



# Pragmatic News Objectivity: Objectivity With a Human Face

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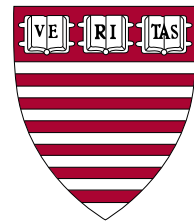
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**PRAGMATIC NEWS  
OBJECTIVITY:  
Objectivity With a Human Face**

by  
**Stephen Ward**

**Discussion Paper D-37  
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The Joan Shorenstein Center  
**PRESS • POLITICS**



**• PUBLIC POLICY •**

Harvard University  
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The Joan Shorenstein Center  
on the Press, Politics and Public Policy  
John F. Kennedy School of Government  
Harvard University  
79 John F. Kennedy Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
Telephone (617) 495-8269 • Fax: (617) 495-8696  
Web Site Address: <http://ksgwww.harvard.edu/~presspol/home.htm>

# INTRODUCTION

A philosopher who thinks about journalism? A journalist who thinks about philosophy? If either or both strike you as a conundrum, you are not alone.

In today's world of "all-Monica-all-the-time"—with its accompanying boundary collapse between entertainment and news—what could philosophy and journalism possibly say usefully to each other?

The answer is, it turns out, as Stephen Ward's fascinating paper explains, a great deal. However wobbly or fractiously, journalism is governed still by professional canons, none more powerful than that of "objectivity." The canon has suffered repeated assault, though, not merely through violations by practitioners, but through a concerted attack by modern (and post-modern) media critics, who believe that "objectivity" is (depending on the critic) deceitful, erroneous, misleading, incoherent, downright irrational—or all of the above.

Into this thicket, Ward has shone the light of modern analytic philosophy—based in part on the career as a philosopher he pursued before turning to journalism (and most recently, to teaching journalism). Like other critics, Ward is troubled by traditional formulations of the concept of "objectivity" as applied to journalism. But unlike so many others, he seeks to redeem the concept by revising and recasting it.

Ward believes that journalism *needs* standards, including the standard of objectivity, in order to function successfully. What he proposes in place of its rejection is revision—specifically, a new formulation that he calls "pragmatic objectivity."

"Pragmatic objectivity," Ward explains, drawing on the work of Harvard philosopher W. V. Quine, "begins with the premise that everything we know is an interpretation of some aspect of our world"—or what Quine calls the "man-made fabric" of theories only partially hemmed in by facts.

A report is "pragmatically objective," in Ward's account, if it meets the test of three available standards: *empirical standards* that test a report's accord with facts derived by careful observation, controlled experiments, or statistical measure; *standards of coherence* that tell us how consistent an interpretation is with what else we believe; and *standards of rational debate* that include a commitment to rational persuasion and tolerance, and openness to rival views and counter-evidence.

Ward believes the virtue of this reformulation of news "objectivity" is that it explicitly recognizes the inherent qualities of judgment that reporters must employ, and entails an understanding of the inherent fallibility of such judgments, while holding them to community or collective standards that usefully promote the central goals of reporting itself.

These goals can vary widely in individual instances, depending on the reporter's subject: a short piece recounting a traffic accident or burglary has much less demanding requirements than analysis of political or economic trends or policies. What they share in common is the reporter's, editor's, and audience's grasp of the contingent quality of the reporting in all cases, and openness to its revision.

Ward, in my opinion, is offering a useful restatement of a central tenet of journalism that has clearly grown more controversial over the years. For that, we are in his debt. There remain, however, elements of his description of "pragmatic objectivity" that are unresolved and sure to draw criticism.

Ward uses the idea of "best available standards" without detailed reference to two of the most powerful (and disputed) domains in modern social science: "power" and "interests." Both concepts, after years of investigation and debate, lack widely-agreed definitions. This is problematic to social scientists (as well as philosophers of social science), but no less for journalists and their public audience.

How well in fact does modern journalism—faced not with auto accidents, but complex political and economic issues—go about incorporating the role of "power" and "interests" into its standards and practices?

Consider the recent "Asian economic crisis." Early reporting berated the failures of "crony capitalism" and lax standards and controls over local capital markets as aspects of an "Asian development model" that only months before had been touted as a paradigm for how the underdeveloped world should advance. Western economics writers now suddenly find themselves exploring the advantages of capital controls as a means to prevent future failures, when months earlier any mention of such practices was anathema to economists and economic journalists alike. Were Ward's criteria of "pragmatic objectivity" lacking before the crisis, after the crisis, or is some other component missing

in Ward's model that explains the immense shift in the explanatory and prescriptive paradigms?

Or consider how many press accounts have in fact handled the "Asian financial crisis" by retranslating its public and policy dimensions into stock-picking opportunities for the investment-minded individual—even as a quarter or more of Indonesian school children leave school, their parents unable to afford their minimal fees. Here again, do Ward's rules help journalists select which story frame to use, or how to weight their relative usages? If so, against what standards?

Closer to home, although there have been noteworthy exceptions, has the immense press coverage of Monica Lewinsky essentially failed to meet Ward's three standards—of empirical factuality, coherence, and openness to rational debate? Or does the audience feel exhausted or

betrayed by the sheer volume and unifocal monotony of the coverage, even though Ward's "pragmatic objectivity" standards have been met in thousands of individual stories?

Ward has taken an important step in presenting his own description of a viable interpretation of news "objectivity." Hopefully those self-same standards can expand subsequent conversation about what more is needed to help modern journalism—and the public it serves—through the thicket of problems facing us at the end of the twentieth century.

**Richard Parker**  
**Senior Fellow**  
**Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press,**  
**Politics and Public Policy**  
**John F. Kennedy School of Government**  
**Harvard University**

# Pragmatic News Objectivity: Objectivity With a Human Face

by Stephen Ward

## Introduction

*Within our own total evolving doctrine, we can judge truth as earnestly and absolutely as can be; subject to correction, but that goes without saying.*

—W. V. Quine, *Word and Object*

This paper provides the philosophical framework for pragmatic news objectivity, a new theory of objectivity for journalism at a time when its ethics and standards are in turmoil. For most of the 20th century, news objectivity has been a dominant ethic, requiring reporters to be accurate and fair, and to deliver the news with as little bias as possible. Traditionally, this has entailed the avoidance of all evaluation and judgment, the use of only facts and perfectly neutral chronicles of events. This traditional formulation of news objectivity is no longer adequate. A new theory is needed, one that retains the ideal of news objectivity while responding to the needs of today's journalism.

The traditional notion of objectivity is flawed because it is based on the mistaken belief that objectivity requires absolute standards and knowledge that is independent of perspective. In practice, traditional objectivity now lacks the ethical force to guide journalists because criticisms of objectivity have cast a pall of doubt over the ideal. Moreover, the relevancy of news objectivity is questioned as newsrooms move toward a more interpretive journalism.

Doubts about news objectivity arise from doubts about objectivity *per se*. Can our beliefs be objective? Since at least the middle of the 20th century, there has been a “simmering dissatisfaction”<sup>1</sup> in academia with the idea of objectivity because of the view that all knowledge, even science, is theory-laden and not value-free. Outside academia, our post-modern

*Stephen Ward was a Fellow at the Shorenstein Center in the spring of 1998. Formerly a reporter, foreign correspondent and bureau chief for The Canadian Press news agency, he is now an Associate Professor at the Sing Tao School of Journalism. He can be reached at the University of British Columbia, 6388 Crescent Road, Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z2. His e-mail address is sjward@interchange.ubc.ca*

culture is skeptical about anything as seemingly outdated as the belief in truth and objectivity. Not surprisingly, this skepticism has seeped into journalism. Media critics claim that news objectivity is impossible because reporters are political actors, not neutral observers.<sup>2</sup> Objectivity, critics say, is too much to expect because journalists are under intense commercial pressure to sell the news and please their bosses. Even if objectivity were possible, these critics argue that it is undesirable because it encourages reporting routines that carry their own biases, such as reinforcing the status quo.<sup>3</sup> Other critics argue that journalists' biases distort not only how they select their stories, but also how they select the facts and sources for stories. Further, biases are said to affect how reports are edited, how headlines are written and even how photographs are chosen. Many of these criticisms are unhelpful to working journalists because the critics fail to provide alternatives to news objectivity. Rejection of traditional objectivity without a viable alternative ideal would open the door to undisciplined, irresponsible journalism.

This paper defines objectivity in a philosophical sense and then applies the concept to journalism. It concludes by replying to three fundamental questions. Unlike traditional objectivity, pragmatic objectivity does not require detachment from all values and perspectives—an impossible demand on humans. Instead, it tests the essential activities of interpreting, evaluating and adopting a perspective. Pragmatic news objectivity allows for human failings; it wears a human face.<sup>4</sup>

## **Pragmatic Objectivity: The Philosophical Basis**

Both the proponents and opponents of objectivity get objectivity wrong. Both define objective knowledge as belief based firmly on neutral facts or absolute standards of logic and reason. Objective knowledge is knowledge of reality that is independent of anyone's perspective. The skeptic has little difficulty casting doubt on such strong claims and therefore objectivity is too easily refuted and the real issues are missed. The notion of pragmatic objectivity strips away these incorrect assumptions.

Pragmatic objectivity begins with the premise that everything we know is an interpretation of some aspect of our world. All beliefs, descriptions, theories and points of view contain some element of conceptualization, theorizing and evaluation. Even our perceptions of objects do not provide direct contact with reality, but are the result of much filtering of stimuli by our concepts, beliefs and expectations. Everything we know in science, the professions or journalism is what W. V. Quine, the Harvard philosopher, calls a “man-made fabric” of theories only partially hemmed in by facts.<sup>5</sup> Any interpretation is part of a web of mutually supportive facts, values and theories. What we accept as fact depends upon our theories and values; likewise, the theories and values we accept depend upon facts.

An interpretation is objective if it is well justified according to the best available standards. There are three types of standards: *empirical standards* that test a belief’s agreement with the facts, such as standards for careful observation, controlled experiments, statistical measurement and prediction; *standards of coherence* that evaluate how consistent an interpretation is with the rest of what we believe, such as standards of valid reasoning; and *standards of rational debate* that include a commitment to rational persuasion and tolerance, to fair consideration of rival views and counter-evidence. In many cases, these standards will conflict and imprecise tradeoffs between standards will be required. For example, how many contrary facts are needed before you change a coherent theory? A judgment of objectivity is a judgment about the overall reasonableness of a belief, theory or news report. The belief is reasonable insofar as it balances these standards.

Pragmatic objectivity has five main features. First, objectivity is the rational justification of our beliefs, not the search for some absolute Truth. Second, objectivity is a complex judgment that weighs various standards; it is not a simple feature of a news report. Third, the judgment of objectivity is fallible, a matter of degree, and comparative. The judgment says that interpretation X is more objective than interpretation Y, given certain standards. Fourth, the best available standards are determined by the overall conceptual scheme (or perspective) of a discipline, profession or tradition of inquiry. However, we are not locked into these perspectives, which are open to challenge and change. There are no absolute standards, but we can still

judge some claims as better than others, given some standards. Fifth, the correctness of our basic standards is determined pragmatically by their overall usefulness to achieving whatever theoretical or practical goals we have, from understanding the genetic code and predicting earthquakes to communicating information. Objective belief is not the product of a neutral spectator whose ideas mirror external objects; it is the product of an active problem-solving agent whose beliefs and standards are means to certain goals.

Pragmatic objectivity skirts the two great bogeymen of objectivity—the extreme relativist and the extreme skeptic. The relativist says that none of our beliefs are objective because their truth is relative to our society. The skeptic says none of our beliefs are objective because their truth is not certain. For centuries, defenders of objective belief have answered the relativist and the skeptic by trying to prove that certain knowledge exists. The pragmatic attitude is to acknowledge cheerfully that humans cannot reach certain knowledge, but can muddle along perfectly well with plausible beliefs and standards. All that pragmatic objectivity requires is a skepticism about particular claims and standards. We think from within a historical era and a culture, but we can avoid a narrow viewpoint by keeping our standards of objectivity open to reform. We can do no better.

### ***Objectivity in Journalism***

How does this notion of pragmatic objectivity apply to journalism? News objectivity is a species of pragmatic objectivity. All forms of journalism, including news reports, are interpretations of events with at least some degree of conceptualization, selection, theorizing and evaluation. There are no value-free or theory-free reports. Some degree of interpretation and evaluation haunts even our basic attempts to report an event. For example, a report saying that the Prime Minister of Canada was “stung” by accusations of wrongdoing and “struggled” to reply is an interpretation. Descriptions of an armed standoff between Natives and police as being an “illegal act” by the Natives or a “legitimate affirmation of Native rights” are also interpretations.

The degree of interpretation is what distinguishes news reports from commentary. Instead of dividing journalism into objective news reports and subjective opinion, it is better to see journalism as a continuum. At one end of the continuum are stories that stay close to the

facts, such as reports about car accidents, fires and petty crime. In the middle are stories that contain context, judgments, interpretations and assessments of the significance of events, such as reports about protests, government decisions and social issues. At the other end of the continuum are stories about highly complex topics such as civil wars, foreign lands and political intrigue. In such cases hard facts are in limited supply, interpretation is king and the objectivity of a story may be debatable. Moving across the continuum, we encounter stories with increasing distance from known facts, increasing amounts of interpretation, and decreasing degrees of objectivity.

An objective news report is an objective interpretation; the report is objective to the extent that it satisfies the best available standards. What are the standards of objectivity for journalism? They are the same general standards that apply to philosophical objectivity, as previously discussed: empirical standards, standards of coherence and standards of rational debate. Moreover, journalism has developed its own norms of news objectivity. These norms come in two types: norms of factuality and norms of impartiality. Norms of factuality require reports to be truthful and relevant. Truthfulness is the use of accurate facts, quotations and paraphrases; it seeks official documentation and reliable sources. Relevance means that reports are substantially complete, contain the most important facts and address the most important issues. The norms of impartiality require balanced and fair reports about disputes and controversy. In addition, journalists have translated these norms into a wide range of detailed rules of practice, such as requiring two independent sources on a breaking story. These norms and rules test a report's objectivity in the hurly-burly of a newsroom.

Sometimes, these standards and rules conflict and quandaries abound. The duty to inform truthfully may conflict with the duty to respect a person's privacy. For instance, informing a community that a convicted pedophile has taken up residence must be weighed against the duty to respect the pedophile's rights and privacy. When such conflicts arise, there will be tradeoffs between norms. The privacy rights of the pedophile may be sacrificed to public safety if there is a high risk that he will re-offend and if he has moved next door to an elementary school. When journalists make these tradeoffs, the circumstances of the case will help to guide the search for a compromise between opposing

standards. To evaluate a report, or series of reports, as objective is to weigh and balance these many standards—standards determined by the craft of journalism and the public it serves. Evaluation of the objectivity of a piece of journalism is fallible and difficult. One difficulty is that the standards themselves must be interpreted. For example, is the relevance of a story to be decided by journalists, by experts, or by what the public finds interesting? Must a balanced report include all possible views or only the credible ones? Who decides which ones are credible? Decisions about relevancy and balance test the journalist's ability to make weighted judgments in a problematic context, under pressure of deadlines. There are no easy formulas to help one decide, no absolute principles. Yet reasonable, non-arbitrary judgments must be made about specific norms such as fairness and the overall objectivity of a story.

In summary, traditional news objectivity is based on a positivism that accepts only factual statements as objective. Traditional news objectivity disallows interpretation, value and theory in reports. Pragmatic news objectivity allows such perspectives, provided they meet the tests of agreed-upon standards.

Adoption of this pragmatic view of news objectivity has several advantages. One advantage is that it shifts the debate away from irresolvable, abstract disputes about the theoretical possibility of objectivity to more manageable, concrete questions about the degree of objectivity of a specific report, relative to other reports. The question is not whether a reporter makes an interpretation or if the reporter's claim corresponds with reality, but rather, to what degree the story is justified or plausible—relative to our tests of objectivity. Another advantage is that the idea of pragmatic news objectivity can be applied to a wide range of journalism, from news reports to features. Proponents of pragmatic news objectivity can ask about the degree of objectivity of an analysis or even an opinion column. Traditional news objectivity can't make sense of the idea of an objective opinion column because it assumes that only factual statements are objective and objectivity is an all-or-nothing affair. A third advantage is that the question about whether journalists should be objective becomes a pragmatic question about the usefulness of objectivity to particular types of journalism in particular contexts. Objectivity is not the only valuable tradition in journalism, nor is it an ethic that must be followed rigidly in all contexts. The restraint of



objectivity—of factuality and impartiality—should be felt most strongly in news reports because the goal of such activity is careful, accurate informing. However, a strict objectivity may be less appropriate for investigative reporting, public journalism or political satire.

These considerations should lower our expectations about what objective journalism can achieve. Too often, objectivity is defined by some unrealistic standard. For example, Herbert J. Gans thinks objectivity is impossible because there is no “perfect and complete reproduction (or construction) of external reality.”<sup>6</sup> But reproducing reality is too strong a requirement. Conversely, we should not identify objectivity with something too narrow. For example, Theodore L. Glasser ridicules objectivity as a lazy citing of obvious facts and quoting of officials.<sup>7</sup> A more realistic view is that journalism gives us incomplete, yet important, information. A report is neither a copy of reality nor a mental (or social) construction. News is something in between: the depiction of an event from a perspective. Journalism brings together the mind *and* the world. A report is the product of worldly facts and the interpretive skills of the reporter.

### **Facts, Values and Neutrality**

Three major questions are likely to arise about pragmatic news objectivity. First, does pragmatic news objectivity undermine the role of facts in journalism? Second, by allowing perspective and evaluation in stories, does the theory open the door to subjectivity or bias? Third, how can an objective journalist be both neutral and committed to standards and values?

Facts remain a vital, albeit limited, test of pragmatic news objectivity. For example, investigative journalists seek hidden facts to expose corruption. However, in some cases, there may be disagreement on the facts, or insufficient facts to establish a claim. Purported facts may be false, manipulated or twisted. Facts do not carry their meanings on their sleeves—they need context. In opinion polls, for instance, the difficulty of correctly understanding the results shows that facts need to be interpreted against other things we know. In science reporting, the facts of a study on cancer rates must be compared with background levels of cancer. Moreover, yet-to-be-discovered facts may, in the future, prove the original news report wrong. Just as facts underdetermine scientific theory, so too do facts underdetermine our news reports.<sup>8</sup>

The cognitive skills required in journalism, from questioning assumptions to identifying

trends, go far beyond the traditional model of the objective journalist as a passive recorder of facts. Reporters must cognitively transcend the level of isolated facts to understand the event in question. There are, literally, too many things to observe in the world. When reporters cover a complex event, they organize a blizzard of information by selecting the most important facts, picking the relevant issues and choosing story angles. Then they organize these facts under concepts, analogies, narratives and other ways of understanding. For example, good reporting on government documents, which are brim-full with facts, is impossible without hanging the news story on some conceptual structure, such as ideas about what to expect from the report and what facts are important. This selecting and organizing is what people do in all their purposive activity. Selection of facts can be biased, but an unedited parade of facts can mislead if their context is not provided. Not to employ such conceptual structures is to allow spin doctors to confuse you with their own selected facts. Objectivity, in such reporting, is about the methods by which journalists assemble and interpret the data. Some critics argue that the news media approach events with frames of reference (or perspectives) that bias how they interpret the facts. The Western news media, for example, may interpret Latin American revolutionaries as dangerous, leftist rebels, rather than as freedom fighters. It has been suggested, mistakenly, that the existence of frames means that news objectivity is impossible. The correct view is that journalists can't avoid using frames of reference; however, the frames should be made explicit so they can be evaluated—objectively.

The second question asks if subjectivity or bias will result from pragmatic news objectivity. A news report is not subjective simply because it makes an evaluation or assumes a value. The restraint of pragmatic news objectivity derives from its tests and standards, even though the standards are not absolute and their application is fallible. The worry about bias arises from a suspicion that all values and standards are inherently subjective, both inside and outside journalism. But values are not merely subjective preferences, and evaluations have better or worse reasons. It is not enough to say simply that I prefer (or value) X over Y when it comes to justifying important public policy decisions, or journalism practices. I need to argue that X is worthy of rational support by showing that my value judgment satisfies the best available evidence and standards to some degree. Thoughtful

public policy positions on substantive issues, such as global warming, or the treatment of heroin addicts, are not just arbitrary expressions of feeling. They are positions built up by making rational links between facts, theories, goals and values. Similarly, thoughtful journalism stories are not just expressions of feeling; they also make rational links between facts, theories and values. Where there are fundamental differences over values and standards, it may be impossible to resolve disputes. But given some agreement on basic standards and values, the journalist and the non-journalist can rationally and objectively assess viewpoints as being more or less reasonable.

Objective reporters make two types of evaluation. First, they evaluate the value judgments and interpretations of other people for accuracy and credibility. Second, they evaluate their own reports for accuracy and credibility. These evaluations are based on some conception of the basic values of journalism practice, such as accuracy, fairness and balance. A reporter who adopts pragmatic news objectivity will evaluate stories according to the basic standards listed above. These values play a vital role in the construction of stories by guiding the evaluation of claims and alleged facts. Sources must be evaluated as credible or not credible. Some viewpoints (and claims) must be deemed to be more reasonable than other viewpoints. The evaluation of an entire story, as accurate and credible, will be a complex balancing of fact, theory and value. For example, a story on the social impact of a government decision will combine fact, value, social science and theoretical prediction. These entanglements of fact and value are ubiquitous in journalism because of the web-like nature of our beliefs. Evaluation is a difficult, but unavoidable, task of objective interpretation in journalism.

The third question challenges the neutrality of pragmatic news objectivity. Does it violate a defining feature of traditional news objectivity—the idea of strict neutrality? Yes. Strict neutrality is neither possible nor desirable. Neutrality is not an absolute norm that must be observed in all contexts, in all stories. As a component of pragmatic news objectivity, neutrality comes in various forms and degrees. The type and degree of neutrality depends on the story.

The opposition to objectivity derives in part from mistaken images of neutrality. The neutral journalist is seen as a detached chronicler, taking no sides, drawing no conclusions, no matter how horrific an event may be. Another

view of the neutral journalist is a stenographer of official comments, never questioning the sources. These images assume that neutrality means that reporters have no values. But this *can't* be right—objectivity and neutrality are themselves fundamental values. Journalists commit themselves to objectivity and neutrality because these values produce a journalism that accurately informs citizens. Objectivity and neutrality are means to intrinsic public goods, such as a democratic way of life. Outside journalism, judges, peacekeepers and referees also use neutral procedures as means to their larger goals (and values) of justice, peace, and a fair game. They make fair evaluations and draw conclusions. No one should suppose that the judge, the referee or the journalist is completely neutral and value-free—or should be. Neither judging nor reporting is subjective simply because it is guided by values.

What sort of neutrality is suited to pragmatic news objectivity? It is an impartiality of method, of *how* you deal with an issue. Neutrality is not prejudging the issue. Objective, neutral reporters should approach issues without allowing their passions, interests or preconceptions to bias their reports. Objective reporters are not epistemological eunuchs whose reports can never come to a conclusion; where appropriate, reporters may make fair evaluations based on all the evidence. Neutrality demands not the absence of judgment and feeling but their subjection to objective, public scrutiny—as much testing for fact and logic as journalism allows.

Pragmatic objectivity regards the journalist as a participant in society with a vested interest in the health of its institutions, including the institution of journalism. The journalist's commitment to the values of objectivity and neutrality are part of a public philosophy of journalism dedicated to democratic ideals. The journalist may be an observer, but is never a completely disinterested observer. As Robert MacNeil puts it:

We (journalists) are not social engineers but each one of us has a stake in the health of this democracy. Democracy and the social contract that makes it work are held together by a delicate web of trust, and all of us in journalism hold edges of the web. We are not just amused bystanders, watching the idiots screw up."<sup>9</sup>

Pragmatic news objectivity, therefore, is compatible with public journalism's aim to revitalize civic life.<sup>10</sup> The journalist can still report

independently and objectively from within his broad commitment to a vibrant, democratic public sphere. A journalist can be committed to democratic ideals without being biased, ideological or narrowly partisan. Pragmatic objectivity does have an agenda, but it is the public's agenda: to facilitate rational and fair public policy decisions for all citizens. It is better to state these broad commitments up front than to avoid examining them because objective reporters supposedly don't have commitments. This engaged form of objectivity is a core ethic from which today's journalism can draw "practical guidance and moral strength."<sup>11</sup>

Journalism needs to experiment with different notions of neutrality for different types of stories. For straight news reports, two forms of neutrality are desirable: one cautious, the other more liberal. Cautious neutrality means the reporter does not take sides, makes no explicit judgments and avoids contentious inferences. This careful approach is appropriate for news reports about sensitive legal cases and disputes involving contradictory evidence and damaging allegations. Caution is called for in these cases because the danger of getting the story wrong is great—the facts are unclear and the claims advanced are extremely controversial. Caution is appropriate where there is a real likelihood that irresponsible or inaccurate reporting could interfere with the operations of important institutions such as the courts, or inflict harm on individuals.

A more liberal neutrality allows the journalist to make explicit evaluations and judgments, so long as such interpretations are grounded in fact, logic and other objective tests. Liberalized neutrality is appropriate for reports about social and political issues where the public needs some context and assessment. It is also appropriate for interpretive and analytical pieces. For example, the approach of a Canadian report on the Canada-United States dispute over West Coast salmon catches could be neutral, in the sense of avoiding prejudgment and not rushing to the defense of Canada. Yet, the report could include a historical perspective, an environmental assessment of fishing practices and evaluation of a group's political strategy. The report is objective to the degree that the evaluations and historical interpretations satisfy the standards mentioned previously.

Pragmatic objectivity's stress on basic commitments raises one last fundamental question: What is the relationship between pragmatic news objectivity and so-called committed journalism,

such as investigative and advocacy reporting? Some journalists reject detachment and write from an explicit, attached viewpoint. They believe news objectivity requires stultifying neutrality that closes its eyes to evil.<sup>12</sup>

Objective journalists are committed in the sense of having ethical commitments and being engaged in society. But objective journalists are not advocates of specific causes; objective reporters are not willing to compromise their standards, e.g., to distort the facts to achieve their ends. Second, objective journalism can and should co-exist with other journalistic styles and traditions. It is a mistake to portray the difference between pragmatic news objectivity and attached journalism as a stark choice between cool detachment and impassioned attachment. Both the objective reporter and the attached reporter are committed to goals, although the goals and the means may differ. The objective reporter values accurate informing through objectively tested reports. The attached reporter emphasizes reform of society and uses argument and persuasion to prompt action. I believe journalism needs objectivity *and* attachment. This means that analyses, investigative stories and background features should accompany objective news reports on major issues. Moreover, many stories can combine the techniques of objective and non-objective journalism, e.g., reports may combine the story-telling techniques of feature journalism with the hard facts of objective reporting. Journalism's history offers many examples of blending objective and non-objective reporting techniques, from the magazine muckrakers of the early 1900s to post-Watergate investigative reporters.

We need both the passion of attachment and the restraint of objectivity to work together to produce solid, engaging journalism. Objectivity controls our penchant to speculate and promote. Attachment—whether in the form of thought-provoking analysis or the exposure of corruption—lifts journalism above a superficial coverage of events. The standards of objectivity should play the largest role in shaping our daily news in the major areas of education, politics, health, the economy, environment and foreign affairs. But in such reports, there is room for valuable interpretation. A narrow, traditional standard of objectivity that allows only facts in reports is useless to much of contemporary journalism. But a journalism of attachment that stresses feelings, value judgments and interpretations, without objectivity, is reckless. Journalism ethics needs to develop flexible objective

guidelines to test interpretations across a wide range of stories.

Pragmatic news objectivity embraces a pluralistic theory of journalism which claims that the public sphere needs a variety of types of journalism motivated by a variety of purposes—to inform, educate, challenge, critique, satirize and reform. No form of journalism is inherently more valuable than other kinds.<sup>13</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Why should we bother to save objectivity if it has so many problems? Traditional news objectivity tends to reduce reports to collections of official facts; pragmatic news objectivity requires a complex weighing of standards. Nevertheless, reporting today needs the restraint of objectivity, and this need will increase as we move into the next century. We live in an age of 24-hour news channels, of infotainment, of nine-second sound bites and of celebrity journalism. We wade through a deluge of information—and misinformation—on the Internet. Fierce competition in the news marketplace calls for speedy production of attention-grabbing stories. Global economic and technological forces are pushing journalists to do careless or unobjective reporting. Objectivity resists such forces by testing stories with demanding ethical standards.

Uncertainty about objectivity can lead to confusion in newsroom practice and the erosion of standards. Reporters and editors need a clear idea of what objectivity is and why it is valuable. Many reporters—and new codes of ethics—avoid use of the word “objectivity” and instead talk about some of its components, such as fair-

ness and balance. But these components themselves are just as controversial as “objectivity.” Also, the components of objectivity cannot individually provide an adequate journalism ethic because each is only one feature of an objective report. Objectivity is a comprehensive ideal that can justify the more specific values of fairness, accuracy and accountability to the public.

A new theory of objectivity is needed because journalism is moving away from a rigid, traditional style of objective reporting that eliminates any judgment or hint of editorializing. More and more, reporters use a lively, opinionated style, or adopt an interpretive stance toward stories. In Canada, even the more traditional newsrooms of *The Globe and Mail* and The Canadian Press practice an objectivity that mixes facts with interpretation and context. Journalists increasingly see themselves as providing meaning to the daily barrage of fragmented news items. But giving meaning to an event is not a simple, uncontroversial procedure. The meaning may be biased or ideological. Journalists need a theory of objective interpretation to guide their forays into interpretive journalism.

Democracy continues to need objective reporters who care about responsible communication. Objectivity restrains journalists who would sacrifice accuracy and fairness to advocate causes. It restrains those who would use journalism to injure enemies and to pursue their own ends. To devalue objectivity is to leave the public sphere even more vulnerable to manipulation than it is today. In a culture that lacks confidence in objectivity, demagogues prosper and the quality of public debate suffers.

## Endnotes

1. Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), p. 130.
2. Timothy E. Cook, *Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
3. Gaye Tuchman, *Making the News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978).
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5. W. V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), p. 42.
6. Herbert J. Gans, "Multiperspectival News," in *Philosophical Issues in Journalism*, ed. Elliot D. Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 190.
7. Theodore L. Glasser, "Objectivity and News Bias," in *Philosophical Issues in Journalism*, ed. Elliot D. Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 176.
8. W. V. Quine, "On the Reasons for the Indeterminacy of Translation," *Journal of Philosophy* 67 (March 1970). Quine claims that theories are empirically "underdetermined" in his many books.
9. Robert MacNeil, "Regaining Dignity," *Media Studies Journal* 9. No. 3 (Summer 1995): 110–11.
10. Jay Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right: Public Journalism and the Troubles in the Press* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1996).
11. Rosen, p. 29.
12. Martin Bell, the former BBC war correspondent, has supported this view in his "The Truth is Our Currency," in *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 3(1)(1998): 102–09. See my "Answer To Bell: Objectivity and Attachment in Journalism," in *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 3(3)(1998): 121–25.
13. My journalistic pluralism is based on the moral pluralism of Isaiah Berlin, Charles Taylor and John Kekes. See Kekes's *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

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