

3 *Impartiality as a Regulative Ideal*

INTRODUCTION

We have seen that adequate news journalism must aspire to the goal of truth and, moreover, in such a way that what is reported is set in context and promotes the audience's understanding of why the event reported is significant. It is this conception that, properly speaking, underwrites the conception of the news media as the fourth estate, but more broadly it includes stories of human interest and concern. The point of the implicit contract between the public and the news media is to achieve knowledge and understanding of current events and developments in the world around us. Hence the news media's duty is to provide true reports that enable us to get a quick but informed grasp on happenings to people and institutions which not only directly affect our functioning in society but are of social, cultural, or human interest. We have dwelt briefly on constraints and measures that such a conception might entail for good journalistic practice. However, if the notion of an implicit contract between the news media and the general public is a useful one, it ought to supply us with the basic regulative ideals to which good journalistic practice ought to adhere.

REGULATIVE IDEALS

Given the point of the implicit contract, journalists must shape and phrase their report according to the level of understanding of the intended audience. It is important to bear in mind that typically this means nonspecialists. The point of reporting the news is to convey the essence of what has happened in a way that

can be easily grasped and thus constitute a basis from which to assess what has happened. Thus the level of comprehension that a story presumes is of the essence. A story filled with scientific or bureaucratic jargon, for example, will obfuscate the supposed interest for and significance of a story for the general reader. Hence the reader will be unable to judge on any basis what is happening, never mind being able to come to the appropriate judgment. The crucial thing to bear in mind is that the news media must provide news bulletins and radio and television programs that any reasonably literate nonspecialist can comprehend. Of course, there will be a basic range over which this is true. Hence different papers will typically aim at a generally presumed higher or lower level of understanding and interest in particular kinds of stories. Thus what one may legitimately presume in terms of comprehension, on the basis of vocabulary, about a reader of *The New York Times* may not be legitimate in terms of *U.S.A. Today*. Moreover, there will be a range of feature journalism, magazines, and current affairs programs that go in for in-depth explanation of context and critical analysis and, as such, play an integral role in both supporting and contributing to the news agenda. But the bare essence of news must be, if nothing else, addressed to the general audience, who may not be particularly interested. Therefore the story's significance must be made clear and require little specialist knowledge: presumptions, jargon, and motivations should be stated in as plain a language as possible while still retaining the appropriate tone and emphasis for the report.

Bear in mind that this does not mean that the news media must pitch their journalism at the lowest level of comprehension. There are threshold constraints in terms of the information required by any reasonably informed person.¹ Indeed, certain basic information and understanding must be presumed in order for the reporter to be in a position to communicate anything at all. But different audiences do entail distinct levels of understanding to which the story should be pitched. Furthermore, there are institutional constraints of space, time, the editing process, the need for pictures, and so on. Nonetheless, within such constraints, the journalist must gear the story to the intended audience in order to communicate effectively.

Focusing on the understanding of the intended audience as a regulative ideal encapsulates the point of journalism: to render complex events comprehensible, within given time constraints. What is required of the journalist will obviously vary according to both the audience addressed and the nature of the story covered. For example, covering a war story such as Bosnia will obviously require reference to a wider context. In the case of the war in Bosnia only a very limited understanding could be presumed. For example, many Americans and a surprising number of Europeans would have been hard pressed to locate Bosnia on the map before the war started. Moreover, as Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia had formerly been subsumed peacefully under Tito's Yugoslavia for four decades or more, even a minimal awareness of the history and nature of the ethnic animosities could not be presumed. Hence merely episodic coverage of the Bosnian war,

focusing just on UN troop movements, the shelling, skirmishes, and battles, was obviously inadequate if unsupplemented by explanations as to why Serbia was seeking to expand and why the animosities were so complex. Moreover the constant pressures of deadlines and time constraints of rolling news services can exacerbate the tendency merely to report without really finding out and conveying what exactly is going on. CNN may have congratulated themselves on their coverage of Bosnia because of the talent and technology they had at their disposal. But what good are such things when Peter Arnett was forced to do fourteen live shots in a day, using only news agency reports to convey to his viewers what was going on at the battlefronts? The nearest many reporters in Bosnia came to eyewitness reports was the rooftop perch of their accommodation. When the longest period of time that journalists are allowed to foray into the actual situation is forty minutes, it is not surprising that the result is news agency patter giving the appearance of news while failing to convey any deeper understanding of the war.² If the backdrop against which events are happening is not sketched out and reporters are restrained from finding things out for themselves, then obviously we cannot expect a general audience to understand how things are, and thus the contract between the public and news media remains unfulfilled.

Of course, there may be an immensely complex chain of events leading up to the news story itself. But it does not follow that journalists should devote as much time and space to the background events. Rather they should seek to flag or reveal the practical media, political, policy, and human interest aspects of the story in ways that do not oversimplify. Hence we can make sense of the demand that the news media should not concentrate on the human drama at the expense of promoting an adequate understanding of the complex issues involved. Moreover, if the story is a long-running one, over time a certain basic understanding of aspects of the story can be built up and assumed. An obvious example is the coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial. From the run-up to the trial to the verdict itself, the news coverage was intense. The opening of the trial was covered live by at least five national television networks, and polls suggest that 82 percent of the U.S. population followed the trial fairly closely.³ Thus a cumulative understanding of the basics of the case could be built up and fine details examined. Moreover, as the court case proceeded, different aspects of the case itself could be examined and the questions it touched off—from issues of race, domestic violence, money, and justice to the power of media fame and the role of the media in the process of justice. Understanding what is going on is not merely a matter of providing ever more factual information. Rather we need the relevant background understanding required to make sense of what the significance of the facts of the case are.

For example, imagine a reporter covering the purported disregard for elderly patients without health insurance in public hospitals. A reporter might include the fact that some of the more seriously ill patients in such hospitals had, unbeknown to them, been marked down as patients not to be resuscitated should they suffer

another heart attack. Phrased like this, without further explanation, such a fact seems to reveal the callous practice and cruel treatment of the poorest and most vulnerable in society. However, the fact looks far more innocuous when conjoined with the explanation that, in fact, the rationale involved explains why it is a common part of medical practice. For patients who have suffered a number of heart attacks and whose condition gives them no chance of reasonable recovery it is usually considered preferable if they are not perpetually resuscitated only to suffer more pain, consuming greater resources, and culminating in eventual death from an irreversible heart attack weeks later. Thus, if a patient is unable to express his or her own wishes and where there is no family to act by proxy, doctors commonly agree on an order not to resuscitate.⁴ Looked at in this light, the use of such notices in hospitals is, of itself, innocuous. If a fact is cited where the appropriate understanding cannot be presumed, then the rationale should be explained. Thus the selection of details and the representation of their significance must be geared toward the presumed understanding of the intended audience.

The second regulative ideal generated by the implicit contract is that of the impartial reporter. Remember that the point of the contract is to enable the general public to have a fair and accurate account of events so that they can judge situations for themselves. Thus what should be distinctive of a journalist or news story proper must be a certain kind of detachment. One way to grasp what is involved is to imagine what might distinguish a reporter of a demonstration from, say, a participant in the demonstration. Whatever the reporter's beliefs about the validity of the demonstration concerned and the behavior of those involved, the reporter should aim to maintain a professional distance from the issues involved to portray them accurately and dispassionately for all. This stands in marked contrast to the partial, evaluative concerns, prejudices, or emotions that a participant in the demonstration would be likely to convey. After all, the very reason that demonstrators are there is because they feel passionately about the cause on behalf of which they are demonstrating: they believe their viewpoint to be the right one and will naturally represent it as such. The reporter's duty is to convey their viewpoint, but in a balanced fashion, so that the considerations of others who feel differently are presented in the fair and appropriate light.

This is not to deny that a journalist may be motivated to cover a story because he or she thinks that one side is right or has initial prejudices. Hence a journalist's initial prejudices may ultimately be falsified, which can be infuriating when you have spent time and effort chasing what turns out to be a nonstory. But the point is that the intrinsic goal of journalistic activity is to report what is true and not what we might wish were the case. So rather than merely cast events in a light that confirms the reporter's unreflective suspicions, he or she has an ethical obligation to investigate whether those suspicions are well founded. Of course, journalists do typically start with implicit assumptions and possible hypotheses that may explain an event.⁵ But a good journalist will always remain open to the

possibility that the true story may involve a completely different explanation from the one, preinvestigation, that they would have been inclined to give.

The regulative ideal of the impartial journalist enables us to pick out a significant flaw in unethical journalism: a disregard for the truth in favor of the values, prejudices, or beliefs a journalist or news organization merely presumes to be true. The fabrication of the boy "Jimmy" by Janet Cooke for her "exclusive" is thus flawed even if, as a composite fictional character, it conveyed something of what it was like on the streets of Washington.⁶ The impression that Cooke's story gives might be wholly accurate in terms of substance, and the sense of what is "reported" may in fact be true; but whether it is or not is a matter for empirical verification. The problem with Cooke's "report" is that it presents itself *as* empirical verification: a story that refers to actual people and events on Washington's streets. But it is, in fact, a speculative, imaginative hypothesis. It is presenting fiction as fact because Cooke was either committed to the idea that Washington's streets were like this or because she wanted an explosive story in order to make her name—or, of course, both. Cooke abrogated a fundamental ideal of ethical journalism: she disregarded and invented facts for her own purposes. If her story had not been presented as factual, but rather in the style of New Journalism, an imaginative re-creation of what life might be like on Washington's streets, then there would not have been such an outcry. But the point is that she presented as fact what was not, in order to suit the particular line she was taking. Reporters who take bribes from political parties, or papers that skew stories to fit archetypes because this will help sell papers, are guilty in a similar respect.

The ability to weigh up the evidence impartially, to write a story open to confirmation or falsification by the evidence, and to draw out reasoned conclusions rather than being led by mere intuition, feeling, or commitment, is the essence of good journalism. The ideal of impartiality helps us to pick out what we should be wary of when considering the danger of reporters and journalists getting too close to their sources. The danger is an ever-present one, especially in the field of political journalism, as there is often the lure of access to privileged information offered by those figures with a particular viewpoint to push. The danger of being drawn into the same circles, the feeling of privileged access, the attraction of the personalities and even friendships can lead to professional failure because a journalist thus drawn in may be emotionally too close, too secure, and have too much vested interest in maintaining a relationship to report things objectively when these rub against the account proffered by a favored source.

A suitable analogy here might be the kind of professional distance that teachers ought to maintain regarding their students. However well-intentioned, building up close personal relationships with students whose papers a teacher has to mark can ultimately place the teacher, psychologically, in an extremely difficult situation, fraught with dilemmas in a way that may distort his or her ability truly

and fairly to judge the student's performance and level of attainment. Hence emotional ties and commitment on the personal, social, and professional level can, in this manner, obstruct proper investigative reporting precisely because the ability to take up an impartial stance is lost. In the same way, an over-reliance on "official" sources of information, due to political, social, or personal inclinations, can be distortive. For example, the unquestioning stance adopted by segments of the press early on toward Joseph McCarthy's charges concerning the supposed communist infiltration of U.S. government and culture in the 1950s clearly constitutes a failure of impartiality. It is not that the facts they reported were inaccurate, nor would anyone think that such charges should be left unreported;⁷ for the description of McCarthy's speeches and charges of treason and communism were accurate. Rather the reports failed to question whether the charges being made were themselves plausible, had any basis in fact, and thus were fair or not. Given that impartiality is a question of what the truth of the matter is, an unreflective deference toward assertions made by those in authority thus constitutes an abrogation of good journalism.

The point is that the ideal of the impartial reporter enables us to make sense of and criticize journalists and media institutions whose reporting of world events is contaminated by or pressed into service for the furtherance of their own personal, political, or social agendas. In the above case a particular reporter was seduced into taking a particular version of events and omitting facts that did not fit with it, in return for professional favors and social prestige. But a failure in impartiality need not be reducible to the personal integrity of a given journalist. An entire news structure may be geared in such a way as to preclude impartiality. If we look at a Leninist conception and use of the news media in early twentieth-century Russia, we see the information communicated by the media conceived wholly in terms of propaganda.⁸ Indeed, until recently, news in the Soviet Union consciously strove not to cover industrial disputes, crime, AIDS, poverty, and even disasters such as Chernobyl until the last possible moment. Even when such stories were covered, the underlying rationale was that failing to cover a huge story like Chernobyl would have brought the news service manifestly into disrepute and revealed it explicitly as an arm of government propaganda.⁹ The purpose of propaganda is to advocate a particular world view, regardless of the facts, and deride the enemy unconstrained by fine distinctions such as truth, falsity, fiction, rumor, and sensationalism. In propaganda, a story need only contain enough recognizable truth to persuade people of a given viewpoint. The point of news is to report the truth, irrespective of what a given viewpoint might wish were the case. Vehicles of propaganda, such as *Pravda*, have no such aim. Thus in George Orwell's *1984*, newspapers are continually written and rewritten without any relation to what in fact happened.¹⁰ Rather, what is reported is what the Party wishes to have happened in a way that renders its actions most consistent and coherent with its ideology. The Ministry of Truth treats truth as

instrumentally valuable rather than as an intrinsic goal, and the use of the term "news" is merely honorific.

The recognition of impartiality as a regulative ideal does not just enable us to criticize personal bias or political propaganda. It provides a basis from which we may criticize any feature that distorts or inhibits the function of journalism: to communicate the truth about significant events in our world. For example, where the intrinsic goal of newspapers and news programs is conceived of solely in business terms, the truth may be conceived merely as an instrumental goal for the accumulation of advertising revenue. Hence a fundamental problem with news programming in the United States is the fact that television programming evolved to maintain viewers' interest between advertising breaks.¹¹ Thus rather than emphasizing the important or significant aspects of the news, the emphasis can sometimes, falsely, incline toward entertainment.

SUBJECTIVISM

However, there is a rather general form of skepticism that would preclude the ideal of impartiality from having any normative force. The basic idea is that what constitutes news, and thus what is significantly true, is itself radically dependent on the media's or viewer's world view and understanding of events. Essentially it amounts to the claim that all news is inherently subjective. At its most extreme, such a position leads to Baudrillard's infamous claim that the Gulf War only happened on television.¹² In one sense the claim is obviously ludicrous: battles occurred, people died. But the point underlying the rhetoric is not. When we think about a description of an event, the report is obviously driven by the interpretation and evaluation of the events concerned. Reporting is an inherently value-driven process. Thus it is hard to separate clearly between pure description, interpretation, and evaluation. Since different individuals, groups, and societies interpret and evaluate their world differently, this suggests that what constitutes news must be relative to the particular communities involved in any given context. Moreover, for any one news event, there will be a multiplicity of divergent interpretations and evaluations open to potential reporters.

Take a trivial example, such as a football game. Different reporters from different towns might describe the same game differently. A reporter from the home team may describe their leading striker as having a poor game, the defenders as lacking co-ordination, and the opposing team as very lucky. Based on the same evidence a reporter from the visiting team's town may emphasize the skill of his defenders in freezing out a great striker and their striker's verve in outwitting a plucky defence and praise astute play in taking the scoring chances created. The nature of the game seems very different depending on which side one is reporting from. More radically, whether an event is news or not will itself be relative to the interests, values and concerns of the news media concerned.

The interesting claim is that unless an event speaks to our particular interests and concerns, which themselves determine the significance and thus the nature of the event, then it might as well not have happened. This is not a straightforward denial of an event's occurrence. Rather it is to say that events do not have any significance unless they fit into our subjective, and culturally variant, attitudes, interests, and concerns. Thus the meaning of a given event—whether it is news or not, what kind of news it is—depends on and is constituted by the activities of the relevant interpreting journalists, news media, and general culture.

The claim is stronger than the recognition that we may not be in a position to know the truth about particular events. For example, before the Gulf War we were not in a position to know the true scale of the massacre of the Kurds, because of lack of access to the area and local information. This involves only the trivial recognition that we cannot always have access to the facts that would alert us to a news story and set the record straight. Nor is the claim just about the indeterminacy of meaning—that a given event may be open to different possible interpretations regarding its significance. For example, one may quite consistently interpret a sharp rise in violent crime as the result of increasing drug use, the proliferation of guns, the increase in poverty, the retreat of the middle classes from the cities, the dissolution of civil society, and so on. One could imagine articles that approached an announced increase in violence from each of these distinct perspectives. Rather the thesis more radically denies that there are stories or facts that constitute news out there in the world independently of the media's construal and representation of them. What is true of the event itself, and thus whether it is news, depends on the categories, concepts, and values brought to bear by, in the first instance, the media. The basic argument stems from the recognition that the meaning of an event is dependent on context. An obvious example will do to show this.

On 30 August 1994 on the announcement of the ceasefire in Northern Ireland there was a rush of calls for stories covering the ceasefire and the symbolic hopes for the future of the Northern Ireland peace process.¹³ One of the larger issues raised by the ceasefire was how to cover Northern Ireland when it was no longer the threat of violence, bombings, and disturbance that predominated. But on the day of the ceasefire itself the important goal was to capture something about the hopes and promise of peace in the province. Crispin Rodwell from Reuters walked around Belfast and finally came upon a slogan freshly painted on one of the walls: "Time for Peace, Time to Go." So he chose a spot some distance back and photographed the slogan while old ladies walked by and a boy played ball against the wall.

Rodwell sent a batch of photographs through to Reuters, including a photograph of the boy knocking his ball against the wall in front of the slogan "Time for Peace" with the "Time to Go" half of the slogan cropped off. The executive editor of Reuters then telephoned Rodwell to check that it had not been set up in some way by getting someone to paint the slogan or that he had not paid the boy

to play against the wall. Once Reuters were reassured, the photograph was syndicated around the world and used on the front page of most British papers. The point here is that, as Rodwell and the Reuters editor both knew, the slogan "Time for Peace, Time to Go" was in fact a familiar Sinn Fein slogan that had been used for years to express the view that British troops should withdraw voluntarily from Northern Ireland. But, Baudrillard would claim, the meaning of the slogan is transformed by the journalist's clever cropping and the placing of the photograph on newspaper front pages next to lead stories on the ceasefire, above one-line frames, suggesting that the photograph manifested a new hope for people in the province. The photograph as published was taken to express the new hope for peace and mutual understanding. The same slogan under different contexts is actually taken to manifest and symbolize quite distinct sentiments and hopes. The presumption is that the journalist and media community generally determine the relevant context and thus the meaning and significance of an event as news. What enables the slogan to express the symbolic hopes of the community for a fresh peace is the fact that the photographer, Reuters, and the papers who used the photograph have, with a little cropping here and there, framed it as such. Therefore the nature of an event as news is determined by the media community.

But despite the apparent ease with which the argument may be applied, there is something deeply counterintuitive about the conclusion. Why is it so obvious that the meaning or context of an event is appropriately fixed by the media? If anything, surely we want to say that the use to which the media have put the slogan has prised it apart from its original meaning. After all, typically at least, the media come along to an event, to photograph an event afterwards or as it happens and the event itself remains independent of the coverage. Of course, the media can and often do have a more mediating influence. But unless there is a special story to be told about the distorting effect of the media's presence—from staging events for the camera to interest groups attempting to manipulate the media—then the basic case shows the general skeptical thesis to be false. In the specific case discussed, most local people would hardly have seen the slogan as an expression of new hope in the light of the ceasefire. If anything, given the intended meaning of the Feinian slogan, it is a deep irony that it was presented as symbolizing a new departure in the sad history of Northern Ireland's troubles. Hence we ought to feel rather uneasy when photographs are cropped in ways that only partially represent, and thus distort, what is being represented. Although the editor of Reuters rang up to see whether the photograph had been staged, he ought to have been concerned with whether the picture actually misrepresented the assertion of a familiar and highly partisan viewpoint as if it manifested hopeful and tolerant sentiments, thus possibly misrepresenting how those at the heart of the conflict apparently feel. Indeed, in the long run, such coverage may be vicious through painting a false picture of changes in attitude which suggests that only good will is required, something that is far from obviously true.

Someone might ask whether it matters that a particular picture is misleading in this way if it expresses the general sentiments at the announcement of the ceasefire. But, at least here, the point is that whatever else is true, it certainly amounts to falsification, by omission, of the true nature and meaning of the painted slogan. Had the slogan been pictured in full, then, more appropriately, it would have emphasized the wishful euphoria at the time of the ceasefire less and intimated the hard work that still needed and remains to be done. It is only because the nature of an event is significantly prior to and independent of the media coverage of it that we can make sense of the way the media can and often do misrepresent events—from factional reconstructions that present as facts speculative reconstructions and dramatic moments, down to the outright falsification of facts.

The fact that the Northern Ireland photograph distorts the nature of the slogan pictured brings out the most radical consequence of the subjectivist's thesis. If the subjectivist were right, then we would have no possible grounds for claiming that a report misinterprets a particular event. The news media of Germany, the United States, the U.S.S.R., and Britain all framed the lead-up to World War II, the nature of the war itself, and its progress rather differently. Yet they are not necessarily equally true. Of course, many reports were partial and biased. But this is a criticism. For how a report is framed may be inappropriate, especially if it is false. Falsity arises from a gap between the way an event is and the way it has been represented to be. Hence, conceptually, we think it perfectly possible for the media to misconstrue the nature of an event. Just consider how many have reacted within the news media to the coverage of the Gulf War. Retrospectively many in the media consider the primary focus on the Allies' technology to have been grossly misleading.¹⁴ In part this is because the journalists allowed themselves to be misled by the official framing of the events concerned. But the point is that in both cases it is possible for the media to misconstrue and thus inappropriately frame how things in fact are.

The conclusion that the media determine the nature of an event contradicts our common recognition that context cannot be the sole determinant of meaning: the event itself and the language, concepts, and understanding available to us are important constraints too. But even the categories or values we bring to bear upon an event are not themselves wholly relative. After all, it is possible for an entire set of interpretative categories and values to be mistaken. Generally, it is quite possible that Freudians are almost wholly mistaken in construing the fundamental motivations of human action in sexual terms. They have a conceptual scheme, in the light of which they interpret and evaluate human action. But it may be that the underlying beliefs and values they use to explain the meaning and significance of human behavior are mistaken. The general conceptual point brings out the fact that it is quite possible for the news media to misconstrue the nature of an event. Hence reporters may use the wrong words or focus on the wrong aspect of a story. If the radical theory is merely a thesis about the meaning

of a report, then the thesis is trivial and must be supplemented by a theory about an event's significance and how it relates to the world rather than just refer back to the media context. To conceive of certain reports as mistaken is to commit ourselves to the claim that things were and thus should have been represented differently. Hence we cannot be subjectivists about news reporting.

OBJECTIVITY AND THE IDEAL REPORTER

It is crucial to realize that stories, events, people are not infinitely malleable according to the slant a reporter or news organization wishes to give to a story. Indeed, it is a lack of commitment to reporting the way things are or may be that leads to the worst excesses of unethical journalism. The flawed idea that news is merely subjective in the radical sense discussed serves only to lend false credence to such moral degeneration.

The best way of articulating how truth can be both subjective, in the sense that it depends on human experience, and yet objective, in the sense that we can be mistaken about how things are, is to think of secondary qualities such as color.¹⁵ Colors are obviously subjective in the sense that they are necessarily connected to our experience. Nonetheless, we obviously do not count every experience of seeing blue as necessarily an accurate experience of a thing's being blue. For example, we consider certain people to be color-blind precisely because they have the sensation of one color when, by contrast, everyone else sees it as, under standard conditions, another color. This may be due to nonstandard lighting conditions, genetic defects which explain congenital color blindness, or even disease. When we suffer a fever, our taste buds are often distorted, and food can be tasteless or taste quite different. Hence we may be mistaken about tastes and colors even though the sensation we have is, subjectively, unmistakable. We can be mistaken about whether something is blue or is bitter, because of body malfunctioning or nonstandard conditions of perception. We rely on a normative conception or model of the standard observer: what the standard observer unobstructed by physiological distortions would see or taste under normal conditions.

In the case of the good reporter, though, the secondary-properties analogy stretches even further. Far from relying merely on what the standard observer might perceive, we trust that the good reporter's sensibilities are more discriminating than that of the standard observer. The analogy is not merely that, ordinarily, our judgments are not interfered with by genetic or physiological distortions; for even where there are no such distortions, standard observers can be wholly mistaken or only partially grasp the state of affairs concerned. Journalistic judgment may be flawed because it simply is not as sensitive as it needs to be to appreciate the relevant event properly. Just as binoculars enable us to see more perceptively, so a journalist's training and experience hones his ability to pick out the nature of political maneuverings, motivations, and events. Hence the ideal of the impartial reporter relies on a conception of the ideal observer. Of course there

are problems in identifying whether a reporter qualifies as an ideal observer or not. But we can at least spell out various criteria, none of which will alone be sufficient, but possession of a cluster of which will certainly indicate good journalistic judgment and discrimination.

Firstly, a good journalist must have had experience of covering various human tragedies, social issues, or political events. With little or no previous experience a journalist obviously does not have a basis upon which to make the necessary comparisons, because, especially in the coverage of political stories, there is necessarily a comparative element in the interpretation and evaluation of events and characters. Moreover, we would expect the journalist to have had at least some degree of formal training. Training in technical skills—from how to acquire information to writing, filming, and editing—enables the reporter to be proficient in the means required to fulfill his job. Moreover, through developing an understanding of the skills required, training can develop a finer and more discriminating appreciation of what can be achieved, from how to get hold of government information to the use of alliteration and photograph framing to enhance the impact of a story.

An ideal observer of events should lack ingrained prejudices or commitment to pushing a given agenda. This is not equivalent to saying that a reporter should not possess any prejudices, sentiments, or views concerning a particular story. The crucial point is that the reporter should be open to the possibility that the prejudices he has may be mistaken; hence, he or she should look to see whether the story confirms or falsifies his prejudices rather than viewing the story as an instantiation of them. Different ideal observers may vary in their prejudices and presumptions, but they will all be intent on finding out what is the case rather than directed toward confirming their prejudices through covering the story. One way of bringing the contrast out is to consider the case of a reporter who is not politically committed and thus is freer and more able to discern problems in the maneuverings and manipulations of all political parties. By contrast a reporter ideologically committed to the Democratic party may well find it more difficult to subject Democratic politicians to the same kind of critical scrutiny to which he subjects Republicans. For natural psychological reasons our critical gaze tends as a general rule to fail more when directed toward favored causes, and such a failure in journalism leads to a kind of critical myopia.¹⁶ Of course, such journalistic myopia need not be the result of an intellectual or ideological commitment; it may result merely from a susceptibility to the latest fad or fashion. Hence to uncover the truth it is important for the ideal journalist to be able to distance himself or herself from received wisdom or contemporary orthodoxies. A reporter who remains uncommitted in this sense is freer to subject all to his critical gaze and speak out concerning how he finds things to be, independently of favored attachments. A reporter should also be of a composed character, self-disciplined and able to maintain a cool character in the face of great excitement, panic, or danger, so that he can observe details and aspects of an event which

others might miss. For example, Philip Jones Griffiths, who worked for *Life* and other magazines while in Vietnam, describes the way he achieves his fundamental aim of encapsulating the truth, in the following terms; “The way my brain works and my body works is to take a long, calm look at things and try to answer and assess . . . [putting] it together so that under your arm you can have a document that will tell you clearly, truthfully, and as meaningfully as possible what actually happened there.”¹⁷

An important feature of a good journalist is the ability to set aside potential distractions. The failure of the news media coverage of the Gulf War arose partly from the distractions of the warfare technology knowingly displayed by the military. In some ways this distraction led the main focus of the coverage to shift from the war itself to the pyrotechnics of military technology. Similarly, it is familiar for journalists to be tempted by social favors, political power, and financial incentives away from the true nature of a story or from acting with due journalistic integrity. For the allure of power and influence can viciously blur people’s sense of what their job as a journalist is and why they are doing it. As John Yang of *The Washington Post* states with regard to journalists who cover Washington: “A lot of guys over there are so self-important. . . . Their entire existence is based on the fact that they’re White House reporters. They’ve got T-shirts and luggage tags that say ‘White House’ and have the presidential seal. It makes you look like you’re on the team, and a lot of people feel that way.”¹⁸

A different kind of example may help to bring out the distortions that financial incentives and temptations can bring with them. In March 1984 the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) started an informal and then formal investigation into one of the reporters and the editors of *The Wall Street Journal*. The *Journal* had a long-running column, “*Heard on the Street*,” which was an amalgam of gossip, rumors, and stock market analysis: a positive mention in the feature could raise a company’s stock markedly. So obviously anyone with foreknowledge of the column could make a large sum of money, and the SEC had reason to believe that someone was doing just that. The essence of the case turned out to involve the writer of the column, Winans, and his roommate, Carpenter, who were indicted for conspiring to profit from their advance knowledge of the *Journal* articles. Obviously such a lack of journalistic integrity can start to skew exactly what rumors are written up and why. One might also have doubts about placing Winans in sole charge of such a column and at such a poor rate of pay, as Winans apparently complained, which thus exacerbated the obvious temptation.¹⁹

The importance of avoiding distractions and resisting temptation is really the upshot of the requirement to make sure that as journalists we can focus on the appropriate object of a given story. In investigating, attending to, and reporting a story the journalist must always keep in sharp focus the point and purpose of the report concerned. Too often journalists are seduced into explaining the mechanics of a given political policy and its genesis, giving commentary about the

political context, personalities, and critics without making clear why this is directly relevant to the policy announcement concerned. Indeed, quite generally, it sometimes seems as if journalists are writing with their peers in mind rather than for a general audience, often leading toward long-winded descriptions and a preoccupation with jargon.²⁰

It is also important to note a journalist's track record: whether he or she is consistently right and whether people tend to agree with his or her analysis of a given situation over time. Agreement among journalists is often a good indicator that a particular report is fair; of course, it is not sufficient, as the whole press corps may be hoodwinked in a particular instance. But over time the track record of a journalist will speak for itself and is a useful indicator. But the real mark of a good journalist concerns the reason we would expect such agreement: because a journalist's judgment, description, and analysis are reasoned and finely tuned.

The final feature of a good journalist, and the one usually most underrated, is a certain empathy or delicacy of imagination. A good journalist will always have a sense of why people might have acted in a certain way—their possible emotions, motivations, and intentions. Through exercising the sympathetic imagination, he or she will be able to understand characters from the inside. Thus a good reporter should be able to take an audience to the heart of the matter through describing the sights, sounds, and human nuances that we might otherwise miss. But it is important not to confuse understanding with assent. A journalist might, through grasping the pressures and motives involved, understand why a person acted in a certain way and yet still appropriately condemn the resultant action, say corruption, for what it was. Of course one of the problems is that we trust the journalist, often without independent means of verification. Nonetheless, there are clear cases or paradigmatic reports where we can say that they exemplify the properties that we value in good journalism. Hence when difficult or complex matters are involved, where appearances may be tricky or deceptive, we tend to look to what these journalists have to say.

It is important to recognize that despite the emphasis on confirming hypotheses, good journalism is more of an art than a science. For observation, subsequent reportage, and commentary on an event is directed toward how we should conceive of and understand the events concerned. This explains the need for journalistic discrimination, because, though subjective, like autobiography it is an art constrained by truth. We can evaluate journalism objectively in the sense that the ideal observer clearly gives standards that enable us to determine whether a report is appropriately considered and reported and whether or not it is likely to be true.

A CULTURE OF TRUTH AND IMPARTIALITY

Yet there remains a nagging doubt. What is so peculiarly disinterested about journalism? If we take a look at most newspapers, even excluding the feature columns, the reports use pejorative, evaluative language and opinions all the time. The conventions and genres of news reporting all shape and form the events covered in particular ways, and the interests and values presupposed are what determines whether an event is newsworthy.²¹ Furthermore, even where different papers cover the same story, they often cover it from entirely different angles. Surely any news media, by virtue of having to select and interpret events as newsworthy, are necessarily biased? Hence what gets reported is a function of the media's principles of salience rather than any intrinsic features of the events concerned. The news genre, the story of characters and events in the world, seems necessarily to be crisis-driven. Hence bad news is good news. Indeed, we might follow Paul Weaver and suggest that not only is bias inevitable but the media disingenuously presents itself as neutral—for the media's news agenda and coverage of events are biased in favor of their own interests. This is a vicious problem because it leads to the falsification of real world. We are presented with a picture of the world as being in a perpetual state of crisis, as if there are tragedies of epic proportions every day:

As officials and journalists adapt to the news story's preconception of ordinary events as crises and the front page's preconception of ordinary days as times of great excitement and historical consequence, the actions they undertake and the stories they tell become fabrications. What's actually going on in the real world is the ordinary business of ordinary institutions. What officials and reporters converge on, therefore, are travesties, not real events. The news stops representing the real world and begins to falsify it. The barter transaction between newsmaker and journalist degenerates into an exercise in deceit, manipulation and exploitation.²²

Hence we end up with an endless round of press conferences, press releases, and "performances" by political, business, and media personalities to gain news coverage favorable in some way or other to their own interests and agendas. Thus, taking up this kind of analysis, it might be objected that the impartiality ideal rests on a crude and flawed distinction between neutral facts and partial values. The very process of selection and the differing emphases given to the same facts bear out the point that, far from being disinterested, reporters, papers, and the news media generally cover stories on the basis of their own values and interests. Value-neutral reporting is a myth, and thus the regulative ideal of impartiality is unrealizable. Therefore, impartiality and the underlying notion of the ideal observer cannot be a requirement of ethical journalism.

Moreover, we might go further and suggest that the impossibility of value-neutral reporting is a virtue. After all, we typically buy a particular newspaper or watch a given news channel because of the way it represents the world to us.

Journalism as a form of advocacy is hardly a recent turn in journalism. If we look back, journalism tended to be far more partial and adversarial than it is today. Winston Churchill's reporting of the Balkans war was motivated by a compassionate contempt for the inadequacies of British foreign and military policy, and paper proprietors typically used their papers to promulgate favored political or business interests.²³ Different reports represent events differently, and we seek that which we judge to be the most appropriate—which is itself an interested, evaluative judgment. Thus the reporter, when judging how to report an event for his intended audience, must report it in the appropriate light. So the same journalist reporting the same event for two different newspapers would skew his article differently.

Looked at in this light, the regulative notion of the common reader actually clashes with the ideal of impartiality. Any reasonable reader wishes a news report to make sense of and structure the events in order to explain their significance in terms of society. Different readers buy different papers because they differ over how or what enables us to make sense of society. Hence a liberal will more naturally buy *The New York Times* because he or she expects them to understand and represent events such as increasing divorce, crime, and poverty in certain ways, whereas by comparison *The Washington Post* is more likely to focus on business issues and perspectives. Indeed the differences in the United States are ones of mere degree and nuance by comparison with the gulf in world views that separates papers in Britain, from the deeply conservative *Daily Telegraph* to the progressively liberal *Guardian*. So, someone may claim, meeting the requirements of the common audience entails journalistic partiality toward the world view favored by the intended audience. Hence even if impartiality were realizable, journalists should not seek to achieve it. Thus the ideal of the impartial reporter may seem an impossible myth, sustainable only given a naive understanding of the history of the media and the pragmatics of the news business and journalism. At best the ideal of impartiality might be useful in clarifying the putative goal of truth, but it is certainly not a normative ideal that applies to all good journalism.

Now we might be tempted to reply that the ideal of impartiality does not so much pick out an aspect of a journalist's story as the way he approaches it. Thus whether a journalist is impartial or not depends on the purpose for which he or she investigated and wrote up the report. If I interview someone in order to find out the truth about a particular story, then that qualifies as impartial journalism. Conversely, if my motive in interviewing them is to further my financial, sexual, or social standing, then my intention in acting is far from impartial—for the end goal of my action is not the truthful reporting of a given story, but to extract certain favors for myself. What is important is the basic motive, whether I am writing a story because I want to get at the truth or for the furtherance of my own personal interests. So, one might argue, the ideal of the impartial journalist concerns how one attends to or covers events. Thus the distinction is a motiva-

tional one, rather than one based on claims about reporting events or facts in terms of objectivity.

But, important as motives are, this is certainly an inadequate response, for it is quite compatible with my motive of furthering my own personal interests that I cover a story in a faithful and true manner. My motive may be to cover a story for my own advancement, and yet, in writing a given story, I may write it with the intention of presenting things as they really are. Indeed, any decent news media organization ought to be structured in such a way that the two are harmonized—so the best way of personal advancement in journalism is to report things as they are. The really crucial thing is that the motive—whether purely one of aspiring to portray reality, personal advancement, or a mixture of these and other considerations—does not pick out good journalism as such. Rather, good journalism is constituted by the achievement of the end toward which the motive should be directed. Thus the intention involved in investigating and reporting should involve a commitment toward reporting the objective truth of the matter.

A stronger response is to point out that the interpretative nature of journalistic reporting does not preclude objectivity. It may preclude disinterest, where the term is construed as meaning journalism that is independent of value commitments, prejudices, and presumptions. But where objective is taken to mean explanations that are intelligible, consistent, and coherent and fit with the facts independently of particular prejudices and values, then this remains an appropriate ideal. Hence we distinguish impartial journalism, which may entail taking a stance on particular issues, from biased journalism, in the vicious sense of distorting and falsifying the way things in fact are. Impartiality is thus compatible with a partisan approach, where, for example, what may best explain particular events is in fact the unjustified racism, cruelty, and inhumanity of certain sections of society, something that ought to be chronicled to show it for what it is. But bias in its significant pejorative sense means a commitment to a particular interpretation or presumption independently of the facts. Thus bias in the vicious sense is quite rightly condemnable because it involves an imperviousness or disregard for the facts and true nature of a story in favor of whatever values or prejudices are held.

Consider what renders a report propaganda, as distinct from good journalism. Editorials by proprietors, wartime reports, or even news organizations toeing a government line may all constitute propaganda where they involve the deliberate misrepresentation of how things are in order to portray the world in a way that best fits with the proprietor's, nation's, or government's plans, interests, or wishes. But we can only properly recognize such reports as propaganda if, at the same time, we recognize that good journalism is not and should not be like this. That is, irrespective of the particular prejudices that we might have, we should only interpret and report a story in a way that is most consistent with what actually happened: the facts. Of course, there may be and often is, especially in complex matters, more than one possible interpretation that is consistent with the

facts. Hence a news event may legitimately give rise to a number of different interpretations and reports. If they are all consistent with the known facts, then all well and good: journalists cannot necessarily know which one is in fact true, given the mutual consistency. But, as with all stories, journalists are under an obligation to make clear in what way they are interpreting the event concerned, and they must remain open to the possibility that their interpretation may not be the right one. Thus it is imperative for good journalists to articulate clearly why they think that their interpretation most appropriately fits the story concerned and what the actual or possible anomalies in such an interpretation are.

The ideal of the impartial reporter is not a chimera, where we understand it in terms of appropriately describing events in the world rather than as an isolated detachment from our interests, values, and beliefs. The fact that we cannot obtain an Archimedean point outside our beliefs and values does not preclude the ideal of objectivity. Rather, it is a matter of remaining open to a healthy skepticism about whether events, people, and stories are as we presume them to be, a commitment to checking and evaluating other possibilities and making clear to the reader the basis and reasons for representing the events in a particular way. Good journalists should always remain open to the possibility that any one of their presumptions or beliefs may in fact be mistaken, even though we can never examine them all at the same time. So an impartial reporter is always open to the possibility that his or her original intuitions and opinions about a given case may be wrong in a way in which a biased reporter would not be or a propagandist would not care. Thus the ideal of the impartial reporter does not, as is often falsely presumed, rule out personal interests and the possibility of a multiplicity of interpretations and evaluations of particular events. Nonetheless, the recognition that we cannot be "disinterested" in any radical sense does not entail the denial of a motivating journalistic ideal that should be cherished: impartiality and the journalistic aspiration toward truth.

Through clarifying what the ideal of the impartial journalist amounts to we have reached very particular requirements that, at least in much contemporary practice, are not lived up to sufficiently. Weaver is right to condemn aspects of contemporary journalism, but not because the ideals themselves or the nature of the newspaper process, when properly understood, are flawed. Rather it is because the pragmatic practices of much contemporary journalism do not, in fact, square up with those very ideals. Journalists often make up quotes, present their interpretations as the only possible ones, fail to highlight possible anomalies, and talk up nonnews stories just to manufacture material for air time or column inches. Hence, unsurprisingly, journalists often present a far more certain and definitive view of events to their public than may be warranted by their own research. The moral problems in such a state of affairs are not only inherent in the possible misrepresentation of a particular event but also lie in the consequences: the audience is given a far more simplistic black-and-white version of how things are than is in fact the case. Hence the problematic but contingent political bias of

much news media. The results are damaging because such oversimplification fosters a false basis on which the public makes its judgments as citizens. Indeed, in a democracy the problem becomes particularly vicious since politicians are dependent on public favor and support, and they may thus pander to and reinforce the simplistic world picture of the audience. But garnering support for domestic and foreign policies based on a distorted and simplistic world-picture is a dangerous business, often with far-reaching and hideous results.

Commitment to the ideal of impartiality is not to deny that journalists and news media reports may be biased or, through drafting the first sketch of history, fundamentally mistaken. However, as initial sketches, news aims to describe and explain how events happened and analyze the relevant causes appropriately. Sometimes, through no fault of their own, journalists can be mistaken, and occasionally the reasons they articulate for attributing certain causes to an event may not be good ones. Yet it does not follow from this that we should not expect reporters to describe, investigate, and analyze events and their explanations. Journalists can and do seek to report events impartially, and, over time, the important question to be asked is whether a reporter has described the events and attributed the causes as they turned out to be.

It is true that current affairs, especially political and social ones, are often intricate, convoluted, and hard to disentangle and that reporters will typically diverge over which aspects are the most significant. Hence we often have fundamentally distinct representations of the same news story. But this is not because impartiality is an impossible ideal. Indeed, experts in many fields, from science to sociology, where there is a truth of the matter, often disagree about diagnoses, explanations, treatment, and even whether a certain phenomenon constitutes a problem or not. Of course, journalists may not be able to find out the truth of a particular matter, but it in no way follows that there is no fact of the case. Perhaps only in time may we be able to sort out what the likely truth of a particular event was. But the essential point is that journalism, from bombings in Oklahoma and famines in Ethiopia to unrest in Russia, should aim to be impartial by reporting the facts of the case and explaining events clearly and rationally, based on the way the world and events within it are found to be.

NOTES

1. See C. Berry, "Learning from Television News: A Critique of the Research," *Journal of Broadcasting* 27 (1983): 359–370; S. Iyenger and D. R. Kinder, *News that Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1987); and V. Price and J. Zaller, "Who Gets the News? Alternative Measures of News Reception and Its Implications for Research," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 57 (1993): 133–164.
2. Martin Bell, *In Harm's Way* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995), pp. 207–209.
3. Ian Katz, "Juiciest of Tales," *The Guardian*, Monday, 23 January 1995, Tabloid Section, pp. 2–3.
4. Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

5. See S. Holly Stocking and Nancy LaMarca, "How Journalists Describe Their Stories: Hypotheses and Assumptions in Newsmaking," *Journalism Quarterly* 67 (1990): 295–301.

6. Bill Green, "Janet's World," *The Washington Post*, 19 April 1981, pp. A1, A12–A15.

7. As George Reedy, press secretary to Lyndon Johnson, stated, "The objective reporting standards of the day held that if a Senator was going to make charges of treason, espionage and communism in high places, that in itself was news." As quoted in the *Columbia Journalism Review* 24 (1985): 36.

8. For according to Leninism, as Kautsky encapsulates it, the governing elite should "strive to enlighten and convince the masses by intensive propaganda before we can reach the point of bringing Socialism about." K. Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1964), p. 95.

9. See Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media* (London: Routledge, 1991).

10. George Orwell, *1984* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1974).

11. See Robert W. McChesney, "The Battle for the U.S. Airwaves, 1928–1935," *Journal of Communication* 40 (1990): 29–57.

12. In his original article, a few days before the Gulf War, Baudrillard claimed that there would be no war and, even if there were, the mass media coverage and simulation of it would be what our judgment of reality was based on and, therefore, there could be no basis upon which to distinguish the "real" from the "imaginary." See Jean Baudrillard, "The Reality Gulf," *The Guardian*, 11 January 1991. Even in his second article, written just after the cessation of the war, "The Gulf War Has Not Taken Place," *Libération*, 29 March 1991, Baudrillard still adheres to the claim that the war was a fabulous simulation involving a conflict between distinct imaginary realms not open to investigation in terms of rational assessment and questions of truth or falsity.

13. *Decisive Moments*, BBC 2, January 1995.

14. At the time of the war most of the information about casualties, intimations concerning disingenuous motivations for going to war, and facts suggesting that Saddam Hussein could hardly pose a strong military threat were all available, but the media were seduced into covering the war almost solely from the official military perspective of the Allies. See Douglas Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), and Mort Rosenblum, *Who Stole the News?* (New York: John Wiley, 1993), pp. 118–128.

15. See, for example, C. L. Hardin, *Color for Philosophers: Unweaving the Rainbow* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1988), and R. M. Boynton, *Human Color Vision* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979).

16. See, for example, R. E. Nisbett and L. Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings in Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), and Miles Hewstone and Charles Antaki, "Attribution Theory and Social Explanations," in *Introduction to Social Psychology*, ed. Miles Hewstone, Wolfgang Stroebe, Jean-Paul Codol, and Geoffrey M. Stephenson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 111–141.

17. Philip Jones Griffiths, interview with Marianne Fulton, 20 February 1987, quoted in *Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America*, ed. Marianne Fulton (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1988), p. 212.

18. As quoted by Howard Kurtz, *Media Circus* (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 303.

19. See Tom Goldstein, *The News at Any Cost* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), pp. 248–252.

20. Kevin Catalano, "On the Wire: How Six News Services are Exceeding Readability Standards," *Journalism Quarterly* 67 (1990): 97–103.

21. See, for example, Ronald N. Jacobs, "Producing the News, Producing the Crisis:

22. Paul Weaver, *News and the Culture of Lying* (New York: Free Press, 1994), p. 2.

23. See Anthony Smith, *The Newspaper: An International History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), and Anthony Smith (ed.), *Television: An International History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), for the distinct but related evolution of television as a news medium.