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# Objectivity's Legacy

## Is Objectivity Dead?

Objectivity may be dead, but it isn't dead enough.

Even though few journalists still defend the idea of objectivity, it remains one of the greatest obstacles to their playing a more responsible and constructive role in public life. Although the idea itself may be widely discredited, its legacy is a professional ideology that shapes journalists' daily practices.

The traditional philosophical conception of objectivity holds that "our beliefs are objectively valid when they are or would be endorsed from a perspective . . . which transcends the particularities, biases and contingencies of our own egocentric perspectives."<sup>1</sup> This perspective, notes philosopher Fred D'Agostino, has variously been described as the Archimedean point, "the God's-eye view," or the "view from nowhere."

Everette Dennis, former director of the Freedom Forum Center for Media Studies, wrote in 1989 that

The upheavals of the 1960s and a reassessment of journalism's role in society, not to mention a journalistic revolution, shelved the concept [of objectivity] pretty dramatically. In time, editors and others shied away from claims of objectivity which anyone who had ever taken a psychology course knew was impossible, and opted instead for something we came to call fairness. For many, fairness was just a convenient euphemism for objectivity, but to others it represented a more thoughtful articulation of disinterested reporting that covered all the bases rather than simply "balancing" two sides.<sup>2</sup>

This obituary for objectivity may be premature. Objectivity is one of the central ethical principles articulated by Stephen Klaidman and Tom

Beauchamp in *The Virtuous Journalist*, one the most ambitious recent efforts to formulate a comprehensive theory of the ethics of journalism.

Ted Glasser's attack on objectivity in the May 1984 issue of *The Quill*, the monthly magazine of the Society of Professional Journalists, titled "Objectivity Precludes Responsibility," drew numerous responses, suggesting that objectivity, even if under attack, is still very widely embraced. The impact of the article was likened by one media scholar to "farting in the temple." The initial response to Glasser's essay was a spate of angry letters to the editor, but more than a decade later, the bad odor seems to have cleared and the temple still stands. Moreover, though few journalists are prepared to actively defend objectivity as an epistemological doctrine, the underlying, corresponding theory of truth remains embedded in the way concepts such as facts, distortion, and bias are used in journalism.

Objectivity rose to prominence in the 1920s at a time when journalism was facing a crisis of credibility. The simple faith in facts that had sustained a more credible generation in a less complicated era was no longer sufficient. For Walter Lippmann, this meant that journalism had to take its method from the sciences and its organizational culture from the professions. Journalism itself was to become a profession, with a claim to a specialized body of expertise and a special responsibility to the public.<sup>3</sup> In appealing to the scientific method and professionalism, Lippmann was borrowing from those sectors of society that had the greatest public credibility. But his attempt to ground journalists' claims to authority in appeals to science or professionalism has been, and remains, problematic.

### Defining Objectivity

Journalists and media scholars talk about objectivity in at least two different senses. Sometimes, when a piece of journalism is said to be objective, what is meant is that its statements of fact, or more broadly, the pictures of reality it presents, correspond to the way things really are. But the term objectivity is sometimes also used to refer to a set of procedures that the reporter uses in order to produce those objectively true accounts. There are many journalists who practice procedural objectivity without any such epistemological commitments; for them, following the procedures of objectivity may be what sociologist Gaye Tuchman has termed a "strategic ritual," designed to fend off criticism<sup>4</sup>—that is, "don't blame me, I was just following procedures."

The practices of procedural objectivity have been codified by *Washington Post* reporter George Lardner Jr. as follows:

1. The reporter may relate, on his own authority, only the observable facts of an overt event—that is, what he can see and verify—immediate sense knowledge.
2. The reporter should relate what is controversial by stating the views of the parties controverting one another. This usually represents an attempt to give the “why” of an event while restricting the reporter to a narration of what is for him simply more sense knowledge, that is, what he heard the parties say about the controversy.
3. The reporter must be impartial in the gathering and the writing of both the observable facts and the opposing viewpoints. He must not let his own beliefs, principles, inclinations or even his own knowledge color the raw, overt material or the statements covering it.<sup>5</sup>

This definition of procedural objectivity is relatively restrictive, in that it acknowledges no place for interpretation by the reporter. Depending on which use of the term is involved, the question, “Is it objective?” can be translated as either (1) “Does it correspond to the way things are?” or (2) “Was it produced in accordance with accepted professional practices?”

Most defenders of objectivity have retreated from the claim that objective knowledge is possible in practice, taking the position that although complete objectivity can never be achieved in practice, the task of journalism is to come as close to objective truth as possible.

### Facts and Pictures

Historically, the concern with objectivity has taken two different forms. The term was not widely used during the nineteenth century; concern for truthfulness in that era was focused on facts. “Facts, facts piled up to dry certitude, was what the American people then needed and wanted,” muck-raking journalist Ray Stannard Baker later recalled.<sup>6</sup> The appetite for facts may have taken root in the dramatic days of the Civil War (as Hazel Dicken-Garcia has suggested), but by the turn of the century, argues Robert Bremner, it was fueled by the social upheavals that American society was experiencing, as a generation raised on farms and in small towns came to grips with life in an environment that was “more urban, cosmopolitan and industrial than Americans had been accustomed to regard as normal.”<sup>7</sup>

The truthfulness of newspaper reports could be established by other competent observers, but to that end it was necessary that the reports be expressed in terms that made them publicly verifiable. Grounding news

reports in facts located the justification for the journalists' claim to authority in external reality itself. Facts themselves were taken to be unproblematic; their meaning was assumed to be given, available to any competent observer. Although newswriting style has changed a great deal since the 1890s, the emphasis on facts that began in that era (or earlier) is at the heart of modern procedural objectivity and is deeply embedded in the codes of professional ethics.

### *Just the Facts, Ma'am?*

The naive faith in facts of the nineteenth century gave way in the twentieth to a recognition that the facts themselves are never enough. It became necessary to (as it has been variously put) "give the big picture," "place the facts in context," or "interpret the news." This movement has been accompanied by efforts to establish that there can be such a thing as "objective interpretation" or that, just as there can be objective facts (this is generally taken for granted), there can be an objective picture of the world.

### *Correspondence and Pictorial Representation*

Although for many journalists achieving objectivity remains simply a matter of setting aside one's biases and digging up the facts, Lippmann recognized long ago that objectivity was much more problematic. Faith in facts was undermined by the rapid growth of the propaganda and publicity industries during and after the first World War. Facts, it quickly became clear, could be manipulated to convey the meanings that any interested party wished to attach to them. It was at this point that the problem of truthfulness began to be framed in terms of the vocabulary of objectivity and pictorial representation. What the public needed, Lippmann argued, was not merely the news—the facts—but the truth behind the facts. In the first chapter of *Public Opinion*, published in 1922, he represents this need in terms of a correspondence between the pictures inside our heads and an external reality.

What emerged in the 1920s was a recognition that the facts by themselves weren't sufficient; that it was necessary to organize and present them in a way that makes them meaningful, that forms them into "a representative picture of the world." This gave rise in the 1920s and 30s to a new breed of journalist, the political commentator (including Lippmann himself), who offered news analysis. But the latitude given to political com-

mentators was not extended to beat reporters, and the creation of a distinct category for interpretive journalism tended to reinforce the notion that "straight reporting" is objective.

For most reporters, the rules that remained in place through the 1930s and 40s were roughly those described above by Lardner. This version of objectivity was, Donald McDonald has argued, "so narrowly defined that what was eliminated was not only opinionated editorializing in the news columns but also any opportunity for the reporter to put what he was reporting into a context which would make it meaningful." It is also, McDonald notes, a style of journalism that is easily manipulated: "When journalists confined their coverage of the late Senator Joseph McCarthy simply to what the senator said and did, far from producing objective journalism, they were producing 'the big lie.'"<sup>8</sup>

Many journalists were aware of this problem even at the time. Writing at the height of the McCarthy era, Douglass Cater complained that

One of the frozen patterns that have hampered press coverage of the McCarthy charges is the distinction between the "straight" reporting of the ordinary reporters and wire-service reporters and the "interpretive" or "evaluative" reporting of the privileged few. The trouble with "straight reporting" is that it precludes investigation and asking the questions which need to be answered if the reader is to understand what is going on.<sup>9</sup>

Edwin Bayley, in his study of press performance during the McCarthy era, reported that debates over objectivity during the McCarthy era paralleled political divisions in the U.S. press: "All of the 'fundamentalists' on objectivity were from newspapers that supported McCarthy editorially, and all of the editors who defended interpretive reporting were from newspapers that were critical of McCarthy."<sup>10</sup> Writing in June of 1980, a few months before the Janet Cooke affair was to lead to a "tightening up in editing," Bayley argued that one of the legacies of the McCarthy era was a growing acceptance of interpretive reporting. But this acceptance of interpretation did not mean an abandonment of objectivity, either as an epistemological goal, or as a set of journalistic practices; rather, the concept of objective journalism was expanded to include the problematic notion of objective interpretation.

This raises an important central question: How can the notion of an objective picture of the world be defended? When truthfulness is considered at the level of the fact, the central question becomes whether it is possible for journalists to strip away any biases that might prevent them from

seeing and stating the facts clearly. In contrast, when truthfulness is considered at the level of the big picture, the question becomes one of standpoint or perspective: Is there a point of view from which we can see things as they really are?

### A Simple View of Objectivity

Even today, most defenders of objectivity are not troubled by such abstract and theoretical problems as defending the concept of objective analysis or explaining the possibility of a neutral point of view. More typically, objectivity is taken to rest in the elimination of any personal prejudice and the separation of facts from values and interpretation. This simplistic understanding of objectivity clearly underlies Herbert Brucker's assertion that if objective reporting were adopted world-wide, "inevitably the ensuing world-wide access to identical facts and views would make the various nations see their common crises in all their colors, as they are, rather than through the monochrome lenses of national prejudice."<sup>11</sup> This view assumes that what is left when one removes one's conscious prejudices is the facts themselves; it does not acknowledge the possibility that when one sets aside one's conscious biases, unconscious biases or the biases of one's sources may remain.

It is generally acknowledged that complete objectivity cannot be sustained in practice, and yet it is defended as possible in theory and as a goal always to strive for. "None of us can ever truly be objective," acknowledges John Hulteng in *The News Media: What Makes Them Tick?*

Too many biases, beliefs and experiences are built into our backgrounds for us to be truly objective. Just as most of us know we can't be completely truthful, but hope to be close most of the time, so many reporters contend that it is better to aim at the objective ideal, even if you will inevitably fall short of the mark, than it is to abandon the effort and allow bias free reign.<sup>12</sup>

### *The View from Nowhere and "Objective Interpretation"*

Some defenders of objectivity propose that there is a neutral or objective point of view from which the journalist can see things as they really are, and it is this impartial point of view that grounds the claim of procedural objectivity to ethical significance. Philip Meyer, author of *Ethical Journalism*, acknowledges that "it [the project of presenting reality itself] doesn't work, of

course.” But for Meyer the problem is a practical one, not a theoretical one: “The world is far too complex, and readers are far too impatient to wade through and analyze raw data of this sort.”<sup>13</sup> Still, insists Meyer,

The fact that a literal objectivity is impossible should not discourage news people from striving for it. Most of the ideals prized in our society are impossible to attain in pure form. . . . Truth is difficult to come by, verifiable fact is hard to discover and communicate, and that is exactly why we should try so hard.<sup>14</sup>

“The reporter,” explains Meyer, “seeks to adopt a man from Mars’ stance, seeing each event afresh, untainted by prior expectations, collecting observations and passing them on untouched by interpretation.”<sup>15</sup> A similar notion underlies the oft-cited remark of Richard Salant, former president of *CBS News*: “Our reporters do not cover stories from their point of view. They are presenting them from nobody’s point of view.”<sup>16</sup>

This notion is plainly incoherent, as is the notion of observations untouched by interpretation. It is a point that the more sophisticated contemporary defenders of objectivity such as Klaidman and Beauchamp readily concede.

### *The Standpoint of the Reasonable Reader*

Klaidman and Beauchamp, while defending the concept of objectivity, abandon the effort to ground journalistic objectivity in either “reality itself” or “a view from nowhere.” Objectivity, they assert (citing the *American Heritage Dictionary*), entails “being uninfluenced by emotion or personal prejudice.” Bias entails “a value-directed departure from accuracy, objectivity, and balance.” They state their position in the context of a reply to a hypothetical critic:

We would agree that there is no mirror of nature and that there are rival and incompatible sets of standards governing what will count as bias . . . and that our views rest on traditional and deeply embedded cultural perspectives about the proper role and functioning of the press.

The difference between us and those whose views we reject is that we see nothing wrong with having a perspective; nor do we think that the fact that both journalists and consumers of news have perspectives prohibits developing standards of bias that are relevant for journalism. Of course, we assume a cultural and historical perspective. What other perspective could we reasonably take? But do journalists or the general public find fault with the stan-

dards that we contend underlie our tradition of a free and responsible press?<sup>17</sup>

The question is clearly rhetorical. Klaidman and Beauchamp do not believe that journalists or the general public find fault with those standards, and therein resides their (intersubjective) validity. Their benchmark for journalistic performance is what the “reasonable reader” needs to know.

The reasonable reader is a constructed composite of reasonable news consumers, as we collectively know them. This mythical person does not do unreasonable things or have unreasonable expectations and in this respect is the personification of the community ideal of an informed person—one who has certain informational needs of the sort that quality general-news media are designed to serve. Our reasonable reader is a generalist and may be a Republican or a Democrat, a smoker or a non-smoker, a sports lover or a sports hater.<sup>18</sup>

Klaidman and Beauchamp argue that even though transcendent (view-from-nowhere) objectivity is impossible, standards of objectivity in journalism are not simply subjective; rather, they are intersubjectively validated. The implicit assumption captured in their discussion of the “reasonable reader” is that in all relevant respects, journalists and the general public share the same basic cultural and historical perspective. This assumption allows Klaidman and Beauchamp to relativize the notion of objectivity without acknowledging a multiplicity of communities of interpretation or addressing the ethical issues of pluralism.

Klaidman and Beauchamp use the Three Mile Island incident to illustrate the reasonable reader's information needs. In that particular case,

the reasonable reader needs to know about the range of risk and whether there are similar nuclear plants in his or her region where a similar event might occur. As the story develops more information will be needed about how the utility and the government are handling the aftermath of the accident, new information about the accident itself and its implications, how it affects the physical and mental health of people in the area, and the implications for the nuclear power industry in general.<sup>19</sup>

The standard is ultimately communitarian; there is a consensus among journalists and the general public about what constitutes reasonable needs, and people who don't share it just aren't reasonable. The reasonable reader “needs to know about the range of risk and whether there are simi-



lar nuclear plants in his or her area," but apparently does not need to be informed about energy alternatives or be engaged in debates about broader issues such as the social and environmental impact of nuclear energy, the question of environmental racism (policies that concentrate hazardous waste sites in minority communities), the relevance of energy conservation, or the need for a national energy policy.

What good journalism requires, according to this viewpoint, is not a neutral standpoint, but informed judgment about what events are most important to the life of the community. But this only begs the question: "The most important aspects of contemporary life" according to whom? As a defense of objectivity, it is flawed in at least three important ways: it assumes (1) that the community the journalist serves shares a common perspective and set of interests; (2) that judgments of newsworthiness are, or at least could be, based on those public interests, and (3) that the category of facts is unproblematic. None of these assumptions holds up under scrutiny.

The reasonable reader, if we interrogate him a little further, is one who shares the values and outlook of the dominant culture. Readers who have a significantly different set of values are going to have interests that fall outside of this definition of reasonable. Thus, a reader who had an intense interest in the disposal of nuclear waste or who saw this as an important element of the Three Mile Island story, would fall outside the circle, as might, for example, any reader whose concern about institutional racism, environmental destruction, or the problem of poverty falls more than one standard deviation from the societal norm. The most important social issues that journalism must address are precisely the ones on which reasonable people disagree, and often their disagreement is not only over solutions, but also over what is reasonable and what is important. For example, ask people from different racial groups how significant the problem of racism is in American society. Whose view is the reasonable one? Is it possible that the journalist's conception of what the reasonable reader believes and wants may be one reason why newspaper readership is low in communities of color?

Journalists' own judgments of what is reasonable and what is newsworthy are inevitably more parochial than they realize. If the aspiration embodied in the concept of objectivity is to escape the parochialism of one's own point of view, the journalist cannot achieve this goal merely by imagining a reasonable reader. Rather, it can only be achieved through conversation that brings diverse perspectives into contact with each other. In the

realm of philosophy, the importance of this kind of conversation has been stressed by Pragmatist philosophers such as John Dewey, who will be discussed in Chapter 7; within journalism, it has been embraced by the public or civic journalism movement, to be discussed in Chapter 8.

The concept of reasonableness turns out to import into the concept of newsworthiness the ideological biases widely shared within the culture. In *Deciding What's News* Herbert Gans has catalogued a number of these biases: ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, social order, and national leadership.<sup>20</sup>

### The Newspaper as a Picture of Daily Reality

The claim that the newspaper's role is to give a comprehensive picture of the day's events bears less and less relation to daily practice as newspapers become more market-driven. However the concept of newsworthiness may be defined within journalism, it is clear that the final product is the result of many other factors besides "evaluative judgments of relative social importance."

Klaidman and Beauchamp suggest that the organization of the news product is itself an attempt at a rational mapping of reality:

The press often covers some types of events while excluding others for reasons that turn on evaluative judgments of relative social importance. Splitting large-city newspapers, for example, into sections such as Business, Sports, International and Style suggests a commitment to report regularly on important events in these areas. These newspapers do not generally have comparable sections on Australian News, Gambling, Scientific Research, or Professional Ethics.<sup>21</sup>

The suggestion here that the organizational structure of the news organization or news product is intended to reflect objective judgments about the relative social importance of various fields of human endeavor, distorts the complex play of forces that determine the allocation of space and resources.

The journalistic product emerges from a dynamic that is shaped by a number of competing forces of differing strengths and directions. Ethical considerations are only one such factor—and not the strongest. The product that emerges at deadline is the outcome of a daily struggle among these competing factors. Here, for example, is Richard Harwood:

We have great biases built into all of our newspapers in favor of certain kinds of news. . . . A bias towards the coverage of public bodies . . . a bias towards the coverage and pronouncements of politicians . . . a bias towards the coverage of the bizarre, the random event, the car crash that killed twelve people, the tornado, the murder . . . a bias towards the establishment, if you will. . . . This is a commercial function. We know that we've got to do this to hold the interest of our readers. . . . So when you ask, do we every day produce a representative picture of the world we live in, the answer is no.<sup>22</sup>

Economics shape the newspaper in a variety of ways. As newspapers become more market-driven, market research plays an increasingly important role in determining content. The relative balance of locally produced material versus syndicated material is partly a function of cost, as is the quantity of material included in the product. On the one hand, there are economic pressures to use the cheapest raw materials; on the other, there are union pressures, at some newspapers, to use only those local stories produced by staff reporters and editors. Advertisers also shape the product. The content of particular stories is sometimes edited to avoid giving offense to advertisers, story selection is sometimes determined by what advertisers will or will not support, and sections are created based on the demographics that they are able to attract.

The visual has always been dominant in television news, and the graphics revolution ushered in by *USA Today* has gone a long way towards transforming newspaper from a print medium to a visual one—though the transformation may be less obvious to readers of the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* than to readers of local and regional newspapers. Stories that do not lend themselves to illustration with graphs or photography do not fare well in the competition for front-page display.

The story-telling conventions of journalism also impose a certain form on the chaos. Feature stories especially are often expected to have a predictable narrative structure, with the dramatic elements of mystery, denouement, sometimes a happy ending, and frequently a moral lesson of some sort.

In addition to the unconscious ideological biases that may permeate the newsroom and the larger society, organized efforts by ideological constituencies can have a major impact on content of newspapers, not only through the direct placement of stories, but also by creating a presumption in favor of one particular point of view. The production of news is mediated through such institutions as the press conference, the spokesman, the press kit, and the public relations office. This shapes cov-

erage in favor of the elements in society that are powerful enough and organized enough to generate press materials, hold press conferences, and otherwise garner media attention.

The prominence accorded to any given story is also a function of mix (what other stories are going to appear on the page on a given day) and news hole (how much space/time is available, and whether it is a busy or slow news day).

It might be argued that all of this analysis merely shows what many defenders of objectivity readily concede—that objectivity is impossible to achieve in practice. They do not concede that it is incoherent as an ideal. On this view, journalists could, in theory, “carve up the world at the joints” and present a picture of the world that corresponds to the most important features of daily reality. As a practical matter, such a hypothetical reorganization is “possible” only in the most abstract sense of the term; the competing ideological, economic, and other vectors that shape the news product are deeply entrenched in social reality. Moreover, the very question of how to parse up the world into more “objective” beats—even if we translate this into relativistic terms such as “most relevant to compelling human interests”—does not lend itself to any simple or objective solution. The questions of which aspects of reality are the most important or newsworthy are highly contested.

Setting such considerations aside, the claim that there could be a more objective organization of news beats, and hence a more objective picture of the world, is a case of seduction by metaphor. Both “observe” and “world” are problematic. To describe journalists as “observing” puts a representationalist spin on what journalists actually do. What journalists do, for the most part, is to follow a beat whose routines and agenda are shaped by the (usually bureaucratic) news sources around whom the beat is structured. They do not so much observe as listen or transcribe. Their subject is not “the world,” but the news sources who are authorized to offer interpretations of it.

Lippmann's version of objectivity was sophisticated enough to acknowledge that the subject of objective journalism was not the elusive “reality itself,” or something that is perceived from “a view from nowhere,” but rather what is given to us in the accounts of experts—experts whom Lippmann envisioned as dispassionate social scientists. Whether objectivity is any more accessible to social “scientists” than it is to journalists is doubtful; the fractiousness of ideological disagreements in the social sciences suggests that it is not.

What does deserve further examination is the nature and function of the “experts” whom journalists rely on to supply interpretation of the news. These experts rarely qualify as dispassionate social scientists. The conventions of objective journalism have given rise to an entire industry of think tanks and policy institutes whose function is to give representatives of entrenched political or economic interests the credentials they need to serve as authorized “knowers.” Having such credentials gives these “experts” access to the media, which in turn legitimates both their status as experts and the status of their institutions. Tracing the rise of these institutions in the 1970s and 80s, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky observe that

Many hundreds of intellectuals were brought to these institutions, where their work was funded and their outputs were disseminated to the media by a sophisticated propaganda effort. The corporate funding and clear ideological purpose in the overall effort had no discernible effect on the credibility of the intellectuals so mobilized; on the contrary, the funding and pushing of their ideas catapulted them into the press.<sup>23</sup>

Lawrence Soley, in an extensive study of the role of “news shapers” argues that “reporters become convinced of the expertise of news shapers merely because other journalists have quoted them.”<sup>24</sup> Herman, Chomsky, and Soley share the view that journalists’ reliance on experts infuses the news with a heavy bias in favor of the most powerful sectors of society—that is, government and corporate interests. Part of Soley’s proposed solution is to broaden the range of sources that journalists call on to interpret the news. That would undoubtedly make reporting more balanced, but it is not clear in what sense such reporting would be more objective. Rather, Soley’s proposal seems to recognize that responsible journalism can neither be a-perspectival nor have the perspective of the “reasonable reader,” but should be multi-perspectival.

### *The Problematic Nature of Facts*

The emphasis on facts in journalism is grounded, at least in part, in a desire to model journalism on science. The plausibility of the claim that the set of journalistic practices that constitute procedural objectivity is capable of yielding objective knowledge about the world is based on two fundamental premises: (1) that journalists’ methods of gathering information are essentially similar to scientific methods of observation, and (2) that scientific observation yields objective knowledge. This second claim is

widely challenged even within the scientific community. As for the first claim, it is easily demonstrated that the actual practices of journalistic information-gathering are very different from the model of scientific observation upon which the premise is based.

Underlying the edifice of journalistic objectivity is an unquestioned faith in facts. *Washington Post* reporter Lou Cannon observes that "Objective reporters accept on faith the importance of the observed event—of something that can be seen, heard, smelled or felt. They believe, in Brucker's term, that there are 'agreed facts' of such an event from which the truth can be derived. Objective reporting does not admit that the selection of facts, even by trained reporters, is a subjective process."<sup>25</sup>

Cannon rejects the possibility of objectivity, because the selection of facts is a subjective process, but he does not reject the "givenness" of the facts themselves. This is precisely what sociologists such as Mark Fishman have challenged: "the assumption contained in the concept of news selectivity that all events (both the reported and the unreported) are objective, unformulated entities 'out there' in the newsworld, and that they are 'given' in perception and available to any competent, clearheaded observer."<sup>26</sup>

News events are not given, but are rather the product of newswork, argue Fishman and Tuchman. "It makes no sense to speak of pure, unformulated events. Any event arises in the relationship between a knower (employing schemes of interpretation and schemes of relevance) and behaviors in a material world (which are in and of themselves either meaningless or unknowable)."<sup>27</sup> Or in Tuchman's words, "the act of making news is the act of constructing reality itself, rather than a picture of reality. . . . Newswork transforms occurrences into news events."<sup>28</sup>

The plausibility of the claim that journalists observe and record "raw data" (Philip Meyer's term) may trade on an image of journalists observing natural phenomena such as earthquakes and fires or overt human actions such as shootings. But this sort of first-person observation by journalists forms the basis for only a small part of news production. Far more of what journalists report is "cooked data"—staged events such as press conferences, information released by official sources, records of commercial transactions, or events that have been created for the sake of their symbolic significance.

### *Facts as Social Constructions*

If journalistic facts aren't a given in the nature of reality, what are they? They are shared interpretations of reality produced by the interaction of

newswriters and (to use Mark Fishman's term) authorized knowers. Authorized knowers, such as the desk sergeant at the precinct station or the researcher at the Centers for Disease Control, derive their authority from their position in a structure that produces knowledge. Labeling facts as interpretations is a way to emphasize that they express one possible construction of events and that there always exists the possibility of other interpretations from other points of view. Facts are thus to be understood as (in Alvin Gouldner's term) decontextualized discourse.

The missing context in a factual proposition is the part that identifies the point of view (subjectivity) from which the object appears as it does; the assertion of facticity locates the truth of the proposition in the object itself. Some interpretations may be so widely shared that they cannot usefully be identified with any particular class or interests, but, in the more interesting cases, a consequence of objective discourse is precisely to "privilege"—that is, to place beyond the boundaries of debate—a particular interpretation of reality, that may well be in conflict with other interpretations. When there is no conflict over interpretation or when conflict is resolved through an open process that results in consensus, this privileging of information is unobjectionable. But more often, privileging simply forecloses the possibility of open debate.

Those uses of objectivity that privilege one interpretation of reality in preference to other interpretations in the social and political arena may be labeled as ideological. Virtually everyone shares an interpretation of reality in which France exists; thus propositions about France are not, in and of themselves, ideological. Propositions about the Malvinas (the Argentine name for what the British call the Falkland Islands), alcoholism, or terrorists are, however, more problematical.

The widely reported "facts" about alcoholism may be taken as a case in point. It is now very widely accepted within our society that alcoholism is a disease. However, few realize that this interpretation is of very recent origin. Previously, people who are now diagnosed as alcoholics and channeled into medical and psychological treatment were labeled as habitual drunkards, and their actions were interpreted within the framework of a more moralistic conceptual scheme. The transformation was not the result of any scientific breakthrough that revealed an organic cause for the disease; no such cause has ever been found. Rather, we seem to be experiencing a paradigm shift (a process that is still taking place) in which one vocabulary has been adopted and another abandoned.

That transformation parallels the emergence of a social formation—a medical/psychological bureaucracy—that appropriated social jurisdiction

over the handling of problem drinkers. This bureaucracy imposed a vocabulary upon problem drinkers and their behavior that interpreted their conduct in terms reflecting a medicalized worldview, while also legitimizing its own claim to jurisdiction. Alcoholism, a term unknown during most of the nineteenth century, is now accepted as social fact, an element of social reality to which the public has reacted by building treatment centers and passing legislation. Alcoholism has become a key category in terms of which individuals form their self-concept.<sup>29</sup>

The introduction of the discourse of alcoholism into the body of public knowledge is a small but telling example of the role that changes in language play in altering the ethical norms of a society, as well as the role that the news media can play in moral change. The adoption of the vocabulary of alcoholism transformed public perception of the problem drinker from an object of moral condemnation to an object of the same sympathy usually extended to victims of traditionally recognized diseases. At the same time, this new vocabulary promotes a mechanistic and deterministic conception of human agency, replacing a conception that emphasized individuals as agents morally accountable for their actions. Thus, the facts about alcoholism can be seen as facts only relative to a scheme of interpretation, which must be understood as a human construction shaped by human interests.

### **What's Wrong with Objectivity in Practice?**

It might still be argued that even if the practices of objective journalism do not produce objective knowledge, their impact is beneficial or at least benign. But a strong case can be made for the view that these practices are in fact harmful, in several ways.

Objective reporting can be irresponsible. The practices of journalistic objectivity severely restrict the accountability of the reporter for the truthfulness of the information he or she transmits, provided that the information is provided by an authorized knower. In practice, the latitude that journalists have to seek and present diverging opinions or contradictory evidence varies, but within strict interpretations of objectivity it is usually very limited. Howard Kurtz, in explaining why the press failed to alert the public to the impending scandals that took place at the Department of Housing and Urban Development in the 1980s, places the blame squarely on objectivity: "Trapped by the conventions of objectivity, most newspapers would simply quote both sides—Pierce Says Housing Shortage



Nonexistent, Critics Disagree—even though one version was demonstrably false.”<sup>30</sup>

By focusing on facts and overt events, objective reporting devalues ideas and fragments experience, thus making complex social phenomena more difficult to understand. It is arguable that the relative incoherence of public discourse over such important social issues as the economy or the health care system is attributable in large part to this emphasis on events and facts, which decontextualizes relevant information.

Even journalists who no longer believe that the pictures they are creating correspond to some absolute reality continue to define their role in terms of creating pictures—that is, generating accounts of “news.” This focus privileges accounts of events—even trivial events or “pseudo-events” staged for the sole purpose of being recorded by journalists, at the expense of many other kinds of information that journalists could generate. Relatively little space in newspapers is devoted to how-to journalism or to journalism that creates a forum for dialogue between conflicting interests or points of view.

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# The Myth of Neutrality and the Ideology of Information

## The Myth of Neutrality

Another obstacle to more constructive and responsible journalism, closely related to the myth of objectivity, is the myth of neutrality. The journalists' claim that "we don't make the news, we only report it" functions implicitly—and frequently explicitly—as a denial of responsibility: Don't blame us, we're just the messengers, and as messengers, we are only doing our duty. It also functions as an injunction: Journalists must resist the temptation to step outside the role of neutral observer and messenger; even when their motives are altruistic, they risk undermining both their own objectivity (that is, their ability to see things impartially) and their credibility.

Robert Haiman, former executive director of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, expresses this injunction in theatrical terms: journalists must remember that their place is in the audience, never on the stage. The messenger metaphor carries with it strong ethical implications: Messengers are servants, and paramount among their duties are faithfulness and truthfulness. Their job is, in the most restricted sense, to carry messages, and they must not alter the message to suit their own interests, must not dally in delivering the message, and must not accept other employment that would interfere with their duties to their master. These duties translate to the ethical principles regarding objectivity, fairness, accuracy, sensationalism, conflict of interest, and so on.

Of course, the news media do not cause earthquakes, volcanic eruptions or lopsided defeats for the home team, and "don't blame us" is a perfectly

reasonable response to those who turn their distress over these events into anger at the messenger. All too often this defense is used for a broader and more questionable purpose—to disavow responsibility for how the news is reported.

There are three different premises that contribute to the exculpatory force of the assertion that journalists do not make the news: an implied distinction between speech and action, an implied distinction between the “real world” and the mirror world of journalism, and an implicit claim that the journalist could not have done otherwise:

1. *Speech Versus Action.* The exculpatory force of the claim that “we didn’t do it, we merely reported it” rests at least in part on a distinction between speech and action and on an implicit claim that under ordinary circumstances only action is morally significant. Journalists are accountable for the truthfulness of their reporting, but not for its consequences (except, presumably, in cases such as shouting “fire” in a crowded theater). This response is one that journalists frequently offer when criticized for reporting too much “bad news.”

2. *The Real World Versus the Mirror World.* Haiman’s stage metaphor represents journalism as something that happens off-stage, outside of the world that journalists are supposed to represent. The plausibility of this metaphor seems to rest upon a model of journalism in which the reporters/observers and the observed exist in separate domains, with reporters observing their subjects as if through a one-way mirror, a situation in which observation and reporting indeed have no impact on the events observed.

By locating the journalist off-stage, the myth of neutrality obscures the increasingly powerful role of the news media in society. The role that the news media play in shaping not only political discourse but also political institutions, in defining public agendas, and in setting the terms of moral discourse are rendered invisible.

3. *No Choice.* Journalists do not exactly claim that they are “only following orders,” but part of the concept of journalistic objectivity is that there are objective criteria that determine newsworthiness, and when an event has been determined to be newsworthy, the journalist has no choice but to publish. Reality itself dictates the journalist’s actions.

Whereas the first two exculpatory premises in effect deny that the journalist really does anything, the “no choice” argument acknowledges that reporting often does have morally significant consequences. To justify the conduct of journalists that may result in harm to others, journalism’s institutionalized discourse has produced a variety of arguments acknowl-

edging that reporting does have morally significant consequences, but maintaining that the reporter must proceed without regard to consequences and “let the chips fall where they may.”

The arguments in support of this position are sometimes Kantian in their emphasis on principle (A reporter’s first duty is to the truth.) and sometimes consequentialist (In the long run, it is in the best interests of the society as a whole.). A great deal of ethical discourse in journalism focuses on the question of whether there are instances in which this *prima facie* duty to tell the truth may be overridden by a concern for consequences. Some cases involve issues of national security, while others involve issues of privacy or compassion. Also implicit in the assertion that “we don’t make the news” is the counterfactual conditional: If journalists did make the news, as opposed to merely reporting it, they would bear a greater responsibility for what they report.

The problem with this conception of the journalist’s role is that it fails to acknowledge both the active role that journalists play in making the news and the increasingly central role that the news media play as social institutions.

### **Journalists as Newsmakers**

The notion of objective reporting relies heavily on the image of the reporter as observer, exposing him- or herself to the flow of experience and then culling from the totality of experience the most significant events. But the actual practice of newsgathering is quite different. Very little of what is counted as news consists of actual first-hand accounts of the natural world. Most reporting consists of second- or third-hand accounts of what someone said happened, is happening, or is otherwise important. And the accounts reporters rely on cannot simply come from any source; generally, to be acknowledged as facts, they must be taken from sources recognized as authorized knowers—that is, experts or authorized representatives of authority. Most of the facts that reporters deal with are bureaucratic facts, interpretations of reality assembled and disseminated by bureaucracies, reflecting their priorities and their perspectives. A reporter’s beat preselects which elements of the day’s experience the reporter is to take as newsworthy; in practice, the beat is a list of persons whom the reporter may treat as reliable sources of news.

Fishman’s observation of the daily routine of a California newspaper reporter assigned to the justice beat supports this claim:

On any beat, there are an infinite number of activities to which the reporter could potentially be exposed. . . . The [justice reporter's] territory conceivably encompassed . . . several thousand square miles containing 500,000 potential law-breakers . . . three law enforcement agencies . . . four penal institutions . . . two juvenile facilities . . . two entire court systems . . . an extensive drug subculture . . . a moderate size skid row area . . . and so on.

. . . Out of the potentially infinite (and indefinite) expanse of his beat territory, [the justice reporter's] round narrowed his coverage to three official agencies of social control: the city police, the county sheriffs, and the superior court. . . . The reporter's round simply excluded him from all juvenile facilities and adult penal institutions, the FBI branch office, two municipal police departments in the Purissima region, the local chapters of the American Civil Liberties Union, National Lawyers Guild, and American Bar Association, a community legal collective, and all private security and detective agencies. But more important than this, the justice round steered the reporter away from all institutions (or "communities of action") relevant to criminality and law enforcement which were not formally constituted or bureaucratically organized. Specifically, the journalist had no regular contact with the underlife of prison and jails; the unofficially sanctioned practices of law enforcement, judicial and penal personnel; the entire spectrum of deviant subcultures (from the world of winos to the stable corporate arrangements for price fixing); and the local markets for stolen goods, illegal drugs and pornography.<sup>1</sup>

The reporter could, of course, expand his range of sources to include people with other perspectives, for example, victims or defendants. But this is problematic for several reasons. As a practical matter, it would be much more difficult and time-consuming than collecting information from fewer official sources, and the autonomy that journalists have to draw on unofficial sources varies greatly. It would also be difficult to claim that such an approach would be "more objective"; rather, it embodies a tacit acknowledgment that responsible journalism must be multi-perspectival.

In daily operations, then, the reporter is dependent on a network of (to use Mark Fishman's term) authorized knowers. The reporter's ability to write news stories based on this bureaucratically supplied information depends on being able to accept the truthfulness of that information as a given. These authorized knowers are also not simply the objective observers of reality that the theory of objectivity presupposes; they are its producers.

Also concealed by the doctrine of neutrality is the reflexivity of the newsmaking process, the inevitably interactive relationship between reporter and source. The presence of the reporter (and especially, the pres-

ence of the camera) transforms the event from private to public. The news media did not just report the news of the two whales trapped in Arctic ice or of two-year-old Jessica trapped in an abandoned well. Rather, they transformed those obscure occurrences into news, invested them with symbolic meaning, and by their activity shaped their outcomes—the sending of icebreakers, the outpouring of donations. These may not be typical news events, but what is typical is the transformative impact of news coverage. When the newspaper reports that interest rates will rise next Tuesday, it doesn't merely report a fact; it also alters what will happen as a consequence.

Fishman's prime example of the manufactured nature of news events is the crime wave he observed in New York City in 1976. During the course of this supposed wave of crimes against the elderly, which occupied the attention of the city's media and public, Fishman discovered statistical evidence that the number of crimes against the elderly had actually declined compared with a year earlier. As he observed, "Something in the news production process was creating the news. What was it?"<sup>2</sup> Fishman ultimately traced the beginning of the crime wave to a series of stories about the elderly written by a reporter for the *New York Daily News*, with information provided by the newly created Senior Citizen Robbery Unit (SCRU) of the city's police department.

The police unit let him know they felt beleaguered, understaffed, and that they were fighting a battle that deserved more attention. After he finished the feature stories, the reporter was able to follow up the series with several reports of specific incidents because SCRU officers were calling him whenever they knew of the mugging or murder of an elderly person.<sup>3</sup>

Soon, the city's other media increased their coverage of crimes against the elderly. Individual crimes that would have gone unreported before were now connected by a common theme. As coverage escalated, politicians seized hold of the issue. The mayor grabbed headlines by declaring a war on crime, expanding the SCRU, and increasing the priority of crimes against the elderly within the police department. "Thus, a week and a half after the coverage started, the police wire was steadily supplying the press with fresh incidents almost every day. And when there was an occasional lack of crimes, there was plenty of activity among police, politicians and community leaders to cover."<sup>4</sup>

The ideal of objectivity means that the journalist makes every effort to record reality just the way it is, but that becomes impossible when reality

interacts with the journalist. Defenders of traditional ethical norms address these interactions in terms of manipulation. Daniel Boorstin coined the term pseudo-event to draw a line between the unreflexive reality that it is the journalist's task to record and a false, manipulated reality, created for the journalist's benefit. A pseudo-event

is not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted, or incited it. Typically, it is not a train wreck or an earthquake, but an interview. It is planted primarily, (not always exclusively) for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced. . . . Its occurrence is arranged for the convenience [of the journalist]. Its success is measured by how widely it is reported.<sup>5</sup>

William Rivers, Wilbur Schramm, and Clifford Christians echo Boorstin's distinction between reality and pseudo-events: "For a journalist to be more than ordinarily suspicious these days is a step towards reporting the news behind the facade."<sup>6</sup>

The claims underlying this concept of the pseudo-event are that there is a real world beyond the world of pseudo-events and that although the journalist may be occasionally permitted to indulge the really imaginative publicity stunt, he or she is obliged to separate news from publicity and to make certain that readers or viewers can make the same distinction. But the distinction seems to have lost its usefulness.

Real events, Boorstin suggests, are things like train wrecks or earthquakes. If that is the case, then the vast majority of what is covered in the news media must be counted as pseudo-events—images of reality constructed not only by the intentions of the subject, but also by the conventions and technologies of the news media themselves. When President Bush chose to give a speech in a flag factory or when President Clinton flew to Yellowstone to deliver an environmental message, the event was shaped for, and by, the presence of the camera. The reality portrayed by television becomes more real than "real" life, because it is public—in a sense in which few actions of private individuals can be—in a mass-mediated era. Journalism scholar John Pauly argues that

In a familiar sense, the media call society into existence by creating the infrastructure of everyday life, connecting and coordinating society's parts and investing those connections with meaning. But "the media" are themselves symbols with which Americans habitually think about modernity. The media create a stage upon which modern society plays itself out, but they soon become characters in that drama as well.<sup>7</sup>



This role of the news media in constructing our image of reality came under public scrutiny during the 1996 Summer Olympic Games, when NBC tailored its coverage to achieve higher ratings among a targeted audience—women—by emphasizing gymnastics and human interest profiles of the participants, while virtually ignoring such traditional staples as boxing. Although NBC came under considerable criticism for this strategy and for virtually ignoring foreign competitors, one would be hard-pressed to say what an “objective” presentation of the games would have looked like. The Olympic Games were closely followed by the Republican and Democratic national conventions, which had been transformed by their organizers into tightly scripted television programs, designed for television consumption. Do those events now qualify, under Boorstin’s definition, as “pseudo-events?” If so, it would be difficult to find events in American political life that do not fall under that heading.

Some, like Walter Karp and J. Herbert Altschull, have claimed that it is erroneous to ascribe power to the news media. They argue that power resides elsewhere (in the hands of an elite or, in the case of political reporting, in the hands of the Congress) and that the media are merely instruments or agents of power. But it seems better to say that the news media are a battleground where struggles over meaning and for power are waged. Although it is indisputable that those who have the most power in this society also exert the greatest control over (and through) the mass media, it is also true that the mass media have institutional interests and values that cannot be simplistically identified with the interests of any particular group.

Rejecting the observer model goes beyond arguing that journalists make the news, that the reports in the newspaper are more properly read as inventions—or at least as interpretations—than as pictures or discoveries. A more complete concept of the news media as actors in society involves recognizing and giving an account of the ways in which the emergence of the news media has transformed social practice. The often-lamented transformation of public discourse that has resulted in “sound-bite politics” is only one example. On the campaign trail, the audience remains, but as a prop; the politician’s discourse no longer takes the dialogical form dictated by face-to-face encounters; rather, the politician now speaks the language of the media, in images.<sup>8</sup>

The result is what has been termed “hyper-reality” by Umberto Eco, Jean Baudrillard, and others. As the mass-mediated reality comes to supersede a social reality based on face-to-face encounters, the traditional ground of journalistic practice is eroded. Leaders, in a traditional sense of

the term, emerge from social institutions within a community, but what characterizes much of contemporary life is precisely the collapse of these institutions. Community organizations, in this context, are more typically small and struggling efforts to create an organized community than evidence of the existence of one. So when the reporter searches for leaders to speak authoritatively for or about the community, she or he is actually engaged in the process of conferring legitimacy and creating leadership.

### **The News Media as More Than Information Services**

The emphasis on information is explicit in all of the media's major codes of professional ethics. The ASNE Statement of Principles contains this assertion: "The primary purpose of gathering and distributing the news is to serve the general welfare by informing the people and enabling them to make judgments on the issues of the day."<sup>9</sup> The SPJ Code of Ethics holds that: "Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues."<sup>10</sup>

Journalism's ethics focus so intensely on the role of the news media in the transmission of information that other very important—and ethically significant—social roles played by the news media are completely overlooked. There are at least three critical roles the news media play in the life of their communities that go beyond merely providing information: they construct a common reality, they bring a public into being, and they are an important vehicle by which the moral values of the community are circulated. The news media play a central role in constructing the picture of the world that people who live in complex modern societies carry around inside their heads. That picture may vary in its details from head to head, but having a shared body of information is what gives us a common culture.

### **The News Media and the Construction of Social Reality**

It has become commonplace to say that facts are social constructions and that journalistic facts are constructed by journalists, but that doesn't explain the social significance of this activity. Traditionally, the journalist has been characterized as observer, gatekeeper, or messenger. Each of these metaphors suggests different aspects of the media role, but they all suggest that the news media are essentially servants of the public. The observer

merely records events, but does not cause or participate in them. The gatekeeper screens out unreliable messages, ones that might distort the master's perception of reality. The messenger operates at the periphery of our kingdom; like a periscope, telescope, or microscope, the messenger extends the reach of our senses, fills in gaps in a map that is primarily grounded in our own unmediated experience.

The servant model is consistent with the widely held "limited effects" theory, which maintains that the news media have a very limited ability to influence people and events. The messenger model may have offered a plausible account of the role of the news media throughout the periods of human history in which face-to-face interaction was primary and mediated information was secondary or peripheral. Before the introduction of printing, virtually all human communication was face to face. But in the last two centuries, the news media and, more broadly, the mass media have come to play an increasingly central role in shaping social reality. We act in the world on the basis of the pictures (and meanings, stereotypes, and symbols) inside our heads. These images and meanings are a synthesis of our own direct experience and mediated experiences of events that occur in another place and time and are communicated to us by other individuals or through the mass media. In the modern era, the news and mass media have come to play a rapidly increasing role in shaping the contents of the pictures in our heads. Within the mass media, over the last 40 years television has risen to a position of clear dominance. "TV provides the dominant system of spiritual, political, moral and social values by which we live," insists Elayne Rapping.<sup>11</sup>

The media are an arena for a fundamental struggle in our culture over the power to decide whose knowledge claims are to be taken as authoritative, to define the rules and limits of rational discourse, and to determine who is to be included or excluded as a legitimate participant in public discourse.

This power, and the struggle over it, is a central dynamic of social life, as Michel Foucault has pointed out:

In a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association.<sup>12</sup>

When Foucault speaks of an “economy of discourses of truth,” he means an ensemble of apparatuses much broader than just the mass media, but it seems clear that the mass media, and more specifically the news media, play a central role in the production, circulation, and functioning of the discourses that sustain the social order.

That role has become more powerful as the news media have supplanted the church and the marketplace as the prime disseminators of information. Just as public discourse sustains the relations of power within a society, the relations of power within a society determine the direction and boundaries of public discourse. To the degree to which any social entity is able to command the attention of the media (and dictate the terms of coverage), it is able to define the representation of reality in ways that reflect its interests. Thus, the ability of the Pentagon, White House, and other official entities to dictate the terms of how the Gulf War was represented in the news media influenced public perceptions of the war that reinforced the credibility and public approval of those institutions.

Recently, critics and scholars of the news media have rejected the conventional information model, offering theories that assign the news media a more pervasive and constructive role. James Carey, for example, distinguishes between the transmission function, which is emphasized in codes of ethics, and the ritual function of communications, which is almost entirely ignored:

A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space, but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs.

If the archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purposes of control, the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality.<sup>13</sup>

Elayne Rapping, in *The Looking Glass World of Nonfiction Television*, stresses a related point: The structure and content of local television newscasts are designed not so much to create an understanding of local or world events as to create a sense of community and belonging.

The news media also play a key role in constructing what sociologists call the “social imaginary”: To think of oneself as a citizen is an act of the imagination. We all live in what Benedict Anderson has termed “imagined communities,”<sup>14</sup> and it is participation in a shared discourse circulated by the media that makes us members of those communities. The American revolu-

tion became possible, in part, because the newspapers of the era spread the idea to its readers that they were not merely Virginians, or New Yorkers, or royal subjects, but Americans. Journalism is only possible in a world in which readers imagine themselves as citizens. Whether readers have this concept of themselves depends on the nature of the discourse that surrounds them. When a newspaper addresses its readers as citizens, it addresses them as parts of a “we” that shares common concerns and mutual obligations.

### *The Creation of a Public*

Alvin Gouldner argues that it is the sharing of a common base of information among strangers that constitutes this collection of strangers as a public; newspapers thus have played an instrumental role in bringing publics into being. As Gouldner argues, “News . . . has a cosmopolitanizing influence, allowing persons to escape provincializing assumptions, and thereby enabling them to *compare* their conditions with others. News allows alternatives to be defined as ‘realistic,’ by showing different conditions to exist already.”<sup>15</sup> Gouldner argues that this function of the news media enhances public rationality, but it must also be seen as inherently destabilizing to the social order. The news media break down the walls that segregate different moral communities. This breakdown occurs not only through the “cosmopolitanizing” influence created by the importing of information about other ways of life, but also by the transformation of large areas of social life from private to public. The domain of topics considered too private to discuss—especially those related to sexuality—has shrunk to the vanishing point because the media do talk about them. Practices within the family or within the community come under public observation (actual or potential), and the moral discourse of the community is carried into the walls of the home.

### *The Moral Function*

The news media play a dynamic role in shaping the morality of the society they serve. All ethical discourse is based on a sense of *we*: that you and I are part of some larger community and that the consequences of being part of that *we* need to be worked out. That sense of being part of *we*—and our understanding of the scope of that belonging—emerge from the totality of the communities and conversations or discourses in which we participate. The news media are not the only way that this discourse is circulated, but they are a very important one. We live in an era in which mass

communications predominate, providing the context within which interpersonal communications take place and are understood.

It seems likely that the moralistic tone of early nineteenth-century news reporting both reflected and fostered similar thought and speech among its readers. It is also likely that the banishment of explicit moral judgments from the news columns, which came with the introduction of the objective style of reporting, has had, for better or for worse (or perhaps both), an equally significant impact on current public discourse. When Alasdair MacIntyre tries to explain the incoherence of much of today's moral discourse, he overlooks one important possible explanation: What we know of this vocabulary we know largely through the mass media, which present it only in fragmentary and limited ways.

When societal values change, the engine of that change is language, and the mass media are the medium for the circulation of that language. Even—perhaps especially—without explicit moral language, new vocabulary encourages us to see the world in new ways. The term “sexual assault” helped to shift the perception of rape from an act of passion to a crime of violence. When the word “ecology” came into widespread circulation, it reframed public perception of the natural environment as a living and interdependent system of which we are a part and to which we have some obligations.

This moral function of the news media is arguably their most important function. The news media are one of the most influential means for circulating the moral norms of the society, for circulating the conversation in which disagreements about those norms are debated and resolved, and for circulating the new vocabulary that signals changes in those values. For example, the introduction of words such as “sexism” and “homophobia” signaled changing social attitudes while also making problematic some forms of conduct that had been taken for granted before.

Thus, there are profound ethical implications when a newspaper shifts from seeing itself as being fundamentally in service to its community to being in service to its customers, and when it shifts from addressing its readers as citizens to addressing them as consumers. To the degree that it ceases to place its duty to the community first and to address its audience as members of a community, the newspaper is abandoning both journalism and its larger moral role.

### *The Impact of the News Media on Social Structure*

“Culture is the means by which we pass on to new generations our values, beliefs and hard-won wisdom,” notes Elayne Rapping. “But, as the term

'mass communication' implies, the rise of home TV has taken this crucial socializing function out of our hands and transferred it to commercial network executives."<sup>16</sup>

What image of social reality do the news media create and transmit? We can begin with one broad generalization: Journalism produces images through which bureaucratic institutions define and dominate social reality. There are conflicts among institutions that can generate conflicting versions of social reality, and there are forms of journalistic narrative in which the role of institutions is less predominant. But, as sociologist Fishman notes, the way that facts are defined in journalism gives a high priority to bureaucratically generated accounts: "If reporters draw their own inferences from available accounts, they cannot report them as facts. If somebody else draws the inferences—and usually this somebody else is an official empowered to do so—then the journalist can treat the inferences as hard facts."<sup>17</sup>

Beat reporters orient their activity around the schedules and structures of institutions, thereby creating a public reality in which institutions are predominant actors. Inevitably, this must be at the expense of other content. Forms of social life that lack bureaucratic structures, spokespersons, and fact-generating machinery are not caught in the news net, except insofar as they interact with bureaucratic structures or adapt themselves to the requirements of the news-making apparatus.

This conception of the role of the media and the equation of objective reporting with the transmission of bureaucratically generated facts can be traced to Walter Lippmann and the Progressive movement, as we have seen in Chapter 3. Lippmann argued in *Public Opinion* that "The common interests in life very largely elude public opinion entirely and can be managed only by a specialized class whose personal interests reach beyond the locality."<sup>18</sup> Lippmann's conception helps us to understand how objective journalism has contributed to the decline of communities and the public sphere.

In the liberal view, as expressed by Lippmann, the rational critical discourse that must take place in order to make sound social policy can only take place within a coherent, rational, educated elite that shares a commitment (not shared by the broader public) to disinterested scientific inquiry. Within that framework, the news media have the responsibility of serving as a watchdog for the public and of explaining and securing public consent for elite policy and decisions. Within this conception, government is democratic if it operates with the consent of the governed. Lippmann's prescriptions gave journalistic practice an epistemological frame that interprets social reality in terms of institutions and individuals. The social

structures of the informal or associational sector (that is, “family, friends, neighbors, neighborhood associations, clubs, civic groups, local enterprises, churches, ethnic associations, temples, local unions, local government and local media”<sup>19</sup>) were consequently marginalized.

What impact does this media depiction of social reality have on social reality? This question is a tricky one; as it is framed, it suggests that we can make a meaningful distinction between a “real world” and a mirror world constructed by the news media. It seems more correct to acknowledge that the boundary and distinction between direct and mediated experience has become hopelessly blurred. Many Americans spend 30 hours or more every week watching television, entering into long-term emotional relationships with television characters or personalities who may be real or fictional. Insofar as our sense of the “real” is grounded in shared experience, mediated experiences that are widely shared often have a stronger claim to reality than experiences that are direct but not shared.

Although it is true that much happens in the world that is not captured in journalistic accounts, it is predominantly the events that are captured by the news net, placed in an interpretive frame, and transmitted to a mass audience that have the potential for widespread impact. The news media provide a frame through which much of interpersonal experience can be interpreted. To the extent that we have a world to talk about with our neighbors, it is most often the world presented to us by the mass media.

The decline of the community and public sphere is widely attributed to the collapse of traditional social forms in the face of modernity. The late twentieth century has seen a widespread decline in civic institutions, ranging from the unraveling of neighborhoods and families to declining participation in more formally structured forms of voluntary civic organization such as churches, political parties, block clubs, and fraternal organizations.<sup>20</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that the twentieth century has also seen an unprecedented blossoming of bureaucratic discourses and the proliferation of bureaucratically (and hierarchically) organized structures for the management of every dimension of social life: health care systems, welfare systems, systems for the management of the poor, the mentally ill, the socially deviant, and increasing rationalization of the organizational structures of businesses and educational institutions.

John McKnight argues that there is a direct link between the rise of bureaucratic structures and the decline of community in America:

Whenever hierarchical systems become more powerful than the community, we see the flow of authority, resources, skills, dollars, legitimacy, and capaci-



ties away from communities to service systems. In fact, institutionalized systems grow at the expense of communities. As institutions gain power, communities lose their potency and the consent of community is replaced by the control of systems; the citizens of community are replaced by the clients and consumers of institutional products.<sup>21</sup>

Although this “increasing organization of everything” has been widely noted and analyzed, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of the news media in extending the reach of these power structures into the social body and into the construction of personal identity. This is not to say that bureaucratic institutions do not predate the rise of objective journalism (they predate it by centuries) or that the mass media are responsible for the creation of these institutions. But the social power of these institutions consists, at least in large part, in their ability to transmit their versions of reality, and this power is sustained in large part through the agency of the mass media.

The impact on public life has been profound. James Carey argues that “the public has been dissolved, in part, by journalism.” More specifically, Carey maintains, the dissolution was caused by the sweeping changes in journalistic practice introduced by the institutionalization of objectivity. According to Carey, Lippmann believed that the proper role for journalists was to act as “symbolic brokers who translate the arcane language of experts into a publicly accessible language for the masses. They transmit the judgments of experts and thereby ratify decisions arrived at by that class—not by the public or public representatives.” The consequence of this view has been, over the decades, a sweeping delegitimation of public discourse. “Lippmann, in effect, takes the public out of politics and politics out of public life.”<sup>22</sup>

Lippmann did not completely deny the public a role in political life. Although the public were largely relegated to the role of spectators, they were spectators whose consent gave legitimacy to the established order and who held the power of the ballot box to remove leaders who failed to act in the public interest. But this role is distinctly limited (and limiting).

One of the most significant instances of the impact of the news media on social institutions has been the impact of television on the institutions of democracy, that is, on the way campaigns are run, issues are defined, and constituencies are built. Television has become the most significant medium for the transmission of political discourse and, thus, also for the public understanding of political discourse. Simultaneously, it has transformed that discourse: politicians now adapt their message to the medium

by encapsulating their ideas into sound bites. The result, argues Robert Entman, has been a debasement of the political system: “Bluntly speaking, the media now provide an overwhelming temptation for politicians and other political figures to engage in demagoguery.”<sup>23</sup>

The decline of the public sphere and traditional forms of civic engagement is sometimes discussed in terms that suggest a lost golden era. Revisionist historians such as Claude Fischer have questioned whether the ideal communities nostalgically evoked by contemporary communitarian theorists ever really existed. Fischer argues that the rosy visions of the past rest upon historically inaccurate pictures of places, such as New England, and eras, such as the 1950s, that were quite anomalous in important ways.<sup>24</sup> In a similar spirit, others have pointed out that the model of public discourse embodied in the coffee houses and political journals of the Enlightenment era was, like the Athenian model of participatory democracy, very restrictive in terms of who was allowed to participate.

Historically, the public “spaces” in which public discourse took place were initially the physical spaces of inns and coffee houses and the pages of the early partisan newspapers, which restricted participation to those with the requisite wealth and leisure time—that is, bourgeois men. The space of public discourse gradually expanded, though, to include the pages of the popular press, and the emergence of the penny newspapers made the public sphere accessible to a much broader public.

According to Benjamin Barber, Lippmann is part of a long tradition of political thought that sees a profound tension between participatory democracy on the one hand and liberal values such as autonomy, liberty, and tolerance on the other. “In each case, the charge is that democracy untempered by liberalism becomes distempered democracy, that popular government carries within itself a seed of totalitarian despotism.”<sup>25</sup> The key question here is whether the greater danger lies in the threat posed by an “excess of democracy” to liberal values, as Lippmann would suggest, or in the threat posed to democracy by an excess of liberalism, as communitarian theorists such as Benjamin Barber, Mary Ann Glendon, and Harry Boyte argue.<sup>26</sup>

### The Importance of Community and the Public Sphere

Even on its own terms, the information-centered model of objective journalism is a failure. If we set aside the fundamental question of whether the information transmitted by the media is properly regarded as constituting

a factual representation of reality, the news media have still been less than successful at fulfilling their mission as defined by liberal democratic theory, that is, giving citizens the information they need to be active participants in self-governance. Not only has the rise of objective journalism been paralleled by a decline in citizen participation in public life, but numerous surveys of public knowledge show that very little of the information transmitted is actually received—or at least retained. Although the predominant model of an objective press emphasizes information at the expense of ideas or debate, surveys of the American public invariably show alarmingly low levels of basic knowledge about world events. Christopher Lasch argues that

As things stand now, the press generates information in abundance, and nobody pays any attention. It is no secret that the public knows less about public affairs than it used to know. Millions of Americans cannot begin to tell you what is in the bill of rights, what Congress does, what the Constitution says about the powers of the presidency, how the party system emerged, or how it operates.<sup>27</sup>

The fact that most Americans cannot name their U.S. representative can't be explained in terms of a failure of the news media to report the activities of Congress. Rather, Lasch suggests, news consumers don't retain political news because they do not perceive themselves as having a meaningful role to play in the political process. Lasch argues that what democracy needs is public debate, not information. Of course, it needs information too, but the kind of information it needs can be generated only by vigorous popular debate. We do not know what we need to know until we ask the right questions, and we can identify the right questions only by subjecting our own ideas about the world to the test of public controversy.<sup>28</sup>

Some defenders of objective journalism may wish to argue that the decline of civic engagement and the decline of the public sphere are the price that we have to pay for progress. These social structures simply aren't capable of responding to the complex, technical problems that modern societies have to deal with, and though there may be some positive aspects of these more primitive social structures whose passing we will nostalgically mourn, we have entered a period of human history in which only the leadership of experts can enable us to deal with the challenges we face.

To this, it may be countered that hierarchical bureaucratic structures have also proven themselves incapable of responding to the complex technological problems of modern society. As John McKnight argues,

our “correctional systems” consistently train people in crime. Studies demonstrate that a substantial number of people, while in hospital, become sick or injured with maladies worse than those for which they were admitted. In many of our big city schools we see children whose relative achievement levels fall farther behind every year.<sup>29</sup>

McKnight contends that this pattern of “crime-making correction systems, sickness-making health systems, and stupid-making schools” is the result of a social model that “conceives society as a place bounded by institutions and individuals.” What is missing from this model, says McKnight, is the informal, associational sector. Although McKnight does not acknowledge the role of the news media in constructing this social model, it is the very model that has been institutionalized in journalism in this century through the procedural norms of objectivity.

According to McKnight, one reason why social planners ignore community is that “there are many institutional leaders who simply do not believe in the capacities of communities. They often see communities as collections of parochial, inexpert, uninformed and biased people.”<sup>30</sup> This, of course, closely parallels Walter Lippmann’s view of the public. Increasingly, as communities deteriorate, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam speaks of the decline of civic engagement as a loss of social capital. Over the past generation, there has been a sharp decline in the level of civic participation in everything from church groups and fraternal organizations to the PTA. At the same time, the culture of cynicism within the press has undermined public faith in those bureaucratic institutions that are the central players in journalism’s picture of reality. “Step by step,” says James Fallows, “mainstream journalism has fallen into the habit of portraying public life in America as a race to the bottom, in which one group of conniving, insincere politicians ceaselessly tries to outmaneuver another.”<sup>31</sup>

It doesn’t seem farfetched to suggest a connection between this kind of depiction of the world of politics in the news media, and the declining public participation noted by Putnam:

By almost every measure, Americans’ direct engagement in politics and government has fallen steadily and sharply over the last generation, despite the fact that average levels of education—the best individual-level predictor of political participation—have risen sharply throughout this period. Every year over the last decade or two, millions more have withdrawn from the affairs of their communities.

Not coincidentally, Americans have also disengaged psychologically from politics and government over this era. The proportion of Americans who reply that they “trust the government in Washington” only “some of the time” or “almost never” has risen steadily from 30 percent in 1966 to 75 percent in 1992.<sup>32</sup>

The bureaucratic institutions that have become predominant in our way of life are increasingly unable to perform the basic functions that are the ultimate measure of any system of social organization: feeding the hungry, educating the young, healing the sick, and protecting our society’s most vulnerable members. There is, Putnam has argued, a strong connection between how well government works and the vitality of civic life. Although journalism is far from the only factor that has contributed to the decline of civic life, it clearly has the potential to play a constructive role in rebuilding it.