

Doctrine in Decay – the Post-Objectivity Vacuum in Journalism

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When I look at the front page of the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* or the London *Sun* ...
When I see Fox News ...
When I hear the content of commercial talk radio in Australia or the United States ...
Objectivity is not the first word that springs to mind.

It is clear that the formats associated with objective journalism are increasingly surrounded by – and often supplanted by – more opinionated, judgemental and partisan presentations of news.

It is equally clear that there are often market and organizational rewards for these more opinionated forms of journalism.

So the first of the three themes in my paper today and the first of the senses in which I think objectivity is a doctrine in decay is the increasing number of news outlets where objectivity is eclipsed in favour of partisanship or decidedly one sided presentations.

Moreover it is not simply that the mainstream media continue as they were with more variety around them. It is that these media increasingly have affected the way the mainstream media make news judgements.

When we look at the manifest failures of reporting in the lead up to the Iraq war – especially in America and Australia, somewhat less so in Britain – it was the political context partly fanned by these vociferous organs of opinion that influenced the news judgements of the mainstream media.

The second sense in which I think objectivity is a doctrine in decay comes from examining journalists' attitudes.

In survey research, Australian journalists would seem to be as committed to objectivity as any in the world. In Julianne Schultz's mid 1990s survey, 88 per cent said was very important for a 'journalist to be as objective as possible' and the remaining 12 per cent said it was somewhat important.

However when you do the deeper probing that qualitative interviewing allows this apparently strong consensus quickly disappears. In my unstructured interviews with journalists in the 1980s, when discussing objectivity I found they fell into three main groups.

Just about one fifth rejected the idea of objectivity, sometimes vigorously so, but almost always then substituted some near surrogate, such as fairness or accuracy or balance.

The rest endorsed objectivity but fell into almost equal groups each endorsing contradictory positions.

One group thought that objectivity represented an unrealizable ideal; the other half that it was an unproblematic achievement.

So comments in the first group included ‘Objectivity for journalists is like Jesus Christ for Christians. Even if you seek it, you can’t attain it ...’

On the other hand, in the second, ‘I aim for objectivity. It is semi-automatic, because it is trained in to you. You get both sides.’

There were many interesting aspects of the way journalists talked about objectivity. But for today’s purpose the most important point to make is that I got no sense that professed attitudes to objectivity actually guided their decision-making.

The first indicator of this was that they never talked about it. Journalists have well developed senses of ethics regarding relationships – how to handle issues of independence versus intimacy; balancing public responsibilities against private trusts and obligations. They often volunteer examples about these. They also talk about dilemmas about when and when not to publish.

But I never heard any journalists talk about dilemmas involving objectivity and how to apply it. This silence is more powerful testimony than how they respond to a structured survey question.

The second piece of evidence supporting the idea is the great variety of responses. People working for the same organization gave widely varying opinions suggesting the issue had not been canvassed within the organization. Colleagues who shared similar views on political and other matters differed quite markedly on objectivity again suggesting that it was rarely discussed.

The profusion of meanings attached to the term by journalists raises its own analytical issues – namely how can a doctrine so plastic and malleable, a concept invested with so many different understandings, be credited with such explanatory force?

So this leads into the third of the themes of this paper – the unsatisfactory nature of analysts’ contemporary critiques of objectivity.

I say analysts because I am including not only scholars but critics from within journalism. For example in a book published last year which received wide attention, *Flat Earth News* by investigative reporter Nick Davies, he wrote: ‘The great blockbuster myth of modern journalism is objectivity, the idea that a good newspaper or broadcaster simply collects and reproduces the objective truth. It is a classic Flat Earth tale, widely believed and devoid of reality. ... In this sense all news is artifice’ (p.111).

My criticisms of the modern commentary on objectivity are the following:

First, it has failed to recognize the changes by which objectivity's place in contemporary journalism has become more limited. Their critiques have not kept pace with changes in practice.

W. Lance Bennett in a recent edition of one of America's best selling textbooks said 'Yet for all the change, one feature of the profession that has remained nearly constant since the rise of a professional press in the 1920s to the present day is the over-riding commitment to objectivity ...'

Second they attribute too much explanatory power to objectivity; they rest too many of the failings of contemporary journalism at the door of this concept.

We have already noted the variety of meanings attached to the term. Another issue pertaining to its explanatory power is the selectivity with which it is employed.

It is often used to explain the passivity of reporting, in particular the reliance on official sources. However reporting is much more passive in a culpable sense at some times than others. How can a constant doctrine be used to explain such variation?

Third, and perhaps most striking is the lack of evidence in most claims about the contemporary influence of objectivity is the lack of evidence presented, is that it proceeds with little if any empirical discipline.

The critics sometimes get angry about what they call the myth of objectivity. Davies above said the myth is widely believed – by whom? The public? If objectivity is a myth, who is taken in by it? What evidence is there that the audience naively believes the news is objective and is fooled by it?

Conclusion

In the abstract, I suggested – not entirely seriously - that one day we might look back with nostalgia at the era of objectivity.

But I am making a serious point.

I'm not against opinionated and judgemental journalism, and certainly not against vigorous and active journalism, but a system that rewards the ability to express opinions more than the ability to report will have some drawbacks.

The contemporary danger is if media institutions reward the strength of opinion more than the quality of evidence.

Second, when people talk of breaking free of the constraints of objectivity, they often picture a flowering of opinion. But more opinionation does not necessarily mean more diversity. Moreover because commercially they often take the audience as their touchstone about what opinion should be strongly expressed, it is likely that the great bulk of opinion will be about reinforcing public opinion more than challenging it.

One senior journalist once said to me that the press gallery is either at someone's feet or at their throat. Journalists feel free to express opinion most strongly when that opinion conforms with audience opinions and when they feel the political tide is running in that direction.

Finally and most importantly, to paraphrase CP Scott, opinion is free but getting the facts is expensive. A proliferation of opinion is no substitute for devoting resources to reporting, and it is cutbacks in this area which is the biggest contemporary threat to news quality.