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# A reexamination of the canon of objectivity in American journalism

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A REEXAMINATION OF THE CANON OF OBJECTIVITY  
IN AMERICAN JOURNALISM

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
In partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Mass Communication

in

Theanship School of Mass Communication

by  
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B.S., University of Idaho, 1975  
December 2001

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To Dr. Louis A. Day  
and  
To My Family

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## ABSTRACT

Journalistic objectivity is the definitive canon of American mainstream journalism. Yet American journalists cannot agree on what it is, how it is measured, or on how it is done. The source of the confusion is the assumption that objectivity is an ideal, absolute, impossible, incomprehensible, value-free state of being, outside of all physical, cognitive, psychological, and social contexts, where reality is perceived without distortions of any kind. This assumption is logically invalid and historically inaccurate. Journalistic objectivity evolved from the American cultural premises of egalitarianism and positive scientific empiricism through four historical stages: *Nonpartisanship*, *Neutrality*, *Focus-On-Facts*, and *Detachment*. It is possible, comprehensible, and reflects specific values.

Within the context of journalism, there is no absolute truth. A “truth” is an interpretation of reality that passes three tests—coherence, correspondence and pragmatism--within a specific context. There are as many potential “truths” as there are contexts from which to determine those truths. With so many potential truths, chaos is unavoidable unless an added dimension of truth is identified. That added dimension is “objectivity.” “Objective” truths are interpretations of reality that pass the three tests of truth within the largest, most information-rich contexts.

An “objective” journalist is one who gathers interpretations of reality (true or not) from the smaller contexts of news participants, and presents them faithfully and accurately to the larger context of news consumers, so that the most objective truth (the one that everyone in the large context can agree on) can be determined. In order to do this, an objective journalist has to be able to surf contexts. Therefore, “journalistic objectivity” is the ability to surf contexts, or *Contextual Independence*.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Purpose of the Study

Objectivity is widely recognized as American journalism's greatest value. Yet American journalists disagree on what it is (a definition), how to measure it (a standard), and how to do it (a technique). Definitions, standards and techniques currently intertwine in a Gordian Knot of confusion and disagreement almost impossible to unravel.

There has, in fact, been so much confusion and disagreement over the meaning of the term "journalistic objectivity" during the last 50 years, that it has become fashionable to declare objectivity an illusion. The following caveat from a 1988 book on journalistic ethics is typical of this continually growing attitude about objectivity: "This chapter was written with the following conviction: No matter how close journalists approach objectivity, objectivity is an illusion. (Rivers and Mathews, 64)"

But, also typical of this attitude is an exhortation from various commentators to journalists, as exemplified in the remarks below, to try for objectivity anyway:

We use "objectivity" frequently in this chapter, and, like other thoughtful journalists, we do not believe in objectivity. We know only that the better journalists can approach objectivity. (Rivers and Mathews 1988, 65)

To achieve complete objectivity when you are evaluating your research is obviously impossible . . . Yet while the ideal is impossible of achievement, we are all obliged to come as close to it as we possibly can. (Fontaine and Glavin 1987, 59)

Complete objectivity, like flawless accuracy, is an impossible ideal that journalists must pursue tirelessly. (Rivers and Work 1988, 23)

Such a state of absolute impartiality, which might be termed "'Objectivity' with an upper-case 'O,'" is seldom to be found in journalism . . .

For the working journalist, this more feasible goal could be called "'objectivity' with a lower case 'o.'" It's the objectivity of journalists who want to tell the truth as best they can ascertain it, without bias or prejudice, while understanding that they can but approximate the ideal of absolute impartiality. (Porter and Ferris 1988, 341)

This attitude about objectivity—that it is impossible, but journalists should try to achieve it anyway—is counter-productive. American journalists are not known for their pursuit of intangibles. How long will they continue to try to do something that is impossible to do?

And yet, “journalism,” as a distinctive literary genre, does not exist without objectivity. This thesis defines journalism as “an objective account of current events.” Objectivity, currency, and the focus on events, are journalism’s key ingredients. Take away any of them, and “journalism,” as a distinctive genre, disappears. Substitute a focus on ideas for the journalistic focus on events, and you get academia. Substitute the past for the present and you get history. Substitute advocacy for objectivity, and the result is propaganda. If “objectivity” is an illusion, so is “journalism.” Under these circumstances, a theoretically possible and comprehensible conception of objectivity isn’t just a convenience, it is an absolute necessity.

The purpose of this study is to develop such a conception of objectivity. Through an historical and philosophical analysis of the premises of the concept—the philosophical ideas that underlie and generate the notion of journalistic objectivity—this study will identify and eliminate the source of most of the current confusion, and produce the simple, clear definition, the measurable standard, and the compatible technique, that the concept is lacking now.

#### Statement of the Problem

Currently, American “objective” journalism strives, above all, to catch reality “as it really is”—without distortions of any kind. According to the current ideal of absolute journalistic objectivity, if a journalist could just step outside of his physical/cognitive/psychological/social frame of reference, he could achieve undistorted perception of absolute reality. This will never happen of course, and no one believes that it is even possible, but objective journalists are expected to continue trying to be absolutely objective for as long as they practice their craft.



This unrealistic expectation ignores the obvious. Since no one has ever experienced absolute journalistic objectivity, and no one ever will, absolute journalistic objectivity can never be sufficiently defined, described or measured. The best anyone can do is make an educated guess. The result of 50 years of educated guesses is the tangled mass of conflicting definitions, standards and techniques that this thesis will attempt to put in order.

The endless, hopeless pursuit of an ideal that can never be understood or realized has generated at least four counter-productive responses. The first two attack the ideal: (1) Some journalists have rejected even the possibility of objectivity; (2) Others have tried to reconstruct and re-define "objectivity." The second two defend the ideal: (3) Journalists have concocted "recipes" for objectivity; (4) Journalists have boiled objectivity down to a set of mindless slogans.

### The Four Responses

#### Rejection

Some journalists have attacked the ideal by rejecting the idea of journalistic objectivity altogether. To them, it is a false idol, the "worship" of which does more harm than it does good. Gaye Tuchman and J. Herbert Altschull are two notable examples of this response, and their discussions about objectivity, Tuchman's especially, have deeply influenced two generations of journalists.

#### Reconstruction

Other journalists, anxious to keep the word "objectivity" in the American journalistic lexicon at any cost, have attacked the ideal by trying to reconstruct it and redefine it. Educator John Merrill represents this approach. He stretches "objectivity" on the Procrustean bed of John Paul Sartre's Humanistic Existentialism, disfiguring it beyond recognition in an effort to save it.

## Recipes

Provided with a plethora of approximate definitions of objectivity, many journalists defending the ideal have concocted recipes, that feature their favorite definitions as ingredients. Their reasoning is: if journalists would only do everything on the list, they would come as close to objectivity as is humanly possible. In two books, written in 1949 and 1973, for example, journalist and editor Herbert Brucker toted up seven ingredients of journalistic objectivity: (1) correspondence to reality, (2) accuracy, (3) lack of bias, (4) honesty, (5) fairness, (6) completeness, and (7) dispassion (Brucker 1949, 252-253; Brucker 1973, 76-77). Such recipes are complicated and ambiguous.

## Slogans

In an apparent effort to operationalize the ingredients of objectivity presented in complicated and ambiguous recipes, many defending journalists have boiled them down to mindless slogans that any cub reporter can memorize, and then practice without bothering to think. The most pernicious of these slogans, *bald-and-exact-fact*, made possible the embarrassing and tragic journalistic debacle of McCarthyism.

The sooner American journalism discards the current impossible ideal of journalistic objectivity, the better. But the ideal itself is only a manifestation of something deeper. The root of the problem is the philosophical premise the impossible ideal rests on. That premise, termed here “negative scientific empiricism,” is not the original premise of American journalistic objectivity. It is a usurper, put into place by frightened American journalists during an epistemological crises that followed World War I.

“Negative scientific empiricism” is the naive notion that “scientific empiricism” is to be defined primarily, and negatively, in terms of the avoidance of personal distortion, instead of positively, in terms of peer review and the consensual validation of empirically observed

phenomena. Under negative scientific empiricism, the “scientific method” is not an approach to observation that allows scientists to check one another’s findings in a systematic way, but a set of specific procedures that magically makes the results of an experiment or observation “objective,” no matter how biased the scientist performing those procedures is.

The American journalists who started applying this magic scientific method to journalism after the 1920s were convinced it produced objective journalism not because of journalists, but in spite of them. What began as a desperate response to the post-war epistemological crises, solidified into sacred doctrine during the 1930s and 1940s, when American scientific objective journalism seemed more and more to be a final solution. (Of course, like other sacred doctrines, many “believers” neither understood it, nor practiced it.)

Then, during the early 1950s, Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy manipulated the conventions of scientific objective journalism to force American journalists to propagate his communist witch-hunt. Disillusioned and shamed by their unwilling participation in McCarthyism, American journalists began weaving the Gordian Knot. The Knot has continued to grow for 50 years because journalists have continued to attack or defend the conspicuous, absolute ideal, instead of the false hidden premise that supports it.

#### Research Questions

Before the absurd and impossible absolute ideal can be discarded, the premise of negative scientific empiricism must be exposed as a usurper by comparing and contrasting it with the true premises. The true premises must be reinstated and a possible and comprehensible definition of journalistic objectivity developed from them. In any successful attempt to redefine journalistic objectivity, therefore, the first research question would have to be:

*"What are the true first principles, or philosophical premises, of the concept of journalistic objectivity?"*

To find the true premises, we must examine the historical/philosophical environment that generated the concept of journalistic objectivity in the first place. We must look for the origin of the concept. But “origin,” does not mean “place it started,” or “editor or newspaper who started it.” These questions may never be answered satisfactorily--primary historical evidence is too malleable. Instead, origin designates the philosophical origin of the concept. What kinds of things does the concept presume? What would a journalist have to believe in before he or she could believe in objectivity? The search for the philosophical origin of an important cultural concept like journalistic objectivity is, however, at least partially historical. When we ask “What kinds of things does the concept presume?”, we also have to ask “When did people start presuming those things, and why?”. When we ask “What would a journalist have to believe in before he or she could believe in objectivity?”, we also have to ask “When did journalists start believing those things, and why?”. So another research questions that must be asked and answered is:

*What were the cultural milieus within which the concept of journalistic objectivity emerged and evolved?*

It takes time for any idea to imbue a culture as large and variegated as American journalism. Objectivity did not simply spring into being fully-formed. It had to evolve, and evolution means change. If we want to find out what objectivity is now, we must find out what it has been. We must trace its evolution. So a final research question has to be:

*What are the evolutionary forms that journalistic objectivity has taken since its emergence?*

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

This thesis will address the third research question first: "What are the evolutionary forms that journalistic objectivity has taken since its emergence?", because those evolutionary forms are hiding in plain sight. They are the definitions, standards and techniques, the "ingredients" and slogans tangled up in the Gordian Knot.

The difference between "evolution" and "change" is that, when something evolves, vestiges of its previous forms remain. The historical process of human evolution, for example, can be traced through our vestigial tails, gills, and teats, much discussed in popular literature and television programming. Likewise, the historical development of the concept of journalistic objectivity can be traced through the definitions of it that one can still find in journalism literature. The best place to begin, therefore, is with the third question, and the first step to answering that question is to collect definitions.

To this end, the tables of contents and indexes of 324 books, on journalism theory, ethics, technique and practice, published between 1911 and 1995, identified by their Library of Congress designations and located in Louisiana State University's Middleton Library, were surveyed for the words "objectivity," "objective" and "objectiveness." Even though relatively few of them included material on objectivity (90% of the tables of contents, and 62% of the indexes of the original sample of 324 contained no references to objectivity), 268 definitions and 274 associations of journalistic objectivity were collected. (Most of the discussions contained several of each.)

Definitions were defined as: words, phrases or sentences that described states of being, attitudes, characteristics, qualities, actions, etc, that were specifically identified as being equal to, or part of, journalistic objectivity. Associations were defined as: words, sentences or phrases that

described states of being, attitudes, characteristics, qualities, actions, etc, associated with journalistic objectivity by the authors surveyed. Associations accompanied objectivity, or were products of objectivity. They did not equal objectivity.

Associations were collected primarily in order to weed out definitions that were inconsistent with the evolutionary development of the concept. What some survey authors presented as definitions, other authors thought of as associations, and vice-versa. If a definition did not show up at least twice--as two definitions, or as one definition and one association, it was considered an "unsuccessful mutation" that did not belong in the larger evolutionary scheme.

"Accuracy," for example, was presented by some authors as a definition (or part of a definition) of objectivity, and by others as a by-product of objectivity (an association). So "accuracy" was included. On the other hand, "relevance" was suggested by one author (citing a sociologist) as a part of the definition of objectivity (McManus 1994, 145), but did not show up anywhere else. So "relevance" was not included. Five other definitions were left out for the same reason. They included (1) The reader's individual perception of a news report, (2) Advocacy, (3) Taken-for-grantedness, (4) Readers get no positive or negative feeling about newsmakers featured in the news story, and (5) Absence of convictions.

The removal of these six unsuccessful mutations left 262 definitions of objectivity. These 262 definitions were reduced to 24 distinct definitions through comparison and contrast. (Two one-word definitions of objectivity, "fairness" and "balance," cited eight times each by survey authors, but never defined, could not be placed in the paradigm.)

The 24 distinct definitions were then grouped according to common themes. For example, "honesty" and "impartiality" are different things, but their common theme is a rejection of partisan control. *Nonpartisanship*, therefore, is one of the four broad themes, and "honesty" and "impartiality" are two of its variations.

The four themes were: (1) *Nonpartisanship* (with 4 variations), (2) *Neutrality* (4 variations), (3) *Focus-On-Facts* (6 variations) and (4) *Detachment* (9 variations). (The four broad themes are discussed throughout this thesis. Individual variations are discussed in the section entitled “The Four Quadrants.”)

One of the 24 distinct definitions, *Get-Both(All)-Sides*, is actually more of a technique than a definition. It could not be limited to any of the four themes, because it could, conceivably, be used in the service of any of them. It was, therefore, set aside as the “universal technique,” of American objective journalism, instead of being counted as a theme or variation of journalistic objectivity. *Get-Both(All)-Sides* will play an important part in the reformulation of journalistic objectivity, but not until much later in this thesis.

Once identified, the four themes had to be ranked in some way. Since journalistic objectivity has to do with the question of how journalists gain knowledge of the world, the branch of philosophy that studies how humans gain knowledge--epistemology--was examined for an appropriate ranking scheme. The history of epistemology provided it. One question that epistemology asks is "How does one find 'truth?'". The most common answers to that question can be ranked “most primitive” to “least primitive,” in terms of when they appeared in history. In the Middle Ages, people believed that truth was arrived at by studying an established authority--such as the Bible, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, or Thomas Aquinas.. Blind submission to authority is called “authoritarianism” (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. 77), and it is the most primitive epistemological strategy of those to be considered here. During the 17th and 18th centuries, people came to believe that any intelligent human being could acquire knowledge of truth solely through the power of his own mind, by using his reason to think his way to it. This was “rationalism” (Stumpf 1993, 238-246) and it is the second most primitive epistemological strategy. Shortly after rationalism gained prominence, English philosopher John

Locke pointed out that it ignored a vital step. He believed that knowledge of truth could only be acquired by first perceiving the world outside of the mind, and then rationalizing about it (Bittle 1953, 105). This belief is called “empiricism,” and it is the least primitive epistemological strategy.

None of the four themes of journalistic objectivity (or any of the original 262 definitions, for that matter) alluded to the use of authoritarianism for day-to-day knowledge about the world. Mainstream American journalists apparently consider authoritarianism to be unreliable and outdated (at least theoretically). But this was not the case with the epistemological strategies of rationalism and empiricism. Two of the themes, *Nonpartisanship* and *Neutrality*, were demonstrably rationalistic, and two, *Focus-On-Facts* and *Detachment*, were demonstrably empirical.

In this way, research question three was answered. The evolution of the concept of journalistic objectivity mirrored the epistemological developments of rationalism and empiricism. A rationalistic *Nonpartisanship/Neutrality* had apparently evolved into an empirical *Focus-On-Facts/Detachment*. But a more refined ranking, and greater detail, were needed if the essence of journalistic objectivity was to be identified. In other words, it was time to address research question two, “What were the cultural milieus within which the concept of journalistic objectivity emerged and evolved?” So a study of the history of American philosophy, science and journalism was undertaken in order to shed light on how each theme came about, and in what historical order.

That study identified *Nonpartisanship* as the earliest and most epistemologically primitive stage of journalistic objectivity. Since *Neutrality* was a philosophical expansion of *Nonpartisanship*, it fell into place as stage two. Stage three--*Focus-On-Facts*--was American journalism's incorporation of a philosophical movement called “realism” that swept through American culture in the 1890s (Schudson 1976, 167-171). And stage four--*Detachment*--was a turning-inside-out of *Focus-On-*



*Facts*, brought about by the epistemological crises following World War I. The concept of journalistic objectivity began, therefore, as *Nonpartisanship*, and evolved through *Neutrality*, *Focus-On-Facts*, and *Detachment*, in that order.

This four-stage evolutionary model of journalistic objectivity, the fruit of a search for answers to research questions two and three: *What are the cultural milieus within which the concept of journalistic objectivity emerged and evolved?* and *What are the evolutionary forms that journalistic objectivity has taken since its emergence?*, provided the means to answer research question one: *What are journalistic objectivity's philosophical premises?* This is because the philosophical premises of journalistic objectivity turned out to be the two primary American cultural forces that had propelled the concept through its four evolutionary stages. Those two cultural forces were egalitarianism and positive scientific empiricism.

Egalitarianism is defined here as "The rejection of a priori rank, based on a belief that everyone is created equal in terms of their ability to recognize truth." This definition is the author's, but it was derived from an illuminating essay on "The Quest For The National Character," written by former Stanford History Department Chairman, David M. Potter (Rapson 1967, 70-72). "A priori" means "before examination or analysis (Webster's New World Dictionary, 3<sup>rd</sup> college ed. 68)," "automatic," "God-given," "born with it," etcetera. Positive scientific empiricism is defined here as "The belief that consensual validation of empirical perceptions yields the most reliable knowledge of reality." Again, this is the author's definition, but it is primarily a reformulation of similar definitions that can be found in a number of scholarly works (Schudson 1976, 5-6; McCombs, Shaw and Grey 1976, 47; Scheffler 1967, I, 10-11).

Once the two original premises of journalistic objectivity were identified, and the previous evolution of the concept was charted, the new definition—what journalistic objectivity means today—could be extrapolated. That new definition is *Contextual Independence*.

Examination of egalitarianism and positive scientific empiricism not only yielded the definition of journalistic objectivity, it also yielded a standard by which to measure the degree to which objectivity has been accomplished, and a compatible technique for accomplishing it. All three—the definition, the standard and the technique--will be examined in detail in this thesis.

## CHAPTER 3

### OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

This thesis is not a typical thesis. It examines theoretical problems that most journalism authors avoid. As noted above, of the 324 books originally surveyed for definitions and associations of objectivity, 90% of the tables of contents, and 62% of the indexes contained no references to objectivity at all. Because this thesis is not a typical thesis, a brief outline of it is provided below.

The Literature Review and the History of the Canon of Objectivity are the next two sections of the thesis. They will develop what the above section on Methodology could only touch on. The Literature Review will demonstrate, through an examination of a few well-known and well-respected journalism authors, where and how a belief in the ideal of absolute objectivity has led American journalism astray. It will present examples of the four ways American journalists have responded to the impossible expectations of absolute objectivity: 1) rejection, 2) reconstruction, 3) the recipe approach, and 4) mindless slogans, and it will highlight these strategies' counter-productivity.

Following the Literature Review, the History of the Canon of Objectivity will lay out in detail the four-stage model of the evolution of journalistic objectivity. It will trace the concept of journalistic objectivity from its emergence in the 1830s as *Nonpartisanship*, through *Neutrality*, *Focus-On-Facts* and *Detachment*, to the ambiguity of the present day. It will detail the cultural changes that accompanied the concept's evolution, but it will not attempt to prove a direct, causal connection between the two, since such proof is impossible. In the course of relating the history of the concept's evolution, this section will also anchor it securely to its two original premises of egalitarianism and positive scientific empiricism.

After it traces the evolution of the concept of journalistic objectivity through the fourth stage of *Detachment*, the *History of the Canon of Objectivity* will bring the concept into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by using the universal technique of *Get-Both(All)-Sides* to deal with relativity theory and quantum theory. Albert Einstein published his now famous paper on Special Relativity in 1905 and his theory of General Relativity in 1915 (Hawking 1988, 20, 29). In 1926 German scientist Werner Heisenberg formulated the “uncertainty principle,” that forms the basis of quantum mechanics (Hawking 1988, 54-55). Both relativity (Jenson 1957, 156) and quantum theory (Hawking 1988, 55) have profound epistemological implications. Stephen W. Hawking, in his best-selling *A Brief History of Time*, called them “the great intellectual achievements of the first half of this century” (1988, 11). Yet American journalism has never tried to accommodate or incorporate them in any meaningful and systematic way. Unlike the old conceptions of *Nonpartisanship*, *Neutrality*, *Focus-On-Facts*, and *Detachment*, the new definition of journalistic objectivity presented by this thesis does accommodate relativity and quantum mechanics. The *History of the Canon of Objectivity* will explain how.

The section following the *History*, entitled *The Application of Contextual Independence*, will show, using specific examples pulled from a recent survey in the *The Columbia Journalism Review*, how the application of the new definition, and the application of the new standard and technique generated by the new definition, solves the most complex journalism conundrums.

The next section, *The Four Quadrants*, will display the four evolutionary stages, with their variations, a short explanation of each variation, and a simple chart upon which any variation, except the six unsuccessful “mutations,” can be placed.

Finally, the last section, *Summary and Conclusion*, will summarize the progression of ideas put forth by this thesis that led to the reformulation of the concept of journalistic objectivity, and then briefly speculate on what adherence to the definition, standard and technique presented

here would mean for the quality of journalism and the nature of news coverage in our democracy, and in the free world.

## CHAPTER 4

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is unique because there is little research focusing directly on journalistic objectivity, except that which identifies the lack of it. This literature review, therefore, will feature a representative sample of well-known journalism authors, past and present, that illustrates the logical mistakes inherent in previous attempts to define, what has been up to now, an un-definable concept.

#### Rejection

As explained above, the cause of the confusion surrounding objectivity is the impossible ideal of absolute journalistic objectivity. Some journalists and journalism critics respond to this impossible ideal by rejecting the concept of objectivity altogether. But, this ideal is so deeply ingrained in the American journalism culture, that even those who have consciously rejected it have, at the same time, unconsciously accepted it. Two well-known journalism critics guilty of this in the 1970s and 1980s were Gaye Tuchman and J. Herbert Altschull.

Gaye Tuchman's 1972 article about journalistic objectivity in the American Journal of Sociology gave rise to a powerful catchphrase: Objectivity was a "strategic ritual protecting newspapermen from the risks of their trade. (660)" According to Tuchman, this ritual consisted of six activities: verifying facts, presenting conflicting possibilities, supporting any truth claims with evidence, enclosing someone else's words or opinions in quotation marks, arranging information from most to least important in an inverted pyramid and separating "straight objective" stories and "news analysis" stories within the newspaper (660-662).

Tuchman's analysis attracted critics of objectivity like a lightning rod because her observations hit the mark. Six years after her article, Tuchman challenged the concept of journalistic objectivity further with her book Making News: A Study in the Construction of

Reality. In that book, Tuchman argued that American journalists constructed reality for their readers instead of just recording it:

The theme that the act of making news is the act of constructing reality itself rather than a picture of reality runs throughout this book . . . But the process of making news is not accomplished in a void, and so a second theme is that professionalism serves organizational interests by reaffirming the institutional processes in which newswork is embedded. (12)

The "professionalism" Tuchman referred to included objectivity, which she defined as "taken-for-grantedness":

So too, when members of a society identify aspects of culture and structure as objective phenomena (the normal, natural, taken-for-granted facts of life), they are affirming the facticity of the world as given by the natural attitude. (208)

Through naive empiricism . . . information is transformed into objective facts--facts as a normal, natural, taken-for-granted description and constitution of a state of affairs. (210-211)

...newswriters had previously invoked their objectified (taken-for-granted) knowledge to predict that Johnson would turn back Senator Eugene McCarthy's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. (212)

Tuchman's assertion that objectivity equaled taken-for-grantedness possessed a conspiracy-theory kind of allure--"Objectivity is really the antithesis of what it appears to be"--but it also revealed a flaw in her approach. "Taken-for-grantedness" only makes sense when there is a "non-taken-for-grantedness" to oppose it to. What would Tuchman call non-taken-for-grantedness? A hundred years of scientific and journalistic tradition had already identified non-taken-for-grantedness with "objectivity."

Essentially what Tuchman said regarding journalistic objectivity was "Non-taken-for-grantedness is not journalistic objectivity, taken-for-grantedness is . . . and it's not very 'objective,' is it?". In other words, she moved the term, but left the original concept intact.

But Tuchman was playing against a stacked deck. She realized something was wrong with the concept, but she did not probe deeply enough to uncover the real problem, which was the false premise that gave rise to the absolute ideal she criticized. Tuchman assumed that the

absolute ideal was logically valid, but unachievable, and attempted to dislodge it from American journalistic culture by demonstrating that pursuit of absolute objectivity only made journalists more subjective. And she was correct. The hopeless pursuit of an impossible, incomprehensible, absolute journalistic objectivity does tend to make journalists more, rather than less, subjective.

Tuchman's illumination of the sociological dynamics of American objective journalism during the 1960s and 1970s was masterful and invaluable. But, given the impact Tuchman's work had, and still has, on journalism theorists, her unconscious adoption of an impossible, incomprehensible absolute ideal also augmented the confusion surrounding the concept.

J. Herbert Altschull, writing in 1984, made the same mistake as Tuchman. He consciously rejected the ideal of an absolute journalistic objectivity, while unconsciously accepting it. The thesis of his book, Agents of Power: The Role of the News Media in Human Affairs, was that American journalism was not an independent voice so much as it was a tool of the American cultural/political/economic system, and that the code of objectivity was a mechanism of social control wielded indirectly by that system (133).

Like Tuchman's, Altschull's indictment of American journalistic objectivity rings true . . . at least at first. It loses some of its punch, however, when his elaboration of the code is factored in:

under the code, fundamental institutions may not be attacked. Nor may the symbols of those fundamental institutions: the flag, for example, or "democracy"; or freedom of the press or of speech or of religion; or the presidency. Enemies of the system may not be applauded, nor symbolic representation of those enemies. Atheism may not be endorsed; freedom of religion does not extend that far. Nor may any symbol of animosity to "family" be supported. Homosexuality may be tolerated, but it may not be advocated. Motherhood may not be condemned. Communism may not be defended. Nor, for that matter, is it acceptable within the perimeters of the system to attack the code of objectivity. (132)

Altschull criticized the code of objectivity for not allowing journalists to attack fundamental political institutions and their symbols, applaud "enemies of the system," endorse atheism, support animosity toward family or motherhood, advocate homosexuality or defend communism.



But should objective journalists ever "attack," "applaud," "endorse," "support," "advocate" or "defend" anything anyway? Isn't such activity the domain of propaganda?

Altschull would no doubt have responded that American objective journalism did applaud, endorse, support, advocate and defend American political and cultural entities . . . to the detriment of non-American political and cultural entities. This may be true. But, if subtle advocacy of the American system is a violation of objectivity, wouldn't not-so-subtle advocacy of non-American elements be a violation too?

Altschull's criticism of journalistic objectivity in Agents was based on his presumption that ideal objectivity was absolute--that it should reflect no values whatsoever. Like Tuchman, Altschull sensed that the pursuit of this impossible ideal was counterproductive. So, when he identified some American cultural values that journalistic objectivity did reflect, he sought to expose it as a golden calf.

But, also like Tuchman, Altschull missed the point. Journalistic objectivity can never be absolute, not even theoretically. Every concept is built upon premises--other concepts and ideas that precede it and support it. And all premises generate values. If a premise does not generate values, it is not a valid premise. It is a logically absurd, impossible premise. What would the values of negative scientific empiricism be, for example, except the value of being something other than human, which isn't a "value" at all? Journalistic objectivity is real. Because it is real, it reflects certain values. The presence of values doesn't adulterate the concept of journalistic objectivity, it legitimizes it. This very important point will be examined in more detail below. But first, the other three strategies for dealing with the impossible expectations of absolute objectivity must be dealt with.

## Reconstruction

By far, the most prolific representative of the second strategy for dealing with the impossible demands of absolute objectivity--reconstruction--is journalism educator John C. Merrill. Merrill seems to have realized that journalistic objectivity needed new premises if it was ever to be understandable and usable, but, instead of trying to determine the original ones, he substituted his own personal favorites. He forces objectivity into the Procrustean bed of Jean Paul Sartre's Humanistic Existentialism. Consider the following statement by Merrill:

The Idealist says, in effect, that "objectivity" is a personal thing with the audience member; it is the individual perception of the report that really counts; therefore there may be as many objectivities as there are perceivers or audience members. (1990, 156)

Whatever Merrill meant by idealist "objectivities," isn't even close to what the term has always signified in American journalism. Whatever journalistic objectivity is, it is not existentialist. At the very least, "objectivity" connotes intentness on objects and events external to the self, whereas Existentialism, since it preaches self-creation and self-authentication, encourages self-absorption and constant introspection.

But, even if American journalistic objectivity could somehow be reconciled with self-absorption, which it can't, Existentialism in general cannot be reconciled with the American cultural frame that generated objectivity. Like all philosophical concepts, Existentialism reflects its cultural origins. Its inherent pessimism (Merrill 1989, 132), reflects the European cultural experience (Stumpf 1993, 481-482; Altschull 1990, 221-222), not the American one. The "gospel" of America has always been optimism (Altschull 1990, 7).

Merrill was right about one thing: If the Gordian Knot of journalistic objectivity is ever to be untangled, if the concept is ever to be definable, measurable, and do-able, it has to be built, in the mind of journalists, upon premises other than negative scientific empiricism. But Merrill was wrong in choosing the premises of Existentialism.

## Recipes

The third strategy for dealing with the impossible demands of absolute journalistic objectivity is termed here the "recipe" approach. Provided with a plethora of approximate definitions, many journalists have concocted recipes for objectivity that feature their favorite definitions as ingredients. Their reasoning is that, if journalists could only do all of the things on the list, they will come as close to the ideal as is humanly possible. Such recipes, however, are inevitably complex and ambiguous.

One author, for example, writing in 1942, described objectivity in this way:

Objectivity means the coverage of the news on the basis of its facts and its importance . . . It means seeing the truth as a thing in itself, a thing that stands by itself regardless of what you may think of it or how it may affect you. It means that news facts have a real existence of their own and in themselves . . . Objective news coverage calls for the ability to see all sides of an issue or a happening and to determine the exact facts about it. (MacNeil, 25-26)

In other words, objectivity is an activity, a frame of mind, an innate property of reality and a personal talent at one and the same time.

Even if the reader can reconcile these four natures of objectivity, other problems remain. Who judges the "importance" of a news item, and on what basis? If truth is "a thing that stands by itself regardless of what (the reporter) may think of it," is thinking about truth counterproductive? But, if a reporter can't think about truth, how does he find it?

The definition offered by a 1986 dissertation entitled "The Objective News Report: A Content Analysis of Selected U.S. Daily Newspapers for 1865 to 1954" is typical of the recipe approach. According to the author, an objective news report is "detached and impersonal," reports only "verifiable data" and avoids inductive generalizations and statements of prediction, value or advocacy unless it attributes them to source (Stensaas, 7-8, 12-13). According to a 1983 textbook, objective journalism presents a complete report "not colored by the opinion of

the reporter or the requirements of the prevailing government," that "includes facts that can be shown to correspond to objects," and that "speaks for the general interest" (Mencher, 174).

Recipe definitions are difficult to remember and difficult to apply, and even the well-thought-out ones are problematic. In two books, written in 1949 and 1973, Freedom of Information and Communication is Power: Unchanging Values in a Changing Journalism, journalist and editor Herbert Brucker toted up seven ingredients of journalistic objectivity:

(1) correspondence to reality, (2) lack of bias, (3) fairness, (4) completeness, (5) accuracy, (6) honesty, and (7) dispassion (Brucker 1949, 252; Brucker 1973, 75, 77, 81-82). As reasonable as these ingredients are, they don't add up to a suitable standard of objectivity.

"Completeness," "fairness," "honesty," "dispassion" and "lack of bias," are all relative.

"Correspondence to reality" begs the question (How can we use reality to judge whether or not we understand reality?). And, although "accuracy" is clear and measurable, it is insufficient.

What's to stop a journalist from "accurately" reporting only one side of a controversy?

David Mindich, in his well-reviewed, 1998 book, Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism, relied on four of the five "most widely used modern textbooks" for his list. That list includes detachment, nonpartisanship, the use of the inverted pyramid, naive empiricism and balance (8). But, like all recipes, Mindich's augments the confusion instead of diminishing it.

Mindich's definition of "detachment" on page 8, for example, is "to make sure the facts are doing the talking, not the reporter's own preconceived notions." This is understandable--even catchy--but it is almost indistinguishable from his definition of "naive empiricism" on the same page: "reliance on 'facts' to report accurately the truth or reality of the event."

On page 16, Mindich strongly implies that "detachment" has to do with separation from political parties.

On pages 20-26, Mindich makes much of what he saw as a "detachment" by Bennett and his Herald not from political parties, but from the old aristocratic social order represented by Webb and his Courier and Enquirer.

By page 36, "detachment" has come to mean "totally random and without provocation," referring to Bennett's belligerent writing style.

At the top of page 38, "detachment" implies "pulling oneself out of one's life," and "separating one's mind from one's body." The rest of Mindich's ingredients have similar problems of ambiguity.

### Slogans

Recipes are easier to understand and do than absolute journalistic objectivity, but that isn't saying very much, because absolute objectivity is absolutely impossible. Hence we come to the fourth strategy for dealing with the demands of absolute journalistic objectivity--mindless slogans. In an apparent effort to operationalize the ingredients of objectivity presented in complex, ambiguous recipes, many journalists boil them down to mindless slogans that anyone can memorize, and then practice without having to think.

One such slogan is the universal technique of *Get-Both(All)-Sides*. *Get-Both(All)-Sides* has been a valuable journalistic tool for more than a century. But when it is reduced to a mindless slogan, it too easily replaces independent thinking and individual reporter responsibility, as can be seen in this anecdote from Public Officials and the Press:

I do not like the traditional concept of objectivity. If a black horse walks into a bar, and there are AP and UPI reporters and two politicians--a Republican and a Democrat--standing at the bar, and the Republican says, "There's a white horse," and the Democrat says, "There's a black horse," the reporter can plainly see what color the horse is--it's black. But he is to report what each side said in order to remain objective. I think he owes it to the public to say what the situation really is. (Dunn 1969, 19)

A more recent example can be found in a 1987 study of news organization. The study authors related one anecdote in which a reporter, after a few half-hearted efforts to obtain a memo that would have almost certainly vindicated one side or the other of a newsworthy dispute, settled instead for accounts from both sides. The reporter needed only to "check back" with a deputy police chief and walk a few blocks to obtain the memo, but did not. In a retrospective interview, he claimed that "what was important was the fact that he had accounts from the two sides involved in the dispute. (Ericson, Baranek and Chan, 260)"

*Get-Both-Sides*, reduced to a slogan, is dangerous, but the most pernicious journalistic slogan in history, though rarely preached today, was what journalism historian Frank Luther Mott retrospectively termed "bald and exact fact."

*Bald-and-exact-fact* was the journalistic convention, well-established by the 1950s, of recording only what was personally perceived, and omitting all background, context, and interpretation. *Bald-and-exact-fact* arguably caused the most damage to American journalism between 1950 and 1955, when Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy used it, in tandem with other journalistic conventions, to compel the press to propagate his infamous communist witch-hunt. Quoting Jack Anderson and Ronald W. May, James Aronson explains how McCarthy did it in The Press and the Cold War:

Part of the answer lies in the newspaper fraternity's devotion to the principle of objectivity. It is a violation of the unwritten creed for newsmen to mix opinion with fact; and so they gave Joe's wild accusations complete and factual coverage: They were telling the truth when they wrote: McCARTHY CHARGES 205 REDS IN STATE DEPARTMENT. Joe indeed had made that charge. As to the truth or falsehood of his statement, the reporters felt that was out of their line; appraisals of Joe's accuracy were left for the columnists and editorial writers. (1973, 69)

Though thoroughly discredited by McCarthyism, *bald-and-exact-fact* did not immediately disappear. It lingered in the minds and actions of journalists for many years.

Theodore Glasser, writing in 1984, was one journalism critic to whom journalistic objectivity was little more than a collection of slogans. In an article published in The Quill entitled "The Puzzle of Objectivity," Glasser, inspired by Tuchman's work, described objectivity as a set of "routine procedures" codifying a mercenary interest in efficiency:

These are the conventions sociologist Gaye Tuchman describes as a kind of strategy journalists use to deflect criticism . . . For the journalist, this means interviews with sources; and it ordinarily means official sources with impeccable credentials. It means juxtaposing conflicting truth-claims, where truth-claims are reported as "fact" regardless of their validity. It means making a judgment about the news value of a truth-claim even if that judgment serves only to lend authority to what is known to be false or misleading. (14)

Does the word "objectivity" really mean reporting invalid truth-claims as fact and propagating known falsehoods, as Glasser claims? Of course not. Glasser's statements don't make sense at all. But such impassioned misstatement is understandable from someone who views objectivity as little more than slogans that are too often substituted for journalistic responsibility.

To paraphrase Shakespeare, the fault lies not in the idea of journalistic objectivity, but in the misconstruction of it by journalists, even with the best of intentions. The conscious rejection/subconscious acceptance of an impossible absolute ideal, the forced reconstruction of the concept upon inappropriate philosophical foundations, the dissection of the concept into complicated and confusing recipes, and the dumbing-down of recipe ingredients into mindless slogans, have generated a Gordian Knot of confusion and disagreement that tragically binds up the expression and further exploration of, one of journalism's definitive attributes. It is hoped that the examples of the four counter-productive strategies examined in this Literature Review will enable the reader to first, begin to unravel the Gordian Knot, and second, realize the utter necessity of developing a clear, conceivable, measurable and do-able new conception of journalistic objectivity.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE HISTORY OF THE CANON OF OBJECTIVITY

Journalistic objectivity is not some impossible, undo-able ideal. It was not written on stone by deity in letters of fire. It is a human idea that emerged from the human condition--specifically from the cultural milieus that defined America in the first hundred years of its existence. It is based on premises. It reflects values. This is how we know it is real. It is definable, measurable and do-able. It has a history. It has evolved and continues to evolve, just like all important cultural ideas. This section will take a detailed look at the evolution of the concept within the only national culture that could have produced it--the American culture.

The idea of objectivity has run like a silver thread through the fabric of English and American journalistic enterprise for at least 450 years. An English newsbook, printed in 1548 promised: "I shal never admit for any affection towards countree or Kyn, to be so partial, as wil wittingly either bolster the falshood or bery the truth...!". (Stephens 1988, 256-257)" Of course this newsbook also described the pope as "that hydeous monster, that venemous... Antichriste. (257)" In the 1640s the English newspaper Mercurius Civicus not only promised "impartiality," but delivered it by including "relatively balanced reports on the various anti-Royalist factions. (257)" And the London Daily Courant, the first English-language daily, was a remarkably balanced newspaper for the early 1700s (Stephens 1988, 257; Emery and Emery 1984, 13).

#### Colonial America

Many colonial papers initially declared for some form of (primitive) objectivity also. These included the New England Courant, founded in 1721 by James Franklin, the brother of Benjamin Franklin, the Pennsylvania Gazette, which Ben himself began publishing in 1729, the Weekly Rehearsal, founded in 1735, the Boston Chronicle, founded in 1767, the Massachusetts



Spy, founded in 1770, and Rivington's New York Gazetteer; or the Connecticut, New Jersey, Hudson's River, and Quebec Weekly Advertiser, founded in 1773 (Altschull 1990, 105-107; Mott 1962, 55, 77, 79, 80, 83, 84-85).

### Revolutionary War

In the months leading up to the Revolutionary War, however, journalistic objectivity exited the cultural stage. As Edwin Emery wrote in The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media, "In newspaper and pamphlet . . . appeared the literature of this revolution. Here it was that the passions and arguments of the revolutionaries found expression. (1972, 73)"

Those passions and arguments were probably most effectively expressed by the Patriot propagandist Samuel Adams. Adams believed war with England was inevitable and he played to win. Through his editorship of the Independent Advertiser and his regular contributions to the Boston Gazette and Country Journal, he pursued five main objectives: (1) Justify the revolution, (2) Advertise the advantages of victory, (3) Arouse the masses by instilling hatred of Royalists, (4) Neutralize Royalist arguments, and (5) Phrase all issues in black and white so that even common laborers would understand the situation (Emery and Emery 1984, 68-69).

The result of the efforts of Adams and his cohorts can be seen, for example, in the experiences of James Rivington, owner and publisher of the New York Gazetteer. Before the war, Rivington was well known both for his Royalist leanings, and the objectivity with which he ran his newspaper. As the war approached however, Rivington's shop was raided twice and his type destroyed once by Patriots. Rivington himself was burned in effigy by Patriot mobs, forced to sign a public apology for voicing his opinions, and driven back to England in 1776 (though he returned as king's printer in 1777). Such fanaticism, on both sides, made journalistic objectivity dangerous and self-defeating, and the idea remained discreetly embryonic (Mott 1962, 79-80, 103; Stephens 1988, 193).

### “Dark Ages of Partisan Journalism”

After the war, ideological differences between the infant republic's Federalist party, in favor of ratifying the new Constitution, and the Anti-federalist party (otherwise known as the Republicans, Jacobins, and, later, Republican-Democrats), who were against ratification (Mott 1962, 113-119), caused papers to persevere in partisanship (Stephens 1988, 198). And, as America rumbled toward the new century, journalistic partisanship only worsened. The Federalists wanted a strong central government, the Republican-Democrats favored states' rights. The battle, fought daily in American papers, became so scurrilous and widespread that Frank Luther Mott called the period between 1801 and 1833 "The Dark Ages of Partisan Journalism. (Mott 1962, 167)"

But the silver thread of objectivity wound through even this darkness. The famous National Intelligencer, established in 1800, was politically non-combative enough to earn the nickname "Mr. Silky Milky Smith's National Smoothing Plane. (Mott 1962, 177-178)" The Niles' Weekly Register, established 1811, achieved a well-deserved reputation for objectivity (Mott 1962, 188). And, in 1828, former president James Madison suggested the printing of both partisan viewpoints in one paper, though he believed it to be as yet "ideal" and "impracticable. (Mott 1962, 17)"

### Nonpartisanship

In 1833, The Sun literally rose. Benjamin Day established in New York The Sun, the first of the "penny papers" (Lee 1917, 187). (They were called penny papers because they were hawked in the streets for only a penny.) Day set out to make money by targeting the urban mass of relatively uneducated common folk drawn to the city by the industrial revolution, and his success inspired imitators.

The penny papers pledged *Nonpartisanship*--freedom from economic and political control by a formal authority such as a church, a government, a political party, or business interests.

*Nonpartisanship* was essentially a reemergence of colonial-era objectivity, inspired by the philosophy that had energized the Founding Fathers and spawned the Revolutionary War. This philosophy, called "egalitarianism," was the political expression of two earlier epistemological philosophies—rationalism and empiricism—that had supplanted authoritarianism during the 17th century Enlightenment.

Authoritarianism is blind submission to authority. Epistemological authoritarianism is dependence on an established authority, such as the Bible, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, or Thomas Aquinas, for knowledge about the world. The champion of rationalism, French philosopher Rene Descartes, challenged authoritarianism by asserting that, since all knowledge was connected, intelligent, educated men could start with old knowledge, and reason their way to new knowledge (Titus, Smith and Nolan 1986, 525; Jones 1952, 664). To prove this, he used logic to build an entire cosmology on one premise--his famous "cogito ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am"). Since it took truth out of the control of elite authorities, and put it into the hands of all educated men, Descartes's rationalism was the beginning of the end of the authoritarian monopoly on truth held by the Church for over 1000 years.

Not long after Descartes's rationalism established a secure presence on the European continent, British philosopher John Locke enhanced it with the epistemological philosophy of empiricism. Locke agreed with Descartes that men were reason-able, that they could understand and manipulate knowledge with their minds. But he maintained that the knowledge manipulated had first to be acquired empirically--from perceptions, and from thinking about and responding to perceptions. If Locke was right, truth was available not only to an educated elite who could

uncover it with skillful reasoning, but to anyone who could see, hear, smell, taste or feel. Truth, in other words, was community property, and God did not play favorites.

Enter egalitarianism. Egalitarianism is the "rejection of a priori rank, based on a belief that everyone is created equal in terms of their ability to recognize truth." Rationalism and empiricism implied that socio/economic rank wasn't the result of an inherent, God-given superiority, but an accident of birth. Men were born with different abilities, into different economic and social situations, but, because God's truth was available to all men, no man had an a priori right to tell others what to do, or to decide what was "right" or "wrong," "correct" or "incorrect," "true" or "false" regarding other men (Locke 1980, 8). Locke is called the "father" of American democracy, because the egalitarianism his philosophy inspired, studied by Founding Fathers like Jefferson and Franklin, and translated into the cultural vernacular by firebrands like Samuel Adams, fueled the Revolutionary War (Altschull 1990, 49, 57) and founded our unique American culture.

Of course, old habits die hard. It took time for egalitarianism to prevail in the new republic of America. But prevail it did. The 1830s and 1840s are considered by many scholars to have been the apex of an American egalitarian revolution.

America did have to suffer a democratic revolution... It did so beginning in the years after 1815 and reaching a height in the 1830s and 1840s. In those decades the country was transformed from a liberal mercantilist republic still cradled in aristocratic values, family, and deference, to an egalitarian market democracy where money had new power, the individual new standing, and the pursuit of self-interest new honor. (Schudson 1976, 63)

The journalistic manifestation of this egalitarian revolution was penny-paper *Nonpartisanship*. One way the egalitarian revolution generated penny-paper *Nonpartisanship* was through financial self-interest (Capitalism). As historian David M. Potter explains, egalitarianism leads to equality of opportunity, equality of opportunity leads to individualism, and individualism challenges each individual to pit his skills and talents against others', and to earn the individual rewards this

competition might bring (Rapson 1967, 71-72). In his The Story of the Sun, Frank M. O'Brien, for example, makes no bones about the fact that Benjamin Day, was at least partially motivated by financial self-interest to found The Sun (1918, 22).

Charlotte D. Jones argues in her dissertation "The Penny Press and the Origins of Journalistic Objectivity: The Problem of Authority in Liberal America," that egalitarianism worked in yet another way to bring about *Nonpartisanship*. By the end of the journalistic "Dark Ages," Jones maintains, "the gravest threat to the (American) republic was its own inability to forge a national (consensus) which could set an agenda for the nation. (1985, 18)" According to Jones, the emerging penny press, inspired by the egalitarian press theory of Thomas Jefferson, identified the public as the locus of authority in American life, and appointed itself "the only legitimate institutional forum for the production and dissemination of public opinion--the moral glue of the culture. (13)"

A good description of penny-paper *Nonpartisanship* was presented in the mission statement of the New York Herald, founded in 1835 by James Gordon Bennett:

Our only guide shall be good, sound, practical common sense, applicable to the business and bosoms of men engaged in everyday life. We shall support no party, be the organ of no faction or coterie, and care nothing for any election or any candidate from President down to a constable.

We shall endeavor to record facts on every public and proper subject, stripped of verbiage and coloring, with comments when suitable, just, independent, fearless, and good tempered . . . (Jones 1985, 160)

It is important to note that penny-paper *Nonpartisanship* was not what we think of today as "objectivity." *Nonpartisan* editors' self-described concern for "common sense," "public morality," "truth" and "justice" left plenty of room for commentary, the use of color words and much more (Roshco 1975, 30; Cannon 1977, 41; Lee 1917, 185, 191-192, 210). Egalitarianism may have celebrated, in a political way, the common, uneducated laborer, but epistemology changes more slowly than politics and the penny-paper editors were rationalistic. They depended on interior

“reason,” “logic,” and “common sense” for truth—their own more than anyone else’s—and they published news the way they saw it. They sometimes got cocky and abusive. *Nonpartisanship* was only a first step in the right direction, but it was a distinctive first step. Accordingly, it is considered here as the first, most primitive conception of journalistic objectivity.

Penny-paper *Nonpartisanship* put down strong roots in American culture during the 1830s and 1840s, but it remained the exception rather than the rule for 30 years (Mott 1962, 215-216). This changed during and after the Civil War, when the individual reporter came into his own.

First, during that war individual reporters were the only source of dependable news. Since they often wrote literally “under the gun,” they rarely had time to inject partisan opinion. After the war, local news became more important, newspapers prospered and grew, reporting staffs got bigger, reporters' salaries increased. The shift in emphasis from editorial comment and preoccupation with government affairs to more intimate human interests, introduced by the penny papers, took the news out of the hands of politicians and placed it into the hands of reporters (Mott 1962, 412). All of this increased reporters' self-respect, social status and numbers, and partisan editors found it increasingly more difficult to enforce a standard political line.

Second, the war also brought about, directly or indirectly, the inverted pyramid reporting form, which communicated facts (as opposed to opinion) better than the colonial-era essay or the “Dark Ages” narrative form. (Stephens 1988, 253-256)

Third, readers dealing with post-war devastation and an increasingly complex social order precipitated by the industrial revolution, grew tired of sensationalism and bias and demanded more useful, impartial information (Day 1998, 7).

Fourth, growing journalistic independence weakened party solidarity--since the partisan newspaper had been one of the primary ways of keeping party members convinced and faithful--and weakening party solidarity, in turn boosted journalistic independence (Mott 1962, 412).

Finally, as the telegraph system was extended at home and overseas (Mott 1962, 387; Stephens 1988, 227-229), more real news became available, lessening the need for opinion.

As a result of all of the above, post-war journalistic *Nonpartisanship* gained ground significantly (Mott 1962, 411-412).

### Neutrality

As *Nonpartisanship* gained ground it also evolved. As readers became better-educated and better able to reason for themselves, they began to distinguish between news and commentary. The concept of *Nonpartisanship*—journalistic rationalization that does allow journalist judgment--evolved into *Neutrality*--journalistic rationalization that does not allow journalist judgment. This evolution is most easily detected by comparing and contrasting the 23 distinct definitions, or “variations” of journalistic objectivity, derived from the 262 definitions gathered in the survey described in the earlier chapter on Methodology. These 23 variations, gleaned from journalism literature spanning a century, are vestiges of the evolution of the concept of journalistic objectivity from its earliest forms to its most current.

The variations that speak to interior processes, such as logic or emotions, or to anything that “rationality” plays a part in, are rationalistic. They include *honesty*, *impartiality*, *conjecture avoidance*, *reader draws own conclusions*, *use of neutral language*, *Which side?* and *universal usefulness*. The first three, *honesty*, *impartiality*, and *conjecture avoidance*, all allow judgment on the part of the journalist. *Honesty* requires conclusions to be honest about, and conclusions require judgment. (A journalist who exactly balances the persuasive weight of two conflicting accounts when one is obviously wrong is not being “honest.”) *Impartiality* is not permanent non-judgment, but listening with an open mind

in order to judge well. *Conjecture avoidance* is not avoidance of judgment, but avoidance of rash, illogical judgment. But the other four, *reader draws own conclusions*, *use of neutral language*, *Which side?* and *universal usefulness*, do not allow journalist judgment. *Reader draws own conclusions* asserts that the reader should be allowed to make his own judgments about the people and events in a news story. *Use of neutral language* prohibits the use of words that connote or denote journalist judgment. *Which side?* demands that the news story be so nonjudgmental, that readers cannot tell which side of a controversy the reporter is on. And *universal usefulness* reminds the journalist that the story should be so lacking in judgment that papers of all political persuasions can use it without fear of offending their readers. Since the prohibition of journalist judgment is an undeniable epistemological advancement, *Nonpartisanship* must have evolved. And what it evolved into is called here *Neutrality*.

This evolution, easy to see in the vestigial terminology, is harder to see in the primary texts, since there is no clear-cut line of demarcation. However, some sense of it might be gathered from the following accounts of shipwrecks, published in the New York Times between 1856 and 1874:

ALMOST A TRAGEDY—Collision of a Steamer and a Schooner—Two Hundred Excursionists Terribly Frightened and Very Nearly Drowned—an Uncomfortable Night at Sea—Varied (word is unclear) Incidents.

An event occurred on Sunday afternoon which might have resulted in the loss of nearly two hundred lives, but which, fortunately, was productive of nothing worse than severe discomfort to the same number of persons, and which, instead of being a tragedy, has resulted in a comedy of a very laughable description.

. . . the old steamer *Robert L. Stephens* . . . left the foot of Ames street, North River, at 9 o'clock on Sabbath morning, with nearly 200 persons on board. They were very merry. They inhaled the delicious sea breeze, and poisoned it with the smoke of bad cigars. They boasted of their fishing tackle. They drank themselves, and bestowed (word is unclear) and (word is unclear) on their ladies. They rejoiced greatly, and were bent on having the best of all good times.

Under the sun or moon little comes to pass as we anticipate it. Saturday was hot; Sunday was cold. That was the first blow to thorough enjoyment, the wind being northwest and strong . . . about 2 o'clock P. M., a schooner was seen rushing upon them, as if for the express purpose of destruction . . . she struck the steamer direct in the wheel-house, carrying



away the greater part of the paddle and damaging the machinery, staving also a large hole in the steamer's side, a little above water mark. The consternation among the excursionists was instantly very great. They seized stools, chairs and everything that could float. Some stripped themselves of most of their clothing, and awaited the sinking of the steamer with a resolution to struggle desperately for their lives. Of life preservers there were very few and those who attained them were tenacious in their grasp. The ladies fluttered and cried, but behaved, on the whole, better than the men... (New York Daily Times, May 27, 1856, page I, column I)

The reporter goes on to relate that a small oyster boat came out and picked up 60 excursionists and deposited them "drenched to the skin with spray and almost perished with cold" on land. The schooner that had collided with the steamer picked up "about" 130 more and made for shore at 5 pm. But a strong seaward wind prevented the overloaded boat from reaching land until 9 the next morning. During those 16 hours without food, water, or protection from the elements, the excursionists had to first shove off into the sea a shipment of lime that, as it combined with sea spray, emitted noxious fumes, and then bail furiously just to keep the boat afloat. The reporter ends his account of the incident with the following sentence: "Terminating as happily as it did, the excursionists can afford to join in and laugh against themselves, and forget the hardships of the first Sunday fishing excursion of the season."

The reporter was not on the steamer or in the schooner and had probably never met any of the excursionists he writes about, yet he blithely passes judgment on, for example, the male excursionists' taste in cigars and their bravery (or lack thereof) under duress. He makes sweeping, unnecessary statements like "Under the sun or moon little comes to pass as we anticipate it," assumes that none of the unfortunates was seriously hurt, and advises them to join everybody else in a good laugh at themselves. These comments, unreasonable and uncalled-for in our estimation, made perfect sense to the poorly educated factory workers and service providers that comprised the penny-paper readership before the Civil War. They likely shared with the reporter the assumption that anyone with that kind of time and money wouldn't possess the common

sense that poverty and hardship instilled, and thus deserved to be laughed at. In the absence of an alternative rationalistic viewpoint (or of any empirical evidence to the contrary), the reporter's judgments just "made sense."

Contrast this shipwreck story from April 14, 1864 (New York Times, page I, column 4):

WRECK OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK—*From the Cork Examiner, March 29*

The first serious accident which has befallen the American steamers running to and from this port occurred this morning. The *City of New-York*, after a splendid passage from New-York, struck upon Daunt's rock as she was entering the harbor, and great fears are entertained that she will become a total wreck. Fortunately the accident has not been attended by loss of life. The ship ran right on the center of the ridge of rocks, and remained firmly seated on it, so that no immediate danger to the passengers rose. Had the ship struck on one of the ledges of the rock, there is every reason to believe that the mishap would have been fraught with the most lamentable consequences . . . The concussion shook all the passengers who had retired to sleep. It is described as resembling a series of shocks, and the ship seemed literally to drive over ledge after ledge as, impelled at almost full speed, she dashed upon the rock. The water rushed into her compartments in immense volumes, and in a very short time it had risen to the level of the sea. A scene of the greatest confusion ensued. The passengers, some half dressed, others as they had risen from sleep, rushed about, not knowing the extent of their danger, but thinking from the terrible shock that the ship received that she would do (sic) down on the instant . . .

This story is still rationalistic: The writer felt no compunction, for example, to describe the rock, or the ship, or the location of the sleeping passengers, in empirical detail. We must simply take for granted that "Had the ship struck on one of the ledges of the rock, there is every reason to believe that the mishap would have been fraught with the most lamentable consequences." But the writer also felt no compunction to pass judgment. He just told the story--rationalistically, but *Neutrally*.

Of course, the story above was originally published in an English newspaper, and it appeared in the Times during the Civil War, when space for anything other than "straight" news was at a premium. So here are two accounts from 1874, ten years after the close of the war:

LOSS OF THE EUROPE—RESCUE OF THE CREW AND PASSENGERS—A SALVAGE CREW PUT ON FROM THE GREECE AND RESCUED BY THE EGYPT—THE EUROPE ABANDONED, WITH EIGHTEEN FEET OF WATER IN

THE ENGINE-ROOM. QUEENSTOWN, April 7—Evening.—The National Line steamer Egypt, which sailed from New-York March 28, arrived at this port this evening. The Egypt brings the First Officer of the steamer Greece, of the same line, and a salvage crew, rescued from the French Transatlantic Company's steamer Europe, which they endeavored to save, but were compelled to abandon at sea in a sinking condition, after all the passengers and crew on board had been rescued by the Greece.

The First Officer of the Greece reports: "Left Liverpool March 25 and Queenstown 26<sup>th</sup>, for New-York. On the 2d (sic) of April we encountered the French steamer Europe, from Havre, for New-York, in a sinking condition, and took off her passengers and crew, 400 in number. With twenty men, I remained on board the Europe, in hope of saving her, while the Greece proceeded on her voyage to New-York with the people rescued from the French steamer. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of April we signaled the steamer Egypt, and asked to be taken in tow. The latter consented, and hawsers were made fast, but, owing to a heavy sea, the lines parted: and, as the water was constantly gaining on us, we concluded to abandon the Europe. We signaled the Egypt to take us off, and all were safely transferred to her and brought to this port. When we left the Europe there was eighteen feet of water in her engine-room. (New York Times, April 8, 1874, page 1, column 5)

Again, this is a rationalistic account. Many empirical details are missing. We aren't even told why the Europe was in trouble in the first place. But, even though it's rationalistic, it isn't judgmental. And neither is this last example, a column about a steamer stranded at sea for 13 days, featuring the personal recollections of one of the passengers:

#### THE COLIMA'S VOYAGE—SUFFERINGS AND PRIVATIONS OF THE PASSENGERS.

A letter received from Dr. Eliphaht Clark, of Portland Me., who was a passenger on board the Pacific mail steamer Colima, which broke three blades of her propeller of (sic) Cerros Island on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, gives a (word is unclear) account of the disaster and the consequent privations . . . It states that boats were sent to San Diego for relief on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Meanwhile the provisions nearly gave out, there being nothing left but spoiled ship biscuit, and the passengers and crew subsisted on an inferior kind of fish which they caught from the sea, near rocks lying halfway to the shore. This supply even was scanty and the privation was great. The Doctor says, "Fancy, if you can, 395 persons, near a desolate island 200 miles from a settlement on half rations, many invalids in the number, and, then to add to our distress, to be commanded by a man who had failed to inspire confidence or affection, and you can only make an approximation of our fears." On the 28<sup>th</sup>, about 11 o'clock in the morning a steamer was sighted by one of the passengers. . . (New York Times, April 12, 1874, page 1, column 7)

The Colima, in tow, eventually arrived at San Francisco on March 30<sup>th</sup>.

The most striking thing about this account is that, even though the passenger, Doctor Clark, criticizes the captain of the steamer twice (the second critical quote is not included in the

excerpt), the Times itself does not. Imagine what the author of the first shipwreck story, examined above, would have done with the opportunity. This is still a rationalistic account— How many and what kind of “invalids” were on board? How many, if any, injuries resulted from the privation? Why, exactly, was the captain disliked? What happened to him afterward? Much of the empirical information that we would expect in a news story is missing. But, though rationalistic, this story was not judgmental. It was *Neutral*.

Such primary-source evidence for the evolvment of *Nonpartisanship* into *Neutrality*, as presented above, is obviously open to interpretation. But a lack of *Neutrality* in news stories of that period wouldn't necessarily contravene a possible change in the conceptual ideal. *Detachment* is the traditional ideal today, but it can still be argued that most journalists have never really achieved it. Amazingly, a primitive *Nonpartisanship* can be detected as late as 1959, directly contradicting, but existing side by side, with *Detachment* (Warren 1959, 79-80). On the other hand, any increase in *Neutrality* in news stories of that period, would be evidence of a change in the underlying notion of what “good” journalism was.

Moreover, *Neutrality* is undeniably a part of the journalistic conception of objectivity now, so it developed at some historical point. And we know that, due in part to the influence of the penny papers (O'Brien 1918, 168), the original, poorly educated, urban readers of the penny-papers, themselves evolved into an educated middle class that could think for itself and that considered itself “neutral” (Schudson 1976, 25-26). It seems unlikely that such readers would continue to appreciate, the kind of cocky narrow-mindedness represented in the first shipwreck story. Such a neutral middle class that made its own decisions would likely begin instead, to recognize and appreciate neutral journalism.

*Nonpartisanship* was the first evolutionary conception of journalistic objectivity and *Neutrality* was the second. But neither disappeared. On the contrary, they still form a part of American

journalistic culture. *Neutrality*, especially, combining with each of its successors—*Focus-On-Facts*, and *Detachment*—took on several additional layers of meaning. It is to the empirical evolutionary forms of objectivity, *Focus-On-Facts* and *Detachment*, that this thesis now turns.

### Focus-On-Facts

Egalitarianism wasn't the only offspring of rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism and empiricism generated science as well. As time passed, both egalitarianism and science became less rationalistic and more empirical.

The increasing empirical emphasis can be detected, for example, in a changing metaphor for the universe. The laws of Isaac Newton, pre-eminent Enlightenment scientist (Alioto 1987, 259-260; Burt 1954, 207), were mathematical and, therefore, rationalistic. The rationalistic children of the Enlightenment viewed the world as the neat, orderly, mathematical creation of a divine clockmaker (Alioto, 1987, 262; Brinton 1963, 130). To the more empirical grandchildren of the Enlightenment, the universe was not a user-friendly clock, but an impersonal and eternal machine, Man was a machine (Brinton 1963, 111) and God was completely unnecessary (Brinton 1963, 119). The hand of a God, easy to see in an abstract, rationalistic cosmology, seemed out of place in a concrete, cause-and-effect, empirical cosmology.

It is true that, between 1800 and 1840, a more romantic view temporarily ascended: Nature was a projection of a universal spirit (Copleston 1967, 18-19), and Reason was communication from this spirit (Brinton 1963, 150). But, although this romantic view temporarily eclipsed the empirical, naturalistic view, it didn't displace it (Brinton 1963, 151). For one thing, the home of the romantic view--philosophy--became, during this period, a "very specialized and academic subject, cultivated almost wholly by professors" (Brinton 1963, 152), while science--the home of the harder, naturalistic view--became popular and accessible.

Science became more popular and accessible because the public image of science changed. Middle class reformers favoring codification of the law also codified science. As a result, by 1830, the common-use meaning of "science" changed from "the personal acquirement of learnedness," a rationalistic interpretation, to "a body of knowledge necessarily clear, written and public. (Schudson 1978, 74)" Science came to be equated with the empirical collection of "facts," and, as such, was open to anyone with a penchant for collecting and classifying (Schudson 1978, 75).

The empirical, "scientific" collection and classification of perceptions became even more important after the 1859 publication of Charles Darwin's The Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life (Alioto 1987, 286), because Darwin's evolutionary theory brought randomness and chaos to a universe previously thought to be divinely ordered.

In addition, technology challenged the validity of rationalism's connotation that truth was innate. Daguerreotypy, for example, and later, photography, "insisted and seemed to confirm that the only form of true knowledge was non-symbolic 'reflection' of an objective world. (Schiller 1981, 90, 93)" No painting, no matter how realistic, could capture "objective reality" like a photograph.

Thus, during the late 1800s, journalists were carried along in the cultural tide away from rationalism and toward a positive scientific empiricism. Consensually validated, empirical "facts" became the key to reality and truth in the journalistic mind, and *Focus-On-Facts* replaced *Nonpartisanship/Neutrality* as the standard of American objective journalism.

Under *Focus-On-Facts*, a newspaper served the public better by actively observing, compiling and presenting the "facts" of a controversy than by presenting the various arguments for and

against a position. If the behavior was much the same at first, the journalistic motivation was different. This difference between rationalistic *Nonpartisanship/Neutrality* and empirical *Focus-On-Facts* is apparent from even a brief comparison of news from the late 1800s and the early 1900s.

The April 5, 1878 evening edition of the St. Louis Evening Post headlined a story about a train wreck in this way:

TERRIBLE COLLISION--A Train of Forty Oil Cars Wrecked at Slatington, Pa.--Two Men Killed and Several Injured by an Exploding Tank--The Wreck Wrapt in Flames and the Town Nearly Destroyed--Shattered Engines--Pieces of the Wreck Hurl'd Hundreds of Yards--Narrow Escapes.

How can a town be "nearly destroyed?" It is either destroyed or it is not destroyed. And what are the criteria for "destruction," as opposed to "serious damage," for example? The paper states:

...The oil tanks caught fire and illuminated the neighborhood for miles around, and had it not been for the presence of mind of Edwin Conner, who suggested that the cars of the rear portion of the train be uncoupled and by main force pushed back, the whole town would have been destroyed. Twenty cars were pushed back . . . (p. I, col. 4)

This reporter was thinking rationalistically. It was obvious to anyone with "common sense" that if twenty more cars had blown up in the middle of town, that town would have been "destroyed."

By contrast, this empirical, *Focus-On-Facts* train wreck story from the April 5, 1913 edition of the St. Louis Post Dispatch (same paper, later title) makes no such rationalistic projections. The headline reads: "60-MILE-AN-HOUR TRAIN WRECKED, 2 DEAD AND 9 HURT.

Locomotive runs Into an Open Switch, Tears Away From Cars, Demolishes Ohio Depot." The story reads:

NORTH BALTIMORE, O., April 5

Two men were killed, four scalded, two of them severely, and five others injured when an eastbound passenger train on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad ran through an open switch and the engine, torn loose from the remainder of the train, crashed through the depot at Hoytville, four miles west of here, at 11:30 o'clock last night. The dead are . . . (p. I, col. 3)

Here's another example: The headline of one column of the first page of the May 7, 1878 edition of the St. Louis Evening Post reads:

RAPINE AND RIOT--A Colored Man Killed in a Political Row--Strange and Singular Case of Poisoning by a Lunatic--Devilish Deeds, Perpetrated by Human Fiends.

By contrast, the headline of a column on page one of the February 10, 1907 edition of the St. Louis Post Dispatch reads:

PHYSICIAN AND ADMIRER FOUND DEAD IN OFFICE--Kansas City Girl and Prominent Doctor Shot in Locked Room--PISTOL NEAR HER HAND--Police Believe She Killed Man She Loved, Then Ended Her Life--SAID HE WRONGED HER--Dr. Merwin Told Friends Her Persistent Attentions Annoyed Him.

The first headline gives several value judgments--"strange and singular," "lunatic," "devilish," "human fiends."--and no empirical evidence for them. But the author probably did not feel the need to support his judgments empirically. We can easily imagine his rationalizations: "Well, any decent human being would agree with what I wrote."

The second headline implies that the dead girl is guilty of the homicide/suicide, but is careful to supply the empirical evidence for this implication. A century of hindsight suggests that the implication was premature--that the physician might have shot the girl and himself and the gun might have just fallen close to her hand, etcetera, but the pre-war empiricism of *Focus-On-Facts* was more naive than post World War I empiricism. *Focus-On-Facts* journalists were still blind to the distorting power of presuppositions, stereotypes, etcetera. To *Focus-On-Facts* journalists, a prominent, mature, male physician would obviously be less likely to take life than a young, immature, emotional "girl" (she was 23).

In his 1976 dissertation and 1978 book, sociologist Michael Schudson termed this early *Focus-On-Facts* empiricism "naive empiricism," and described it this way: "In this version of objectivity, a person's statements about the world can be tested by others' independent observations of a common, external world which, in relatively uncomplicated fashion, is available



for all of us to know through our senses. (1976, 4)” “Naive empiricists” were, according to Schudson: “insensitive to the ways in which the ‘common world’ is one we have constructed by the active play of our minds and our acceptance of a conventional-not necessarily ‘true’-way of seeing it and way of talking about it. (1976, 4)”

In other words, naive empiricism, through the use of consensually validated perceptions, distinguished "facts" from "opinions," but failed to recognize the extent to which subconscious values, stereotypes, etcetera, colored the collective transformation of exterior reality into "facts" in the first place.

This epistemological naiveté of *Focus-On-Facts* eventually doomed it. World War I brought an end to the age of innocence that *Focus-On-Facts* flourished in, and *Focus-On-Facts* journalists, participating in the war, delivered one of the crippling blows themselves.

To prewar *Focus-On-Facts* journalists, morality was just as self-evident as the reality it applied to:

(Turn of the century journalists) understood facts to provide moral direction of themselves and prided themselves that their own moral precepts grew naturally out of their association with the real world. They did not feel the moral declarations of the editorial writers to be subjective but to be dreamy; their own, of course, they took to be as irrefutable as the facts they uncovered. (Schudson 1978, 185)

Perhaps this is why so many American journalists appeared to have no problem disseminating spurious propaganda for the Allies during World War I (Lippmann 1920, 7-10; Luskin 1972, 42; Knightley 1975, 122-123). The "facts" about the war appeared to provide a moral mandate for America to win in any way possible. Why shouldn't journalists have used their talents to convince fence-sitters and boost morale?

Unfortunately this circle-the-wagons behavior backfired. According to Schudson, journalists' own war-time success at spreading propaganda, along with the post-war successes of the new

public relations industry and the new depth psychology, demonstrated that the perception of "reality," and assessment of "truth" were extremely problematic (Schudson 1976, 256-257).

To make matters worse, beneath the surface of everyday reality lurked the alien reality of relativity that Albert Einstein first exposed in 1905 (Herbert 1987, 7) when he published his special theory of relativity. The challenge that relativity presented to traditional science eventually affected Americans' view of the world profoundly. In fact, relativity is blamed by many for the moral relativism (including the situational ethics of some practicing journalists) that stirs up American culture today.

Thus, the political crises of World War I gave way to an epistemological crisis that deeply shook the confidence of American journalists. What was truth? How could it be found? Who could be trusted to disseminate it? Several solutions were proposed, but one suggested by editor and columnist Walter Lippmann eventually prevailed.

Lippmann's early view of the crisis, according to his 1920 book Liberty and the News, was that American journalists were allowing their emotions, especially patriotism, to override their reason (7-10). This, combined with the complicated nature of news, resulted in journalistic "sophistry and propaganda" (10).

Lippmann's early solution was a combination of professional *Detachment* and a set of specific measures, including the documentation of each article, attribution, a "high standard of evidence" and a "power to define words" (69-87).

By 1922, Lippmann had substantially developed his earlier ideas. The problem with delivering the information needed to maintain democracy, according to Lippmann's masterpiece Public Opinion, was that almost everybody--journalists and readers alike--perceived and conceived in terms of limited, inaccurate stereotypes, and there was little reason to hope that this would change:

The mass of absolutely illiterate, of feeble-minded, grossly neurotic, undernourished and frustrated individuals, is . . . much more considerable . . . than we generally suppose . . . The stream of public opinion is stopped by them in little eddies of misunderstanding, where it is discolored with prejudice and far fetched analogy. (Lippmann 1966, 48)

In Public Opinion, Lippmann looked to science for a solution. Science had gained prestige very quickly, and, like most of his contemporaries, Lippmann was enamored with it. But, by the time Lippmann stepped into the epistemological breach, the public image of science had changed again. It had become equated with a professional methodology (Shilen 1955, 65).

Conscientious scientists believed that, if they operated according to a standardized method, they could 1) neutralize to a large extent the distortions caused by their own individual limitations and expectations and 2) make their results easier for fellow scientists to validate or invalidate. The results of such research could, therefore, be considered “objective.”

The fact that the scientific method made peer review easier supported the prewar, *Focus-On-Facts* premise of positive scientific empiricism—“the belief that consensual validation of empirical perceptions yields the most reliable knowledge of reality.” But, given the power that propaganda and public relations appeared to have to dictate what was “true” and what wasn’t, and the apparent naiveté of the American public, Lippmann no longer trusted consensual validation as an epistemological strategy. So he focused instead on the alleged power of the scientific method to prevent personal distortion of perceptions. He was convinced that an organization of professional truth-finders--social "scientists"--could, by virtue of their superior intellects (superior to the average American, that is, and that included the average journalist), Stoic detachment and scientific methodology, seek out and disseminate the truth, without reconstructing it to suit their own purposes. In Public Opinion, Lippmann asserted that public opinion should be organized not by the press, but for the press—by “an independent, expert

organization” that would make “the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions. (1966, 19)”

Handicapped by an incomplete understanding of science, panicked by the post-war epistemological crisis, and inspired by a prolific series of books, essays and articles produced by Lippmann, "the most powerful journalist the United States has ever produced (Altschull 1990, 307)", American journalists of the 1920s and 1930s rejected Lippmann's call for an information elite, but took to heart his ideas about detachment and avoidance of distortion through "scientific" method. They threw out the *Focus-On-Facts* premise of positive scientific empiricism, with its strategy of consensual validation, and replaced it with the premise of negative scientific empiricism, with its strategy of avoidance of personal distortion. This single-minded concern with the avoidance of personal distortion also left little room for egalitarianism--the belief that the truth about reality was an open book to anyone with working sense organs and a brain. Thus the two original premises of journalistic objectivity, positive scientific empiricism and egalitarianism, were set aside, journalistic objectivity came to rest precariously on the one premise of negative scientific empiricism, and *Focus-On-Facts* evolved into *Detachment*.

### Detachment

Journalists began tying the Gordian Knot of confusion and disagreement only during this last evolutionary stage of journalistic objectivity...but not for 30 years. For the first 30 years, one particular notion of journalistic objectivity, inspired by Lippmann, and advocated by his admirers (Bent 1927, 329), steadily gained favor. Journalistic objectivity was scientific *Detachment* on the part of journalists, accomplished through the unvarying use of the scientific/journalistic method, technique or slogan, that this study calls *bald-and-exact-fact*. Through *bald-and-exact-fact*--the practice of recording only what was personally perceived, and omitting all background, context, and interpretation--American journalists completely avoided personal distortion and produced

completely “objective” news...or so it was thought. In the eyes of its practitioners, *bald-and-exact-fact* set American journalism above, and apart from, the journalism of other countries. It took on the awesome aspect of sacred doctrine. Then, in 1950, Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy used *bald-and-exact-fact* to manipulate journalists and negate American political freedoms. Journalists responded by rejecting the concept of objectivity, reconstructing it, concocting recipes for it or substituting other slogans, and the Gordian Knot began to take shape.

*Bald-and-exact-fact's* major shortcomings reflected two implications of Lippmann's: that journalistic objectivity meant a professional, "scientific" lack of interest, and that it could, and should, be operationalized as method.

In Public Opinion, Lippmann wrote: "the power of the expert depends upon separating himself from those who make the decisions, upon not caring, in his expert self, what decision is made. (1966, 241)" Robert F. Davidson has identified Lippmann as a modern stoic (Davidson 1974, 122-128), and two chief doctrines of Stoicism are:

the pursuit of happiness within oneself by the cultivation of apathy or independence of the external world; (and) living "according to nature," which means both to follow reason (as the highest principle in human nature) and to obey the all-pervading law of the "Logos" or World-Reason (Mead 1951, 392).

It is clear from the second doctrine (if not from the first) that the "disinterest" that Lippmann prescribed for professional communicators was emotional, not intellectual, disinterest. He never wanted journalists to turn off their brains, just the emotions that fueled the stereotypes that impaired their perceptions. Unfortunately this distinction was lost or ignored, and a professional disinterest in the events and people reported on, became the hallmark of objective journalism. So important did this injunction of disinterest become that it often overruled common sense.

But journalistic disinterest was not an easy thing to accomplish, or even contemplate, and the notion probably would not have exerted the influence it did without Lippmann's assertion that it was linked with "scientific" method. In Public Opinion he wrote: "The physical scientists achieved their freedom from clericalism by working out a method that produced conclusions of a sort that could not be suppressed or ignored . . . The social scientist will acquire his dignity and his strength when he has worked out his method. (1966, 235)."

The problem with trying to achieve journalistic objectivity through the scientific method was that science and journalism dealt with different arenas of reality. Science dealt with predictable and reproducible physical processes and entities, moved by casual agents, that could be isolated, controlled and exactly measured (before quantum mechanics at least). Under such circumstances, the conscientious application of a universal method can, to a large extent, compensate for the personal biases of the experimenter or observer. But journalism dealt largely with complex human beings, moved by abstract ideas and goals, who could not ethically (or logistically for that matter) be isolated, controlled or exactly measured.

Probably because he understood these differences (1966, 235), Lippmann did not recommend a direct transfer of scientific method to journalism, but, rather, a development of journalistic method inspired by the scientific model. The average journalist of that time, however, apparently had no reason to make an effort to distinguish between science and journalism. The identification of journalistic function with scientific function that had brought about *Focus-On-Facts* was still intact--journalists and scientists gathered facts. Why should journalists have suspected that direct transfer of scientific disinterest and scientific method to journalism would be problematic?

Why indeed, when it appears that most non-scientists of that time (including, presumably, average journalists) misunderstood "scientific method" to begin with? "There is no universal

agreement, even among scientists, about what is meant by scientific method (Titus, Smith, and Nolan 1986, 268). "Science uses formal logic, mathematics, statistics, sampling (Titus, Smith, and Nolan 1986, 243, 268), as well as imagination and creativity in its "method" (Bronowski 1965, 11-12).

Of course, many, perhaps most, people think of the technical method they learned in high school as the one and only scientific method (Titus, Smith, and Nolan 1986, 243). But this method, as it is typically presented, is itself ambiguous. Scientist and former president of Harvard, James B. Conant, wrote in 1952 that it served "only to confuse a layman. (1953, 36-37)" If laymen were confused as late as 1952 about scientific method, they were almost certainly confused in 1922.

This muddled understanding of scientific method resulted in a widely-held image of scientists spontaneously generating new knowledge simply by exposing themselves to facts. As late as 1956, J. Bronowski attacked this image of spontaneous generation of knowledge in his book Science and Human Values:

What is the insight with which the scientist tries to see into nature? . . . To the literary man the question may seem merely silly. He has been taught that science is a large collection of facts; and if this is true, then the only seeing which scientists need do is, he supposes, seeing the facts. He pictures them, the colorless professionals of science, going off to work in the morning into the universe in a neutral, unexposed state. They then expose themselves like a photographic plate. And then in the darkroom or laboratory they develop the image, so that suddenly and startlingly it appears, printed in capital letters, as a new formula for atomic energy. (1965, 10)

To post-war journalists, therefore, the solution to the epistemological crisis seemed simple and obvious, once Lippmann suggested it—continue to gather facts, but do it in a more "scientific" way. And, to the average journalist, this meant passive, disinterested exposure to facts according to a common method. As it happened the universal technique of *Get Both(All)-Sides* was a great place to start:

This striving for objectivity was in its beginning a good thing; but it went a little too far. From holding that newspapers ought to present both sides it went on to the position that it was all right to present only one side if nobody happened to be talking on the other; and it was not the business of the newspaper to tell the reader if that one argument happened to be phony. (Charnley and Charnley 1979, 39)

And journalists were pleased with the result: "(The technique) was thought to be the objectivity of the scientist in his laboratory, meticulously recording what his senses perceived, impersonal, unprejudiced, and, above all, humble before the demonstrable fact. (McDonald 1971, 37)"

Reporters and editors of the 1920s and 1930s, like journalists of today, were confronted by deadlines, limited resources, the fear of lawsuits, the desire to please their bosses and the pressures of professional standards. Those professional standards became more and more important as critics of the press, such as Upton Sinclair (The Brass Check: A Study of American Journalism 1920), Silas Bent (Ballyhoo: The Voice of the Press 1927), and George Seldes (Lords of the Press 1938) examined them under a very hot national spotlight. During the 1920s and 1930s, Sinclair et al exposed financial corruption and political collusion in the press, and, perhaps most damning, a greedy, self-serving Big Business prejudice against American laborers crusading for decent working conditions and fair wages. President Franklin Roosevelt, at one point, explored the possibility of imposing a federal newspaper code under the National Industrial Recovery Act, which gave him the right to license certain industries (Walker 1934, 224-229). In a radio address in March 1938, Senator Sherman Minton proposed an investigation of the press (Seldes 1938, 294). To the reporters and editors struggling to regain public respect and trust during those difficult times, *bald-and-exact-fact* must have seemed like a god-send.

Newbold Noyes Jr., one-time news editor of the Washington (D.C.) Evening Star described *bald-and-exact-fact* in this way:

Fundamentally . . . to the men who first preached it, objectivity meant that the only safe thing in a newspaper--outside of the editorial page--was a fact. The reporter's duty was to supply his readers with the cold, hard barren details of what had happened--and with nothing



more. If he did try to give them something more . . . he was interfering with the reader's right to make up his mind on the basis of the facts alone . . . our responsible press operated under the theory that it was better to take a chance on not informing its readers than it was to take a chance on misinforming them (MacDougall, 1957, 8-9).

*Bald-and-exact-fact* certainly looked like the journalistic version of scientific method. It was detached, passive and methodical, easy to understand and easy to do, and it appeared to solve the post-war epistemological crises by circumventing subconscious causes of distortion. The result was that, through the middle 1950s, *bald-and-exact-fact* increasingly dominated American mainstream journalism.

By the middle 1950s, McCarthyism had exposed *bald-and-exact-fact* for the danger it was. Wisconsin senator Joe McCarthy had grown up around journalists (Bayley 1981, 8-10). He understood how they thought, he understood how American "objective" journalism worked, and he used his inside knowledge brilliantly to force the press to perpetrate his communist witch-hunt.

*Bald-and-exact-fact* wasn't the only journalistic tradition that McCarthy used to manipulate the press, but it was one of the most significant. More than 90 percent of the news published by newspapers about McCarthy right after his most famous speech--where he accused the State Department of harboring 205 communists--was supplied by the three wire services (Associated Press, United Press and International News Service) (Bayley 1981, 66, footnote), and, as early as 1860, *bald-and-exact-fact* "objectivity" had been the wire services' stock-in-trade (Brucker 1949, 261-262). To veer from bald and exact facts (it was believed) was to risk financial ruin. As one of the wire service reporters who covered McCarthy (and later became the chief of the Associated Press Washington bureau) said: "No wire service would have lasted five minutes if we hadn't played it right down the middle. (Bayley 1981, 67)" John L. Steele, later the senior Washington correspondent of Time magazine, recalled: "There was very little opportunity in those days to

break out of the role of being a recording device for Joe. (Bayley 1981, 67)” And, according to William Theis, chief of the International News Service Senate staff in 1940, "all three wire services were so goddam objective that McCarthy got away with everything, bamboozling the editors and the public. (Bayley 1981, 67)”

George Reedy, later press secretary for President Lyndon Johnson, gave a specific example of how McCarthy used *bald-and-exact-fact* objectivity, in concert with other journalistic traditions--in this case the deadline--to manipulate the press:

It was a Tydings committee hearing, where McCarthy had said he'd rest his whole case on Owen Lattimore (a professor) being the main spy (in the State Department) . . . The Communist spy business was ridiculous nonsense, and we all knew it. Joe got up and said, "I hold in my hand a letter that Lattimore wrote to the West Coast office of the Office of War Information telling them to fire all the non-Communist Chinese and hire Communist Chinese." We all wanted to see the letter, but he wouldn't give it up. I had to get an overnight lead for 11 a.m. for the P.M.'s, so I had to go down and write the story. At 11:45 a.m. he let go of the letter. There wasn't a thing in it to back up what he'd said, but there wasn't any thing there that disproved what he said, either. In those days you couldn't say that the letter didn't have the remotest bearing on what he'd said. So Joe's story was used. (Bayley 1981, 71)

In a paper presented at the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the International Academy of Business Disciplines, Donald A Fishman pointed out:

One of the key strategies used by McCarthy to promote anti-Communism was the multiple untruth. According to Rovere (1959), this approach consists of a statement composed of so many parts that it is difficult to keep major elements of falsehood separate from the truth (p. 110) The essential advantages of this method are that it allows an advocate to utilize a mass of random facts, and that the audience tends to overlook which statements have been proven or disproven. (Fishman 2001, 12-13)

The multiple untruth was exactly the kind of emperor's cloak *bald-and-exact-fact* could not unravel. *Bald-and-exact-fact* prohibited journalists from analyzing the validity of McCarthy's shotgun accusations, and the cogency and relevance of the random facts he covered those accusations with.

The tragedy of McCarthyism made it clear that *Detachment* objectivity had to be more than brainless recitation of events that protruded into the public sphere, and un-validated utterings of people in authority. But, unfortunately, after *bald-and-exact-fact* was discredited, a consensus on the meaning of *Detachment* could not be reached. This is not surprising, considering that journalism theorists were trying to make one false premise, negative scientific empiricism, with its emphasis on the avoidance of distortion, do the work of the two original premises of egalitarianism and positive scientific empiricism.

Because of the confusion it's generated, the *Detachment* standard has lost influence, but it has by no means disappeared. *Detachment* is precisely what the relatively new movement of Public Journalism is set against:

The perceived need for objectivity created what Rosen (1994) called "separation fever." Journalists have constructed a long list of separations that guide our attitudes, thoughts, and reactions--all are driven by the notion of detachment as an overriding value, a primary virtue. . . Rosen (1994) concluded that "the journalist's mind is separated from the journalist's soul."

In our effort to get the separations right and persuade ourselves and others that we are properly detached, we engage in endless, arcane hair splittings and rationalizations that strike most citizens not as simply difficult but humanly impossible. (Merritt 1995, 18-19)

Both *Focus-On-Facts* and *Detachment*, like their predecessors *Nonpartisanship* and *Neutrality*, have remained solidly ensconced in American journalism, and have continued to evolve, because they represent a second important method of ascertaining truth--the method of empiricism.

#### Get-Both (All)-Sides

If journalistic objectivity is to remain a viable cultural concept, it will continue to evolve. And, because of the impact relativity and quantum mechanics have had and continue to have on American culture, the next evolutionary stage of the concept will have to accommodate at least the epistemological implications of these revolutionary theories. Relativity and quantum mechanics have been around for 75 years now. They will not go away, and American journalism

can no longer make believe they will. The following discussion about relativity and quantum mechanics, their epistemological and journalistic implications, and the part *Get-Both(All)-Sides* plays in bridging the gap between old and new is offered as a first step toward this adjustment.

What relativity actually demonstrates is that there is no absolute frame of reference. A simple analogy provided by physicist Adolph Baker in chapter four (45-47) of his excellent book Modern Physics and Antiphysics, illustrates this state of affairs:

Imagine a flight attendant serving drinks on a flight from Los Angeles to New York. The passengers have been arguing among themselves over how fast the attendant travels when he carries drinks from the rear to the front of the plane. So they string a tape measure, synchronize their watches, take notes, and agree that he moves exactly 1 meter per second.

At the same time scientists strung out in a series of hot-air balloons along the plane's route measure the attendant's speed at 301 meters per second--because the plane itself is moving 300 meters per second, and the attendant is moving an additional 1 meter per second walking up the aisle.

Meanwhile, traffic control operators stationed in control towers along the plane's route decide the attendant is moving at 311 meters per second. One meter per second is caused by the walk up the aisle, 300 meters per second by the movement of the plane, and 10 meters per second by a prevailing tail wind, which is blowing everything (including the scientists in balloons) past the fixed towers.

An observer from outer space is parked in our solar system. From the vantage point of his spaceship, he can see that the earth is traveling around the sun at (roughly) 30,000 meters per second (let's forget about rotation) and the plane and the earth are going in the same direction. So he confidently reports back to his supervisor at Galactic Headquarters that the flight attendant is moving at 30,311 meters per second.

But the observer should not have been so confident, because his supervisor reminds him that he neglected to factor in the movement of the solar system through galactic space . . . Of course, the supervisor herself is moving also--because the galaxy is moving away from ground zero of the Big Bang--just like everything else in the universe.

The point of this analogy might seem obvious to most journalists--that one should gather all available information before making a judgment about who's right and who's wrong in a controversy. Actually, that is not the point at all. The point of this analogy is that every observer is 100% correct about the speed of the flight attendant and, what's more, science can prove it. The attendant just has to turn on a flashlight while he's walking . . .

One would expect the plane passengers to measure the speed of the light beam from the flashlight at 186,000 miles and one meter per second. Likewise, the scientists in the balloons should measure it at 186,000 miles and 301 meters per second, and so on. But this is not the case. As a matter of fact, the speed of the flashlight beam is exactly the same for each observer (Baker 1970, 54-55). If there is an absolutely still point in the universe from which to measure the absolute speed of the flight attendant, light pays absolutely no attention to it. Meaning--as far as we can tell, there is no absolute frame of reference in the universe.

At the level of the individual observers, this means that no one is wrong, and every one is right. If there is no absolute frame of reference for the speed of the flight attendant, there is no absolute truth concerning the speed of the flight attendant. There are only several relative truths (supported by several different contexts or frames of reference). Each answer is true within its context, and, at the same time, limited to its context.

So 30,311 meters per second is not true within the smaller context of the inside of the plane, and 1 meter per second is not true within the larger context of the ship in space. If the passengers in the plane include the earth's revolution, the plane's speed and the tail wind in their

calculations, they move (mentally) into another context, play by different rules and arrive at a different truth. If the observer in space pretends he is one of the plane passengers, with no knowledge of the earth's revolution, he steps into another context, plays by different rules and arrives at a different truth.

What this means for journalists is that, contrary to popular belief, truth is not "out there," waiting to be discovered. Truth is created by the perceiver according to the perceiver's context. Or, more simply--truth is context-dependent. One can no longer say "Such-and-such is the real reality." There is no "real" reality. Every true statement about reality is "true" only within the limits of a specific context.

Because truth is limited to context, there may be several conflicting "truths" about the same slice of reality. But this does not mean that every statement about that slice of reality is automatically "true." In a context-dependent world, the truth or falsity of any statement about reality is still determined by applying three tests of truth: coherence, correspondence and pragmatism. Coherence is rationalism's test. Coherence asks: "How well does each interpretation fit with what is already known?" (Solomon 1981, 189), or, to put it another way, "Does the interpretation make sense?" Correspondence is empiricism's test. Correspondence asks: "How well does it explain everyone's perceptions?" (Solomon 1981, 190). The third test is pragmatism. The philosophical method of pragmatism, "Unquestionably the greatest contribution made by the United States to philosophical thought . . . (Altschull 1990, 223)," was developed by "Arguably the most influential of all American thinkers . . . (Altschull 1990, 224)," William James, in the late 19th century. Pragmatism asks: "How well does each interpretation work when it's applied? Does it produce results? Does it make life easier and better?" Relativity doesn't maintain that a statement about reality can't be false. It maintains that a statement about reality must be judged true or false within its context. And, although a

“truth” may only be true in one context, it is still a “truth.” Relativity shows that there are, in fact, no statements about reality that are true in all contexts. There are no absolute truths. (Even the statement “There are no absolute truths” is not an absolute truth. It is true within the context of what humans know at this time about physics, and the acquisition of rational and empirical knowledge. It is not true within the context of many religions.)

Quantum mechanics also puts the lie to the presumption of an absolute truth. In quantum mechanics, the physical nature of an electron depends upon how one measures it. Measure it one way, and the electron is a particle. Measure it another, and the electron is a wave. It is, in other words--as far as we can tell--both a particle and a wave. (So is light, by the way.) That the two truths appear to conflict does not alter the fact that they are both true, because, as in relativity, each is true within a specific context.

To have two or more conflicting “truths” about the same matter may seem impossible to the ordinary person, living in an ordinary, day-to-day world. But conflicting, context-dependent truths abound in the day-to-day world also. Does the Atlantic Ocean "separate" or "connect" North America and Europe? Both, depending on the context. Is "color" a quality that something is, as in light frequencies, or a quality that something is not, as in a physical object? (The color of a physical object is the light frequency repelled by it.) Both, depending on the context. Is death a beginning or an end? Is the glass half-empty or half-full? Both and both. Is Castro right, or is America right? Possibly both, depending on the context. Are the Israelis right, or the Palestinians? Possibly both. Are the Democrats right or the Republicans? Possibly both.

Wordsmiths like journalists will suggest, as is being done here, that all of this is caused by the ambiguity of language. "You can convince anybody of anything with the right words.", etcetera. But relativity and quantum mechanics, as far as we can tell, prove that there is more to it than that. Language may be ambiguous, but reality is even more so. Contrary to popular

opinion, reality is not a set of pre-formed discreet, distinct, identifiable entities, concepts, and actions. Human beings organize raw reality into entities, concepts and actions in their minds as they perceive it.

What all of this means for objective journalism is that the nature of reality is neither fixed nor static. It is not a collection of pre-existing "things," that "do" stuff. It is certainly not a collection of "correct" religious beliefs, political systems, etcetera, and "incorrect" beliefs and political systems. It is one, big, boiling mass of potentials, that human beings make sense of as they go. The "truth" about reality does not depend on reality. It depends on the contexts of the humans perceiving reality.

The metaphysical ramifications of the ambiguity of reality are, of course, extensive and complex . . . and mostly unrelated to the practice of objective journalism. The only thing objective journalists need to learn from relativity and quantum mechanics is that the "reality" we perceive--the collection of entities, concepts, actions and so on--does not pre-exist in the ways we perceive it. The reality we know is created by us as we perceive it. And nobody--no individual, and no group, no matter how large--has a head-lock on absolute truth because there is no absolute truth.

The epistemological position that humans, themselves, fashion the entities, concepts and actions they perceive in nature may seem alien, but it is only a restatement of egalitarianism: "The rejection of a priori rank, based on a belief that all humans are created with an equal ability to perceive the truth (about reality)."

Some will argue that the difference is that egalitarianism presupposes a reality that doesn't change according to the whims of the observer(s). But there is no argument here, there is only a difference in the definition of a word. Reality does not change "out there," in the sense of



becoming physically different than it already is, when we perceive it. We change it when we get it inside our minds.

If reality is whatever humans decide it is, then what is it when we aren't making decisions about it? Well . . . according to what context? "No," you insist, "What is real reality--as in context-less reality?" There is no such thing. Your question frames your context as you speak it--the context of "context-lessness." Such a context is logically and semantically impossible, therefore there is no such thing as context-less reality.

If reality is whatever individual humans decide it is in their minds, when is a particular interpretation of reality "objective?" Or does the word even mean anything anymore?

It does indeed. There may be as many "true" interpretations of reality as there are contexts from which to view reality, but if we stopped there, all would be chaos. We must look for an extra dimension of truth. That extra dimension is "objectivity," and "objectivity" is a function of context size. An interpretation of reality that passes the three tests of truth within a large context—a context that contains a large amount of information—is more "objective" than an interpretation that passes the three tests only within a small context. A truth that coheres with many other truths, corresponds with many perceptions, and "works" in many situations is more "objective" than one that coheres with few truths, corresponds to few perceptions and works in few situations.

And this is where positive scientific empiricism comes in. "Consensual validation of empirical perceptions yields the most dependable knowledge about reality." In terms of positive scientific empiricism, an "objective" truth is one that, basically, everyone can agree with. In the example of the flight attendant's speed, the scientists in balloons, tower observers and alien wouldn't ever be able to agree with 1 meter/second. The tower observers and alien wouldn't ever agree with 301 meter/second. The alien wouldn't ever agree with 311 meters/second. But all of

these observers could possibly agree with 30,311 meters/second. Thus, 30.311 meters/second is the most “objective” of the four context-bound truths being considered because it is the only one that could receive consensual validation.

So “objective” truth is consensually validated truth. And the trick to getting consensual validation is the presentation of all alternative truths. This is because presentation of alternatives builds the large, information-rich context needed. To put it simply—You can’t make an objective decision about reality until you hear all the facts, and you can’t get all the facts unless you hear everybody’s side. There is a good chance that each sides’s interpretation of a newsworthy event passes the three tests of truth within its unique, limited context. So consensual validation is only possible, and this means “objective” truth is only possible, if everyone is brought into a context that includes all smaller contexts.

This being the case, an “objective” journalist is a journalist who faithfully and accurately *gets-both(all)-sides*. (There is a reason *Get-Both(All)-Sides* has endured.) And “journalistic objectivity” is something—a personal quality, a frame of mind, an attitude—that allows an objective journalist to *get-both(all)-sides*. Describing it in terms of contexts, “journalistic objectivity” would be the ability to 1) gather information from one’s own personal context, 2) leave one’s personal context and immerse oneself in the context of side one in order to gather information, 3) leave that context and immerse oneself in the context of side two (and so on), 4) leave that context and move into a large, inclusive context that allows one to describe the event, and the alternative interpretations of the event, faithfully and accurately. In short, journalistic objectivity is the ability to surf contexts. Even shorter--journalistic objectivity is *Contextual Independence*.

*Contextual Independence* is what the previous evolutionary conceptions, *Nonpartisanship*, *Neutrality*, *Focus-On-Facts* and *Detachment* intended. *Nonpartisan/Neutral* journalists were trying to be *Contextually Independent* when they peeped out of their own political contexts to consider the reality

interpretations of others. *Focus-On-Facts* journalists were the first to realize that, for the purposes of journalism, what was outside their personal context was more important than what was inside. They did more than peep out. They gazed out hungrily. They wandered far and wide but, because their gaze was outward, they failed to notice the personal contexts they carried with them. Finally *Detachment* journalists, fully cognizant of their ever-present personal contexts, sought to detach themselves from those contexts, so as to see reality as it "really" was, to see it outside of any contexts. Little did they know that such a reality did not exist.

So *Contextual Independence* is what American journalism has been evolving to. It unravels the Gordian Knot of confusion surrounding the concept of journalistic objectivity, because it is the core of every mainstream definition offered. But, a simple and vital question remains: How does the average journalist do *Contextual Independence*? The answer is twofold: (1) Using the premises of egalitarianism and positive scientific empiricism as constant guides, the average journalist (2) role-plays. The first is the journalistic standard for objectivity, and the second is the primary technique.

## CHAPTER 6

### APPLYING CONTEXTUAL INDEPENDENCE TO TODAY'S JOURNALISM

The ability to role-play appears to be innate in human beings. And humans do it often-- whenever they watch television, read a book, daydream or converse. All humans role-play, but the truly objective journalist is expert at it. He can break through his natural fear of the unknown and temporarily die to himself in order to become someone or something else. He may despise or fear that someone or something else, but he takes the chance anyway, in order to experience alternative interpretations of reality clearly, and report them faithfully to his readers.

Of course role-playing is just part of the picture. Most controversies contain several sides-- several roles for an objective journalist to play. How many sides of a controversy should an objective journalist obtain? Which sides should he choose and why? To answer these and other questions, the objective journalist must constantly look for guidance to the objectivity standard-- the premises of egalitarianism and positive scientific empiricism. Many of the controversies that bedevil American objective journalism today can be cleared up with liberal applications of the two premises that generated it in the first place.

A survey of working journalists, featured in the January/February 2000 issue of Columbia Journalism Review (Mitchell and Rosenstiel, 34-36) contains a list of some of these controversies. Apply the two premises of egalitarianism and positive scientific empiricism, and the answers become startlingly self-evident.

Positive scientific empiricism prohibits reordering events, using composite characters, compressing time, reconstructing dialogue, compressing elements from several interviews onto one, and taking quotes out of sequence without ellipses, jump cuts, or other signals, because these strategies violate the principle of consensual validation. Any alteration of the record of events by

the recorder of those events makes validation by another journalist, or validation by the reader or newsmaker, problematic.

Positive scientific empiricism prohibits masking source identities and using anonymously-sourced material from other news organizations. No scientist would ever do this, because, again, consensual validation would be impossible if no one knew where the information to be validated came from.

Positive scientific empiricism prohibits recollecting quotes heard in person but not recorded. No scientist would make a mental note of the results of an important experiment and jot them down later when he had the time. The very idea is absurd. This is not to say that a quote can't be responsibly paraphrased after the fact, if quotations marks are omitted.

Positive scientific empiricism prohibits cleaning up grammar or language inside a quote for any reason other than to make the quote understandable to readers. Everybody says "uh . . ." once in a while. It's only human. If journalists are recording events as they actually happen, making a special effort to try to mask a politician's humanity is inappropriate. If politicians don't know what they're talking about, or are poor speakers, people should know.

Positive scientific empiricism prohibits analytical introductory clauses, such as "In a move intended to deflect the House impeachment inquiry, President Clinton yesterday announced . . ." (Here we move from the Columbia Journalism Review survey to an article in the Washington Monthly (Alter et al. 1999, 22). Journalists are not employed to read minds. They are employed to report empirical events.

Egalitarianism, meanwhile, prohibits excess reference to what other journalists think or say, since it insists that everyone owns a piece of the truth, not just journalists.

Egalitarianism prohibits excess coverage of who is in and out of political power and why. Some people (mostly other journalists) will be interested in a constant, never-ending, blow-by-

blow account of political gamesmanship, but many other readers will not be. If everyone is equal, journalists must give equal space to the interests of others.

Egalitarianism prohibits excess attribution. Objective journalists should not have to quote the National Weather Service to write that the sky is blue. As sensing, thinking human beings, they have enough clout to state the obvious.

Egalitarianism prohibits the unvarying "use of established authority as a substitute for truth. People in authority, just like everyone else in the world, never see the whole picture . . . period. Journalists should not make believe they do.

Egalitarianism prohibits the publication of one point of view without the timely publication of alternative points of view. No more McCarthy- style, eleventh-hour, front-page announcements with rebuttals buried the next day on page 10. Since everyone is equal, everyone deserves equal treatment.

The list of journalistic controversies goes on and on, but application of the premises of egalitarianism and positive scientific empiricism can produce amazing results in a very short time. What about journalists covering wars? Should they remain neutral? Not necessarily, but positive scientific empiricism does demand that journalists suspend personal judgment until enough information has been gathered. But how much information is "enough?" Well . . . No matter how it looks at first glance, participants in war are never stupid, although they are often too emotional to think clearly. Egalitarianism tells us that. When one group does not sufficiently understand the context of another group, it will not understand the hopes and fears that motivate the members of that group, and it will not understand the other group's actions. It is this lack of understanding, generated by contextual dependence, that leads to a war, not stupidity. When reporting on that war, however, truly objective journalists, will figure out a way to step into the contexts of all of the participants. Only after they have done this, only after those objective

journalists really understand the motivations of every warring party, will they have "enough" information to make judgments.

But, this is not to say that they should express their personal judgments in their stories. What they should do, in fact, according to the premise of egalitarianism, is share with their readers all of the information they have gathered by surfing contexts, so that their readers can judge for themselves.

What about something closer to home? Should objective journalists remain neutral about child molestation? Of course not. Molestation is a grievous violation of egalitarianism. But note--disgust and anger at the results of child molestation, does not release objective journalists from the obligation, imposed on them by egalitarianism, to try to understand the molester's motivations, and to try to communicate those motivations to their readers. Disgust and anger at the results of molestation also does not entitle objective journalists to decide the guilt or innocence of an alleged molester prematurely.

Egalitarianism maintains that the public deserves nothing less than all of the pertinent information a journalist can manage to get. In the case of the child molester, knowing how a molester thinks can empower parents to prevent the molestation of their own children. In the case of war, true knowledge of all sides can facilitate peace, because it makes possible a grassroots response to the conflict, from people not only near the war, but all over our global village. There is a popular bumper sticker that states: "If you want peace, work for justice." Real justice is unattainable if Humanity remains ignorant of the grievances and ambitions of the groups that comprise it.

Journalistic objectivity is both smaller and larger than most journalists currently think it is. Because it has definite, clear-cut limits, it is conceptually smaller than absolute objectivity. And it is physically smaller than the long lists of recipe ingredients or mindless slogans so many

journalists struggle with everyday. Filter those ingredients and slogans through the philosophical premises that generated journalistic objectivity in the first place, and two words emerge: *Contextual Independence*.

On the other hand, journalistic objectivity is much larger than just two words. It is an attitude, that leads to an action, that results in the only type of journalism that can bring peace and justice to the world. The "objective" journalist is actually a partisan, but not for one small slice of Humanity. The objective journalist is a partisan for all of Humanity.

*Contextual Independence* is the latest evolutionary conception of journalistic objectivity. It is theoretically possible, comprehensible, and relatively easy to teach. It is the future of objective journalism, because it is the future of the human race that objective journalism serves--if that human race is to have a future.

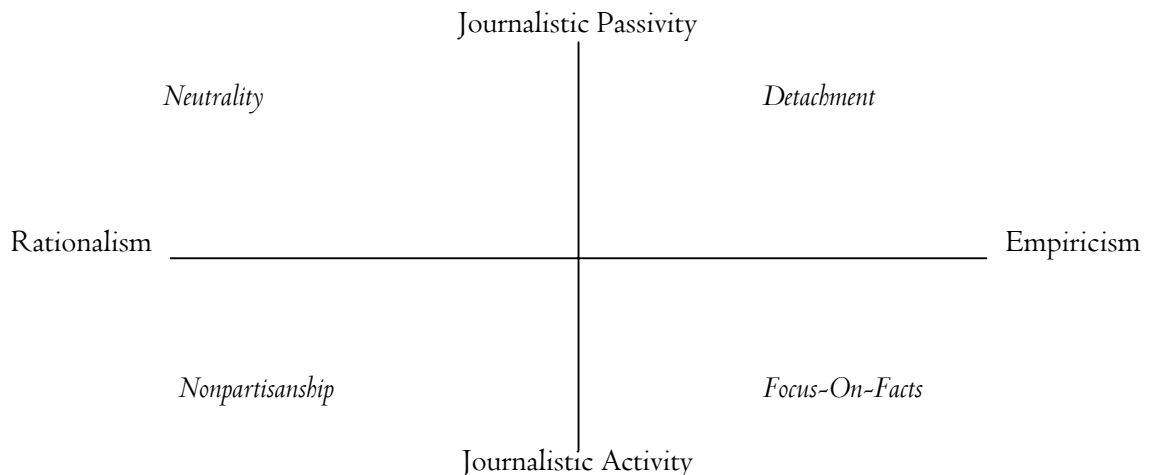


## CHAPTER 7

### THE FOUR QUADRANTS

This is the section where the evolutionary model of journalistic objectivity, developed from the historical/philosophical research, is set out in its entirety. Specifically, this section contains the four evolutionary conceptions of journalistic objectivity, their variations, short descriptions of the variations (if needed), and the number of times each variation was cited by survey authors, as the definition, or part of the definition of journalistic objectivity. (The citations are the original 262 definitions collected from the survey material, minus the “get-both(all)-sides” definitions..)

This section is entitled “The Four Quadrants” because the four evolutionary stages of journalistic objectivity can be located in four quadrants of a grid with a horizontal axis anchored by rationalism and empiricism, and a vertical axis anchored by journalistic activity and journalistic passivity.



*Nonpartisanship*, occupying the bottom left quadrant, represents the active use of rationalism ("reasoning," "common sense," "logic") by journalists seeking the objective truth. *Neutrality*, in the top left quadrant, represents a combination of rationalism and journalistic passivity. *Focus-On-Facts*, combines positive scientific empiricism with the journalistic activity required by that

interpretation (which is consensual validation). It occupies the bottom right quadrant. Finally, *Detachment* is a combination of negative scientific empiricism and the passivity required by it, and it occupies the top right quadrant.

The variations are presented below. All of the variations will be easily recognized by any student or practitioner of American objective journalism. Think of the variations as the different ways journalists have understood, expressed, or put into practice, the four evolutionary conceptions. Or, put another way, they are signs that the survey authors were thinking in terms of particular evolutionary conceptions.

### Nonpartisanship

The first variation requires explanation. Several survey authors presented the denotation of “nonpartisanship” (independence from formal authority), or the word “nonpartisanship” without any qualification or explanation at all, as the definition, or part of the definition of journalistic objectivity. Because of this, this researcher was forced to the rather awkward device of listing *nonpartisanship* (6 citations by survey authors) as a both an evolutionary form and a variation. It is a variation of itself.

*Honesty* (6 citations) was another variation of *Nonpartisanship*. Perhaps the first requirement for active rational truth-seeking and dissemination by nonpartisan journalists was simple *honesty*.

As *Nonpartisanship* took root, it began to evolve into *Neutrality*. The variation of *Nonpartisanship* closest to *Neutrality* was *impartiality* (12 citations). However, although *impartiality* is close to *Neutrality*, it is different from *Neutrality* because it connotes eventual judgment, whereas *Neutrality* doesn't. The difference can be illustrated by the following statements:

"The judge listened neutrally to the arguments of the plaintiff and defendant." A "neutral" judge would be an uninvolved judge, and, as such, would be skirting his or her duty. It would be better to say "The judge listened impartially to the arguments . . ."

"The small country assured its two, warring neighbors of its impartiality." Because "impartiality" connotes eventual judgment, this small country is asking for trouble. If the small country doesn't want big problems, it will assure its neighbors of its complete "neutrality."

A sub-variation of *impartiality* should also be mentioned. Some source authors saw journalistic objectivity as involving *transcendence*--a rising above the fray--into the realm of "logic," for example. But, since *impartiality* is impossible without *transcendence* anyway, citations of *transcendence* were counted as *impartiality*.

The final variation of *Nonpartisanship* found in the survey material--*conjecture avoidance* (5 citations)--reflects a concern with *Focus-On-Facts*. (*Nonpartisanship*, *Neutrality*, *Focus-On-Facts*, *Detachment* are all still with us in the American journalism culture. And over the years they have flavored one another, which, of course, adds to the confusion.) Conjecture is "jumping to conclusions," or making decisions based on incomplete evidence. *Conjecture avoidance* is avoiding jumping to conclusions. *Conjecture avoidance* is placed under *Nonpartisanship* because of its assumption of an eventual judgment.

This author found nothing in the survey material that looked like a *Detachment* version of *Nonpartisanship*. This is not surprising though, considering that the two are almost mutually exclusive (rational involvement vs. empirical noninvolvement).

### Neutrality

The next quadrant, *Neutrality*, reflects a qualitative change from *Nonpartisanship*. This change was the transference of the responsibility of rational judgment from the journalist to the reader. Note that rationalism was still the epistemological method of choice in *Neutrality*, as it had been in *Nonpartisanship*. The journalist still thought in terms of the arguments, or "positions" of conflicting parties, instead of the empirical "facts" of the case.

Four variations of *Neutrality* were found in the survey material: *reader draws own conclusions*, *use of neutral language*, *which side?*, and *universal usefulness*.

*Reader draws own conclusions* (6 citations) obviously belongs under *Neutrality* because it is the primary justification for this evolutionary stage of journalistic objectivity. The placement of *use of neutral language* (2 citations) under *Neutrality* is, likewise, self-explanatory.

*Which side?* (3 citations) and *universal usefulness* (1 citation, several associations) are tests of *Neutrality*. *Which side?* asks if the reader can tell from the news story which side the journalist is on. If the reader can't, the story is considered objective. *Universal usefulness* asks if the story can be used anywhere by any paper of any political persuasion. If it can, the story is considered objective.

#### Focus-On-Facts

In contrast to the forms of journalistic objectivity in the first two quadrants, empiricism, not rationalism, reigns supreme in the third quadrant. To those who cited *Focus-On-Facts* as a definition, or part of a definition of objectivity, empirical "facts" are direct glimpses of the independent "objective" reality outside of the human mind.

The term itself, "focus-on-facts," without definition or qualification, was cited 20 times as the meaning of, or one ingredient of, journalistic objectivity. So, as in the case of *Nonpartisanship*, the only thing to do was to make *focus-on-facts* a variation of itself.

The second most important variation of *Focus-On-Facts* was *correspondence to reality* (17 citations). *Correspondence to reality* reflects the single-minded gaze outward that is characteristic of the *Focus-On-Facts* approach. It was a naive belief in a direct *correspondence to reality* that betrayed pre-World War I journalists. They were so focused on what was going on outside their minds, they never noticed the distorting screens thrown up inside.

Besides *correspondence to reality*, *Focus-On-Facts* also appeared in the survey material as: *interpretive reporting*, *accuracy*, *consensual validation* and *reporting verified facts only*.

The shock and fear engendered by the discovery of psychic distortion and stereotyping gave life to the Frankenstein's monster *bald-and-exact-fact*, but it also permanently handicapped *bald-and-exact-fact's* competition--*interpretive reporting*. Although *interpretive reporting* (6 citations) was offered as a solution to the post-war epistemological crises at about the same time as *bald-and-exact-fact*, it remained an also-ran because it was still naively empirical. It could not control what was in the observer's mind, as *bald-and-exact-fact* was thought to do. *Interpretive reporting's* solution was more facts. Fill in the blank spaces with enough related facts--"background" and "context"--and the full reality would be successfully communicated. But psychic distortion was not adequately addressed, and when the New Journalists took "interpretation" too far for too long in the 1970s, *interpretive reporting's* influence faded rapidly. It remains a footnote, albeit an important one, in American journalistic history.

Contrary to the naive *correspondence to reality*, and the naive and hubristic *interpretive reporting*, the *Focus-On-Facts* variations of: *accuracy* (cited 9 times), *consensual validation* (journalistic objectivity has been achieved when either unbiased observers or newsmakers from both sides agree that the news report was accurate--5 citations) and *reporting verified facts only* (7 citations), reflect a more sophisticated, more humble, more realistic post-crises application of *Focus-On-Facts*.

### Detachment

*Detachment*, in the fourth quadrant, is the latest evolutionary conception of journalistic objectivity. Although *Detachment* takes place in the murky, rationalistic interior of the human mind, what it intends is exterior to the mind. *Detachment* journalists only venture inward in an attempt to remove or minimize the personal biases that get in the way of the view outward. They

try to split in two--to *detach* their private, subjective, emotional selves from their public, objective, journalistic selves.

*Detachment* had the largest number of variations. They include *emphasis on the independent existence of objective reality*, *nonparticipation*, *bald-and-exact-fact*, *self-objectification*, *detachment from one's emotions*, *separation of emotion from fact/thought*, *separation of facts from values/opinions*, *impersonality*, and *attribution*.

An *emphasis on the independent existence of objective reality* (independent from the subjective observer-5 citations), is the first variation of *Detachment* presented here. Turn-of-the-century *Focus-On-Facts* journalists thought of themselves as part of the larger reality, directly connected to the other parts of reality through their senses. *Detachment* journalists don't.

A second variation of *Detachment*, *nonparticipation* (11 citations), is staying out of the news one is reporting on. In practice, *nonparticipation* ranges from non-membership in any group that might conceivably generate news, to passively observing a spectacular suicide, depending upon the individual journalist and the policy of the paper.

*Bald-and-exact-fact* (19 citations) has already been discussed at length.

*Self-objectification* (2 citations) is looking at oneself as another person might.

*Detachment from one's emotions* (2 citations) is not allowing oneself to be guided by one's emotions.

*Separation of emotion from fact/thought* (1 citation, 1 association) is the act of distinguishing between one's own, or someone else's, emotion and thought, or between emotion and the empirical "facts" of the story.

*Separation of facts from values/opinions* (11 citations) is the journalistic practice of confining value judgments and opinions to the "soft news" and editorial pages.

Of all the *Detachment* variations, *impersonality* (50 citations) is, by far, the most prominent. *Impersonality* is the omission of subjectivity, including opinions, prejudices, preconceptions and biases, from the process of producing a news story. In theory, *impersonality* signifies an unbiased journalist using an unbiased process to produce an unbiased product. In actuality, it too often signifies only the product. In fact 22 of the 50 citations of *impersonality* never mentioned the journalist or the process at all. This is worth noting because it is in a preoccupation with the product (the attitude that "as long as the story is unbiased, it doesn't matter whether the journalist was or not"), that mindless journalistic slogans thrive. It is, after all, much easier to fix a report than to fix personal, deep-set biases.

In fact one of those slogans is the last *Detachment* variation to be mentioned here. That slogan is *attribution* (9 citations), and its meaning varies in the source material from "You can put whatever you want into the report, as long as you quote somebody else saying it." to "Always give the source of a quote, opinion, or piece of information."

## CHAPTER 8

### SUMMARY

Objectivity is an essential ingredient of American “journalism.” Yet definitions, standards and techniques of objectivity currently intertwine in a Gordian Knot of confusion and disagreement almost impossible to unravel.

The source of this disagreement and confusion is the theoretically impossible, and humanly incomprehensible, ideal of an absolute journalistic objectivity--the hypothetical ability to report reality as it absolutely is, without distortions of any kind. Journalists have come to realize that absolute objectivity is impossible, but they are still exhorted to attempt it anyway, and they have responded to this absurd demand in four counter-productive ways: 1) Rejecting even the possibility of objectivity, 2) Reconstructing and re-defining objectivity, 3) Concocting "recipes," with several definitions of objectivity as ingredients, and 4) Devolving those ambiguous ingredients into slogans that could be learned by rote and practiced without thinking.

In spite of the havoc it's caused, the impossible, incomprehensible absolute ideal has endured in American journalism because the premise that supports it has remain unchallenged.. That premise is negative scientific empiricism--the false notion that “scientific empiricism” is to be defined primarily (and negatively), in terms of the avoidance of personal distortion, instead of positively, in terms of peer review and the consensual validation of empirically observed phenomena. Elimination of the absolute ideal requires rooting out of American journalistic culture the false premise of negative scientific empiricism.

But discarding the premise of negative scientific empiricism isn't enough to save journalistic objectivity. It must be replaced with premises that generate a theoretically possible and humanly comprehensible ideal. And the only premises that will work are the premises that gave birth to



the concept in the first place. So a two-pronged approach—an historical search for the philosophical origins of the concept--was called for.

The research questions that best expressed this two-pronged approach were:

1. *What are the true first principles, or philosophical premises, of the concept of journalistic objectivity?*
2. *What were the cultural milieus within which the concept of journalistic objectivity emerged and evolved?*
3. *What are the evolutionary forms that journalistic objectivity has taken since its emergence?*

Research question three was addressed first, because the evolutionary forms of journalistic objectivity were hiding in plain sight. They comprised the mass of conflicting definitions, standards and techniques that made up the Gordian Knot. So the first step to answering question three was the collection of definitions of objectivity. To this end, the tables of contents and indexes of 324 books, on journalism theory, ethics, technique and practice were surveyed for the words "objectivity," "objective" and "objectiveness." The survey yielded 268 definitions of journalistic objectivity, which were boiled down to 24 distinct definitions, which, when grouped according to common themes, turned out to be four broad journalistic themes with variations, and one universal journalistic technique. Ranking the four themes according to their epistemological sophistication yielded two broad evolutionary forms—the rationalistic *Nonpartisanship/Neutrality*, and the empirical *Focus-On-Facts/Detachment*.

Historical/philosophical research determined that: *Nonpartisanship* was a rationalistic challenge to pre-1830 authoritarian journalism. *Neutrality* was a refinement of *Nonpartisanship* probably brought about by the expectations of an increasingly sophisticated reading public. *Focus-On-Facts* was the journalistic accommodation of the 1890's "realism" movement, which was a manifestation of empiricism, and *Detachment* was a turning-inside-out of *Focus-On-Facts*, sparked by an epistemological crises that followed World War I.

Answering question two also answered question one. The two cultural forces that fueled the evolution of *Nonpartisanship* into *Neutrality*, *Neutrality* into *Focus-On-Facts*, and *Focus-On-Facts* into *Detachment*—egalitarianism and positive scientific empiricism--were the original premises of journalistic objectivity. With research question one answered, the way was cleared for the ejection of the premise of negative scientific empiricism and its impossible absolute ideal, from the American journalistic pantheon, the reinstatement of the original premises, and the development of a theoretically possible and humanly comprehensible ideal.

To this end, a detailed account of the historical/philosophical story of the concept of journalistic objectivity was provided. The political premise of egalitarianism, derived by America's Founding Fathers from the epistemological premises of rationalism and empiricism, and preceding positive scientific empiricism as a force in American culture by several decades, generated *Nonpartisanship* and *Neutrality*. Positive scientific empiricism, taking root in America later during the empirical "realism" movement, turned *Neutrality* into *Focus-On-Facts*. Then World War I propaganda, post-war depth psychology, the "new" business of public relations, the theory of relativity, and quantum mechanics all demonstrated that the ascertainment of "truth" was much more problematic than pre-war journalists had ever imagined. Concerned American journalists, inspired by editor and communist Walter Lippmann, consigned the premises of egalitarianism and positive scientific empiricism to obscurity, in the search for a premise that could provide them with a concrete response to the epistemological crises. That premise was negative scientific empiricism. The conception of journalistic objectivity that reflected it was *Detachment*, and the primary variation of *Detachment*, which was the concrete response American journalists had been desperately searching for, was the slogan *bald-and-exact-fact*. The efficacy of *bald-and-exact-fact* over the ensuing 30 years turned it into sacred doctrine, and firmly placed the

impossible and incomprehensible ideal of absolute objectivity, which *bald-and-exact-fact* appeared to make possible, in the American journalistic pantheon.

In the early 1950s, Senator Joseph McCarthy demonstrated how dangerous the *bald-and-exact-fact* slogan, and blind faith in the possibility of absolute objectivity, was. And journalists have spent the last 50 years trying to construct viable alternatives—on the same false premise. When the usurping, false premise is deposed and the two true premises are reinstated, a new, viable definition is easy to find. That new definition, *Contextual Independence*, is the true definition of journalistic objectivity for our age.

Not only does *Contextual Independence* incorporate journalistic objectivity's conceptual past (the four evolutionary stages), it accommodates its future as well. Relativity theory and quantum mechanics make it clear that, even if absolute objectivity were possible, there is no absolute truth to be absolutely objective about. The reality we perceive is not the pre-existing collection of entities, actions, concepts, etc., that we think it is. Reality is, instead, a writhing, homogenous, ever-changing mass of biological and physical processes and materials, that humans organize into entities, actions, concepts, etc., as they perceive it. The premises of egalitarianism and positive scientific empiricism easily accommodate this relativistic state of affairs:

Egalitarianism states that everybody has an equivalent ability to recognize truth. There are as many interpretations of reality as there are individual humans, and no interpretation is automatically more "correct" or more "right" or more "true" than any other.

But if we stop there, all would be chaos. We must look for the additional dimension of truth this thesis calls "objectivity," and positive scientific empiricism establishes that dimension. The epistemological strategy of consensual validation, that positive scientific empiricism supports, identifies an "objective" truth as one that 1) coheres with many other truths, 2) matches many perceptions, and 3) works the best in most situations. The larger, more

information-rich the context within which a truth is determined, (the more truths it coheres with, the more perceptions it matches, and the more situations it works in), the more “objective” that truth is.

An “objective” journalist is one who provides the alternative, smaller-context interpretations of reality to readers, so they can build the large, information-rich context they need to ascertain the most “objective” truth. Or, in other words, an “objective” journalist is one who faithfully and accurately *gets-both(all)-sides*.

This means that “journalistic objectivity” is the personal quality, frame of mind, attitude, etcetera that an objective journalist has that enables him to *get-both(all)-sides* faithfully and accurately. In terms of context, “journalistic objectivity” is the ability to 1) gather information from one’s own personal context, 2) leave one’s personal context and immerse oneself in the context of side one in order to gather information, 3) leave that context and immerse oneself in the context of side two (and so on), 4) leave that context and move into a large, inclusive context that allows one to describe the event, and the alternative interpretations of the event, faithfully and accurately. “Journalistic objectivity” is the ability to surf contexts, or *Contextual Independence*.

*Contextual Independence* is the definition of journalistic objectivity. Because it rests on the two premises of egalitarianism and positive scientific empiricism, these premises form the standard for journalistic objectivity. The more consistent a news report is with the premises of egalitarianism and positive scientific empiricism,, the more "objective" it can be considered to be. Finally, role-playing is the primary technique of *Contextual Independence*. Every human possesses the ability to role-play. Every human role-plays from time to time naturally. Any human smart enough to make a living as a journalist can be taught to role-play well enough to fulfill at least the minimum requirements of objective journalism, as it is defined here.

The new understanding of journalistic objectivity presented by this thesis is so simple, it can be summarized in five statements. (The word "truth," as used below, refers to “an interpretation of reality that meets the three tests of coherence, correspondence and pragmatism within its context.”)

1. There is no absolute truth. There is only truth as defined by, and confined to, contexts.
2. There are, therefore, as many possible truths as there are contexts from which to determine those truths. With so many possible truths, chaos is unavoidable unless an added dimension of truth is identified. That added dimension is “objectivity.”
3. Objective” truths are truths that everybody can agree on or validate. In terms of contexts, “objective” truths are interpretations of reality that are “true” within large, information-rich contexts.
4. An “objective” journalist is one who gathers interpretations of reality from smaller contexts, and presents them faithfully and accurately to the larger context, so that the most “objective” interpretation (the one that everyone in the large context can agree on) can be determined.
5. In order to do this, an objective journalist has to be able to surf contexts. Therefore, “journalistic objectivity” is the ability to surf contexts, or *Contextual Independence*.

If a student of journalism today, were to ask professional journalists what journalistic objectivity was, he would probably get as many answers as there were journalists. If he looked for the answer in journalism literature, he would get as many answers as there were sources. At present, nobody really knows what it is, but whatever it is, new journalists never stop hearing about it, good and bad. Old journalists never stop thinking about it. How is it done? What does it mean? Is it really necessary? What happens if it's ignored it? Is the “free world” really doomed without objective journalism? Is it all just a crock?

Such a state of affairs bodes ill for the future of objective journalism in America, because so many people, consciously or unconsciously, secretly or openly, are fed up with the whole mess. If objective journalism were an outdated, unnecessary historical curiosity, there would be no cause for alarm. But it isn't, because, unfortunately, the "free world" cannot be free without it. Only people who have control over their lives can be free. And only people who are sufficiently and accurately informed about the world in which they "live, move, and have their being," can achieve control over their lives.

The development of a theoretically possible, humanly comprehensible, universally acknowledged definition, standard and technique for journalistic objectivity may very well be, therefore, the most important journalistic task of this decade. This thesis is only a step in that direction, and, possibly, not a good one. No matter—There are as many potential models of journalistic objectivity as there are researchers interested in the concept. (Egalitarianism tells us that.) If this particular model can help journalists at all to solve the most frightening journalistic problem since McCarthyism, that will be enough.

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