and practitioners, not just students, need to understand the nature of biases that affect their professional behavior and what can be done to overcome them.

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