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In Defence of Objectivity Revisited

Judith Lichtenberg

Introduction

In these postmodern times, the ideal of objectivity may seem a bit tattered around the edges, but American journalists still embrace it as one of the fundamental norms of their profession. The distinction between news, where objectivity is thought possible and desirable, and opinion, where objectivity is thought impossible, is deeply entrenched in the journalistic culture. Inextricably intertwined with truth, fairness, balance, neutrality, the absence of value judgements – in short, with the most fundamental journalistic values – objectivity is a cornerstone of the professional ideology of journalists in liberal democracies.

Yet the objectivity of journalism has come increasingly under fire in recent years. The criticisms come from a variety of quarters and take several forms. Some say that journalism *is not* objective; others that it *cannot be* objective; and still others that it *should not be* objective. Odd as it may seem, sometimes the same critic seems to be making all of these charges at the same time.

One challenge comes from critics – from across the political spectrum – who claim that the media have misrepresented their views or have not reported their activities impartially. Some say that the media have a 'liberal bias', that they overemphasize unrest and dissent, or look too hard for muck to rake. Other critics contend that, on the contrary, the press serves the conservative interests of government and big business. Aggrieved individuals and groups of all kinds charge that news coverage of this or that issue is unfair, biased, or sensational.

Those who attack journalism on these grounds seem to share one crucial assumption with those they criticize. Charges of bias or unfairness suggest that objectivity is at least possible. How can one complain of bias, after all, unless *un*bias can be imagined? But many contemporary critics, not only of journalism but of every other form of inquiry, reject this assumption. Journalism is not objective, they say, nor could it be. As one recent textbook puts it, objectivity 'is a false and impossible ideal', and although all media

writers claim it in some way, 'they are all wrong' (Kessler and McDonald, 1989: 24, 28).

This view has its roots in the sociology of knowledge and today finds its fullest expression in postmodernism; it is shared by many sociologists, humanists, legal scholars and other social critics. They believe that the idea of objectivity rests on an outmoded and untenable theory of knowledge, according to which objective knowledge consists in correspondence between some idea or statement and a reality 'out there' in the world. 'Objectivity', in the words of a former journalism school dean, 'is an essential correspondence between knowledge of a thing and the thing itself' (McDonald, 1975: 69). According to the critics, however, reality is not 'out there'; it is 'a vast production, a staged creation – something humanly produced and humanly maintained' (Carey, 1989: 26). Reality, on this view, is 'socially constructed', and so there are as many realities as there are social perspectives on the world. There is no 'true reality' to which objective knowledge can be faithful.

One might have expected at least that those reaching such conclusions would do so with a certain regret or disappointment. 'Wouldn't it be good if true knowledge were possible, and isn't it sad that it isn't?' Yet the same people who believe objectivity is impossible often hold also that it is an undesirable and even a dangerous ideal. Objectivity is a strategy of hegemony used by some members of society to dominate others (MacKinnon, 1982: 537); a 'strategic ritual' enabling professionals to 'defend themselves from critical onslaught' (Tuchman, 1972); even 'the most insidious bias of all' (Schudson, 1978: 160).[1] At best, objectivity 'is a cultural form with its own set of conventions' (Schiller, 1981: 5).

The Compound Assault on Objectivity

On the face of it, there is a certain oddness in this compound assault on objectivity – that journalism is not objective, that it could not be, that it should not be – for the charges are essentially incompatible. Thus, although often a single critic makes more than one of these accusations, no two of them taken together makes sense. Why not?

1 The sincere complaint that a piece of journalism is not objective makes sense only against the background assumption that objectivity is possible (why bother complaining about the inevitable?).
2 The insistence that journalism cannot be objective makes superfluous the view that objectivity is undesirable (why bother denouncing the impossible?).
3 The assertion that objectivity is not desirable makes senseless the complaint that journalism is not objective (what is the complaint?).

These apparent confusions do not result from simple muddleheadedness. Ultimately we will find that the different charges levelled against objectivity are really charges levelled against different understandings of objectivity.

Let us begin by trying to reconstruct roughly the chain of reasoning to the all-encompassing conclusion that objectivity in journalism does not, could not, and should not exist:

- Experience continually confronts us with examples of clashes of belief (between individuals, between cultures) that we cannot resolve – we do not know how to decide which belief is true.
- No one can totally escape his or her biases; no one can be completely objective.
- Therefore, the idea that there could be an objective, true account of things is a fiction.
- Anyone who sincerely thinks there could be such an account is deluded by a faulty understanding of the relation between mind and the world.
- This faulty understanding has significant practical consequences; belief in objectivity and adherence to practices thought to be implied by it reinforces existing power relations and cultural and political chauvinism.
- Therefore, the aspiration to objectivity, whether innocent or not, serves as a prop in an ideological agenda.
- So, in other words, real objectivity is impossible and its attempted manifestations are either naive or insidious or both.

Who is this enemy that makes such strange bedfellows, uniting critics from left and right and bringing together the most abstruse of academics with worldly politicians, advocates, and journalists? The alleged enemy is no single entity. In elevating objectivity to an ideal one may be endorsing any of several different ends, or the supposed means of attaining them. It is for this reason that the attack on objectivity can represent a variety of different complaints. Since the values captured by the term 'objectivity' vary greatly – in the extent to which they are possible, probable, actual, or desirable – the legitimacy of the complaints varies as well.

In what follows I have two aims. One is to show that in its core meaning we cannot coherently abandon the ideal of objectivity, and that, whatever they may think, objectivity's critics do not abandon it either. The other is to acknowledge, and to explore, the critics' genuine insights. I shall argue, then, that those detractors of objectivity who enlighten us about the defects and pitfalls of journalism (or other forms of inquiry) themselves covertly rely on the idea of objectivity. Their real target is something else. It may be a value such as neutrality – something commonly associated with objectivity but distinct from it; or it may be a practice or method commonly thought to attain objectivity. There may be good reasons for repudiating these values or practices or methods, but they do not, I shall argue, mean that we should repudiate objectivity in its core sense.

Metaphysical Questions

Our most fundamental interest in objectivity is an interest in truth. We want to know how things stand in the world, or what happens, and why. In this sense to claim that a particular piece of journalism *is not* objective is to claim that it fails to provide the truth or the whole truth. In addition, to deny that

objectivity is *possible* is at least to deny that there is any way of getting at the truth, on the grounds that all accounts of things are accounts from a particular social, psychological, cultural or historical perspective and that we have no neutral standpoint from which to adjudicate between conflicting accounts. To deny that objectivity is possible is often also to insist, not only that we can never get at the truth, but also that for precisely this reason it makes no sense to think there is any such thing. Even to speak of 'truth' or 'the facts', these critics strongly suggest, demonstrates a certain naiveté.

To doubt that objectivity is possible, then, is to doubt that we can know how things *really* are or what *really* happens, where 'really' means something like 'independently of our own perspective'. But there is a crucial ambiguity in the phrase 'our own perspective'. One way to doubt the objectivity of a story or an account of things is to challenge the particular perspective from which it is told. So, for example, one might doubt that American news accounts of the Gulf War told an objective story. When our worries take this form, we may be doubting that a particular account or set of accounts is objective – i.e. true or complete – but we need not be denying that it is possible to tell an objective, or at least a more objective, story. Indeed, we typically have specific ideas about how to go about getting one. We seek out foreign press reports of these events, compare them to each other and to American news reports, and evaluate inconsistencies within and between stories in light of a variety of standards. We inquire into a news organization's sources of information, likely obstacles to the reliability of its judgements, whether it has interested motives that might give it reason to distort the story. So, for example, in attempting to understand what happened in the Gulf War, the cautious inquirer will question the American media's reliance on US military reports and press conferences as a source of credible information, and will attempt to find other sources of information with which to compare and assess US reports. These sources will be subjected to the same kind of scrutiny.

We have, in short, a multitude of standards and practices for evaluating the reliability of information. This is not to say that we can often determine the whole truth and nothing but the truth, particularly in the quick-and-messy world that journalists cover. It is rare, however, that we have no guidance at all. We know how to distinguish between better and worse, more or less accurate accounts.

Often, however, the challenge to objectivity connects to deeper philosophical worries, to the centuries-old debate between realists and idealists. The metaphysical realist says that there is a world or a way things are 'out there', i.e. existing independently of our perspective. Traditionally, 'our' perspective meant not yours or mine or our culture's, but the human perspective, or even the perspective of any possible consciousness. The ideal of knowledge presupposed by this view holds that objects or states of affairs in the world are 'intrinsically' or 'independently' a certain way, and that knowledge consists in somehow 'mirroring' the way they are.

The metaphysical idealist denies that we can know what the world is like intrinsically, apart from a perspective. The world is our construction in the sense that we inevitably encounter it through our concepts and our categories; we cannot see the world concept- or category-free. Kant, the father of the contemporary idealist critique, described universal categories shaping our

perception of the world that are necessary for human beings to experience the world at all. The sense for Kant in which we cannot get outside our perspective is unthreatening, because by 'our' perspective Kant meant not that of our clan or culture but that of all human consciousness. So understood, idealism poses no threat to objectivity. The idealist can make all the distinctions the realist can make: between the real and the illusory, what is 'out there' and what is 'in here', the objective and the subjective. Lions are real and unicorns mythical; trees and sky are 'out there' and stomach-aches and beliefs are 'in here'. Idealism leaves everything as it is (Luban, 1986: 708–11).

But Kant opened the door to a more threatening relativism. For having admitted that our knowledge of the world is relative to a framework, it was a natural step to the view that the categories moulding our experience depend partly on concrete and particular conditions that vary from culture to culture, community to community, even person to person. When twentieth-century thinkers took this step, arguing not simply that reality is constructed but that it is socially constructed – constructed differently, therefore, by different groups and cultures – they repudiated Kant's consolation that we could accept idealism while preserving objective, because universal, knowledge.

Global Doubts and Local Doubts

When critics tell us that reality is socially constructed by way of explaining that our news accounts of events are not objective, what are they saying? That our culture, our political and other interests do much to structure and determine the way we (whoever 'we' may be) look at the world, and that our news reports reflect, reinforce, and even create these biases? Of course this is true. Yet some of the sharpest critics of the press make this latter argument without calling into question the possibility of objectivity; indeed they rely on it, as I would argue they must (Chomsky, 1969). But the assertion that reality is socially constructed means something more than this. There is a finality and inevitability about it: we believe what we believe because of our gender or class or cultural attachments; others with other attachments believe differently, and there is no adjudicating between our beliefs and theirs, for there is no neutral standpoint.

Yet surely the critics do not mean that we can never get outside our perspective in this sense, outside the particular world-view in which we have been raised, that we can never look at it, criticize it, judge it. They have, after all. How do they know that American news accounts of the Gulf War are partial, except by comparison with some other actual or possible accounts? The judgement of partiality rests partly on other sources of information, which taken separately or taken together have, they believe, proved more consistent or coherent.

The point is that it makes no sense to criticize a statement or description as biased or unobjective except against the background of some actual or possible contrast, some more accurate statement or better description. We have a variety of means to settle differences between conflicting beliefs or to establish one view as superior to another. We get more evidence, seek out

other sides of the story, check our instruments, duplicate our experiments, re-examine our chain of reasoning. These methods do not settle all questions, but they settle many. In showing us how, say, British news stories construct reality, critics of necessity depend on the possibility of seeing and understanding alternative versions of the same events. And if no means existed to compare these alternative 'realities', the charges would have no bite. For the critics' point is not that these alternative 'realities' are like so many flavours of ice cream about which *de gustibus non disputandum est* but that those who see things in one way are missing something important, or getting only a partial view, or even getting things wrong.

Typically, the social constructionist critique vacillates between two incompatible claims: the *general*, 'global' assertion that objectivity is impossible because different people and cultures employ different categories and there is no way of deciding which framework better fits the world; and the charge that *particular* news stories or mass media organizations serve ideological interests or represent the world in a partial or distorted or otherwise inadequate way. It is crucial to see that these charges are incompatible. In so far as objectivity is impossible there can be no sense in the claim – certainly none in the rebuke – that the media are ideological or partial, for these concepts imply the possibility of a contrast. Conversely, in so far as we agree that the media serve an ideological function or bias our vision, we implicitly accept the view that other, better, more objective ways are possible.

Transcultural Communication

Lurking in the assault on objectivity is the assumption that different cultures possess radically different worldviews, worldviews so different they are impermeable to outside influence. On this view, different cultures cannot engage in genuine conversation with each other, because they speak different conceptual and evaluative languages and employ different standards of judging. And there are no available yardsticks external to the culture by which to judge these internal standards of judgement.

This claim is overstated, however. Two points are important. First, despite all the talk about differences in worldview, we share a great deal even with those from very different cultures. Second, even where we see things differently from those of other cultures we can see *that* we see things differently and we can see *how* we see things differently. So our worldviews are not hermetic: others can get in and we can get out. As we shall see, the two points are not wholly separable: the distinction between sharing a perspective and being able to understand another's perspective is not sharp.

It is easy to fall under the sway of the doctrine of cultural relativism. At a certain point in our intellectual development – often in late adolescence – we are struck with the realization that language plays a crucial role in shaping the experience and worldview of individuals and even whole cultures. But the truth in this insight has been misunderstood and exaggerated. For one thing, what impresses us depends partly on the premise that different 'worldviews' take the same underlying stuff, the same data of experience, and shape it

differently. The 'aha experience' of relativism depends, then, on the commonsense recognition of one world out there – something that, paradoxically, the relativist is often at pains to deny.

Furthermore, the differences between worldviews can be exaggerated. Even those from very different cultures can agree, despite their deeply different conceptions of time, to meet at ten and to come together at what all recognize as the negotiating table. Intractable disputes between cultures arise sometimes because their values diverge; equally often, however, such disputes arise precisely because their values coincide. Both the Israelis and the Palestinians invest Jerusalem with sacred and irreplaceable value. In what sense do their worldviews clash? As Francis I is supposed to have said about Henry VIII: 'Henry and I agree about everything: we both want Calais.'

Even where our points of view clearly differ, what should we make of this fact? As Donald Davidson puts it (1984: 184).

> Whorf, wanting to demonstrate that Hopi incorporates a metaphysics so alien to ours that Hopi and English cannot, as he puts it, 'be calibrated', uses English to convey the contents of sample Hopi sentences. Kuhn is brilliant at saying what things were like before the revolution using – what else? – our postrevolutionary idiom.[2]

Our worldviews, then, are not unalterable and hermetic. We can and do come to see things as others see them – not just others from our culture but from radically different ones. Thucydides brings the agony of the Athenians' war to life; Ruth Benedict gets us to see 'the uses of cannibalism'; Faulkner shows us how things look to an adult with the mind of a child. The possibility of communication between cultures is perhaps inseparable from the first point: from the outset different cultures possess points of commonality and contact, and these enable us to travel back and forth. Could there be a point to history, anthropology, literature, journalism, biography, if this were not so?

Of course, some people and some cultures are easier to understand than others. Sometimes, at the limit, we remain after all in the dark. Generally, however, we can succeed more or less in overcoming the barriers. We can see the world as others see it.

Deconstructing 'The Social Construction of Reality'

If other 'realities' are not hermetic and impermeable, that takes much of the wind out of the assertion that reality is socially constructed. For the usual connotations of the word 'reality' are exhaustive and exclusive: reality is all, and all there is. If instead there are many possible realities, and ways to get from one to the other, then we can see into each other's worlds, and our realities can thereby be altered.

Perhaps the claim is that even when we seem to escape the determination of our vision by a particular social construction, even when we seem to see things in a new light, that new vision is also socially constructed. Suppose, for example, that, partly as a result of changes in American news accounts, over the last twenty years or so Americans have come to understand the Palestinian point of view in the Middle East conflict better than they had before.[3] It might

be argued that these changes result from differences in the American political establishment's view of its own geopolitical interests. On this view, the changes are themselves socially constructed out of the web of American ideology.

No doubt changing American interests partly explain the changes in perception; but to insist that apparently divergent views *always and only* derive from the push of the dominant culture's interests, from the powers that be, amounts to an unfalsifiable conspiracy theory. The claim that reality is socially constructed is then in danger of becoming empty. If, on the other hand, it is acknowledged that other sources, apart from the powers that be, can be responsible for changes in our views, then the question is what work the concept of social construction is doing. Is the point simply that ways of looking at the world do not come into being *ex nihilo*, but are rather the product of . . . of *something* – the total social-political-economic-cultural-psychological-biological environment? And is this anything more than the claim that everything has a cause? Beyond these extremely general assertions the view that reality is socially constructed seems to add nothing. For if every view is socially constructed but no view could *not* be socially constructed we learn nothing of substance when we know that reality is socially constructed.

This is not to deny that the media sometimes or even often present events in a distorted, biased or ideological way. It is rather to insist that we can only explain this fact on the assumption that there are better and worse, more and less faithful renderings of events, and that, despite our own biases, preconceptions, 'conceptual schemes', we can escape our own point of view sufficiently to recognize the extent to which it imposes a structure or slant on events that could be seen differently.

The word 'reality' is to blame for some of the confusion. By her own account, one crucial theme of Gaye Tuchman's book *Making News* is that 'the act of making news is the act of constructing reality itself rather than a picture of reality' (Tuchman, 1972: 12). Tuchman's point trades on ambiguities in the term 'reality'.

News can illuminatingly be said to construct reality rather than a picture of it in two senses. First, some events are genuine media creations. When *Newsweek* in the 1980s proclaimed on its cover that 'Nixon Is Back', then in a crucial sense Nixon *was* back. To have arrived on *Newsweek's* cover is to be back from whatever realm of nonbeing one formerly inhabited. We have here a variation on the Pirandellesque insight that 'It's the truth if you think it is': 'It's the truth if they (the major media) say it is'. But this rule applies to only a very limited fraction of our beliefs, a tiny portion of the total news product.

Second, the act of reporting news is an act of constructing reality in the sense captured by the sociological commonplace that 'if a situation is defined as real it's real in its consequences'. If people believe that news stories of an event are accurate, they will behave accordingly, and for certain purposes those stories function as 'reality'. This is sometimes simply a matter of the bandwagon effect: when a news story describes college-bound students' scramble for admission to elite institutions, more students may panic and start scrambling.

Nevertheless, journalists purport to represent an independent reality, and,

although they often fall short, if we abandon the concept of a reality independent of news stories we undermine the very basis on which to criticize their work.

The Existence and Meaning of Facts

Most people have a crude picture of what objectivity means, and this partly explains its bad name. Belief in objectivity does not mean that every question that can be posed, or about which people might disagree, has a single determinate right answer. If it did we would be wise to reject it.

What, then, does belief in objectivity commit us to? At the very least it means that some questions have determinate, right answers – and that all questions have wrong answers. So, for example, it is a fact that Bill Clinton is currently the President of the USA, and that in 1995 the New York State legislature reinstated the death penalty.

Do objectivity's critics deny that Bill Clinton is President or that the death penalty was reinstated in New York? Let us hope not. How, then, do they reconcile these unassailable facts with their repudiation of objectivity? We find several strategies.

1 One is to insist that nevertheless such facts are socially constructed. What does this mean? No reasonable person would deny that for there to be such a thing as a President of such a thing as the USA, a wide variety of complex social institutions must be in place. If that is all it means to say this fact is socially constructed, nothing significant turns on admitting it. Typically, however, the point of emphasizing the constructedness of a fact is to undermine its truth or credibility. Yet however constructed 'Bill Clinton is President' may be, it is no less true or credible for that.

A variation on the theme that all facts are socially constructed is the claim that they are all 'theory-laden'. Certainly every factual statement can be understood to imply decisions about the usefulness or appropriateness of categorizing things in one way rather than another. If we want to dignify even the most commonsensical of such categorizations with the label 'theory', who is to stop us? But then we must keep in mind that there are theories and theories. 'The human fetus is a person' and 'The PLO is a terrorist organization' are laden with controversial theories. 'The earth revolves around the sun' and 'The lion is a mammal' are laden with theories not seriously contestable in modern times. Facts, then, may be theory-laden; but whether they therefore lack objectivity depends on the particular theories they carry as freight. 'Bill Clinton is President' may in some sense rest on a theory or conceptual framework, but it is one so widely shared and innocuous that the label 'theory-laden', usually brought as an accusation, loses its bite. Without an account of the faulty theory embedded therein, we can rest content: when our theories are good, theory-ladenness is nothing to fear.

It may be said that the facts just mentioned are not interesting facts, and that this weakens the point they are used to illustrate. In what sense are they not interesting? Surely New York's reinstatement of the death

penalty is in many respects interesting. In claiming these facts are not interesting the critic must mean that it is uncontroversial that these *are* facts. With that we would agree; but to have gained the critic's agreement on this point is itself a victory. For the social constructionists sometimes seem to include all facts, however humdrum, in the realm of the constructed (and to be deconstructed). To acknowledge that these 'uninteresting' facts *are* facts is to concede what seemed to be a point of disagreement.

2 An alternative strategy for the relativist is to exempt such facts from the realm of the socially constructed, but to insist that they are trivial and that all non-trivial 'facts' of the kind prominent in news stories are socially constructed in an interesting sense. Yet to admit this is more significant than it looks. First, there will be *lots* of these trivial facts, perhaps an infinite number of them. Second, such facts will serve as a crucial check constraining all the non-trivial, socially constructed 'facts' that are supposed to comprise the bulk of the news. In this sense it is hard to see how the apparently innocuous facts can be trivial, even if taken one by one they seem to lack a certain cosmic weightiness. Finally, having admitted the existence of some non-socially constructed facts, it will prove difficult to draw the line between these and the socially constructed ones, especially given the constraints the former place on the latter. So the camel of objectivity gets its nose in the tent.

3 A third strategy is to admit the independence of some facts from socially produced theories, but to insist that nevertheless these facts will be interpreted differently by members of different groups or cultures, and that these interpretations, themselves social constructions, will invest the same facts with different meanings. This claim can be understood in at least two ways.

(a) In one sense there is no disputing that these facts will be interpreted differently by different people. We all agree that the New York State legislature reinstated the death penalty, but we disagree about the reasons for it and about the agents ultimately responsible, its consequences, its symbolic significance.

Yet our disagreements about these matters of 'interpretation' will in turn depend partly on other facts, such as people's beliefs about crime and about the efficacy of capital punishment. The constraint of facts will rule out some interpretations as wrong, even if it typically leaves room for reasonable disagreement about which interpretation is right. The web of expectations on which everyday life depends rests on the possibility of knowing all sorts of things 'beyond a reasonable doubt'. So the insistence that an interpretation of the facts is beyond the reach of objective evaluation is simply overstated. There may generally be room for disagreement, but not all the room in the world. Some interpretations are better than others, and some are simply wrong.

(b) A second sense in which it may be said that different people and groups will invest the same facts with different meanings can be illustrated by a study of British, American and Belgian coverage of elections in Ireland. The study found that the BBC story focused on the potential consequences of the vote for British-Irish relations; the CBS story used the election as a peg to talk about Irish unemployment and its potential consequences for immigration to the USA; and the Belgian account focused on the role of the Catholic Church in Irish politics, the relation between church and state being an important issue in Belgium (Gurevitch et al., 1991). It makes sense to say that each story took the same set of facts but interpreted them differently; each invested the facts with different meanings.

The point is important, and we should not underestimate the significance of this 'meaning construction' function of the mass media; it bears extensive examination. Those who stress this point, however, often seem to misunderstand its relevance (or lack of it) to the question of objectivity. The British, American and Belgian news reports invest the Irish election with different meanings – they see it as signifying different things – but they all refer to the same events and agree about certain crucial facts, such as who won the elections. Indeed, the three stories may be perfectly compatible with each other. It is no surprise to find that the same events have different significance for people of varying histories, cultures or interests. We might put this point by saying that the issues raised here go *beyond* the question of objectivity, but they do not subvert objectivity. I conclude that these challenges pose no threat to the existence of objective facts.

Beyond Objectivity?

Belief in objectivity does not mean that about every question we might ask (or everything that reporters report) there is a single right answer. The interesting question is how extensive the realm of objective facts is. Imagine a continuum of objectivity along which to locate the variety of subjects and statements news reporters investigate. At one end we find the relatively straightforward and uncontroversial facts of the kind we have just been discussing. In the middle we find statements about which clearly there is a truth, a 'right answer', but where to a greater or lesser extent the answer is difficult to discover. How did the dinosaurs become extinct? Who were the high-ranking Communists in MI5? Did O. J. Simpson murder Nicole Simpson and Ronald Goldman? The answers to some of these questions may depend partly on what we mean by certain terms (like 'murder'), but even assuming consistent usage we may reasonably disagree about the answers. Still, no one doubts that there are definite answers.

The line is sometimes thin between cases where clearly there is a truth about the matter although we have difficulty finding out what it is, and those where it cannot be said that there is a truth about the matter. For many of the complex goings-on between people, both at the 'macro' political level and at the 'micro' interpersonal level, the language of truth and objectivity may be thin and inadequate. When, for example, we have heard in detail 'both sides of the story' from quarrelling lovers or friends, we may sort out some clear truths about what happened, but in the end we may still be left with a residue of indestructible ambiguity, where it is plausible to say not simply that we do not

know for sure what happened but that at the appropriate level of description there is no single determinate thing that happened.

Now it seems clear that examples of this kind of ambiguity and indeterminacy abound for the most interesting and important subjects covered in the news. Did Clarence Thomas sexually harass Anita Hill? Uncertainty may depend partly on insufficient evidence and doubts about the credibility of witnesses. Disagreement may, however, depend on other things as well: on different understandings of how sexual harassment should be defined, and on related questions about the meaning of certain gestures, expressions and interactions. Depending on the framework in which we embed the bits of evidence, the gestures and utterances, we will get different answers. And the question 'Which framework is the appropriate one?' may not always have a determinate answer.

On the other hand, sometimes it does. Once we know the context of a given utterance or action, the ambiguous often becomes unambiguous. 'Did he or didn't he?' The answer is yes or the answer is no.

So the defender of objectivity can perfectly well agree with Stanley Fish – perhaps to his dismay – that 'no degree of explicitness will ever be sufficient to disambiguate the sentence [for example, what he said to her] if by disambiguate we understand *render it impossible to conceive of a set of circumstances in which its plain meaning would be other than it now appears to be*' (Fish, 1980: 282–83). As long as we can know what context, framework, or set of conventions actually governed the circumstances – which often we can – we will be entitled to conclude that in *these* circumstances he meant *x* or did *y*.

Questions about the application of concepts such as sexual harassment or racism reside in the murky area where fact meets value, description meets evaluation. Some who would describe themselves as objectivists would reject the view that values are objective. To the extent, then, that sexual harassment and racism are evaluative rather than descriptive concepts, these objectivists would deny that there can be a truth about such matters as whether a remark is racist or a person has sexually harassed another. Facts can be objective, they would say, but value judgements cannot.

Yet our commonsense understanding of concepts like racism and sexual harassment supports the view that they can be applied or misapplied: that it can be true or false that a remark is racist or that someone sexually harassed another. Facts and values are not so neatly separable. Their inseparability of facts and values is commonly taken to support the anti-objectivist position: facts are not that 'hard', because they are infused with values. But the shoe can be placed on the other foot: values are not that 'soft', because they are infused with facts.

I cannot take up the larger question lurking here of the objectivity of value judgements. But two points are worth making. First, the realm in which this question is relevant forms a limited part of the object of journalistic investigation. Journalists are typically concerned with issues at the more factual end of the continuum. Second, the more important point is that the journalist (and indeed anyone who hopes to understand the world) must arrive at the conclusion of indestructible ambiguity or indeterminacy

very reluctantly, only after the arduous search for the truth has been found not fully realizable.

We must, in other words, proceed on the assumption that there is objective truth, even if sometimes in the end we conclude that within a particular realm the concept of truth does not apply, or that in any case we will never discover it. It is not irrelevant to note that the vehemence with which defenders of both Thomas and Hill (a category that came to include a large number of Americans and other observers) made their respective cases reveal that *they* had no doubt that there was a right answer to the harassment question. Perhaps they were deluded. But it is significant that people behave and think as if there were a truth about these matters.

They cannot, I would argue, do otherwise. The concepts of objectivity and truth function for us as 'regulative principles': ideals that we must suppose to apply, even if at the limit they do not, if we are to possess the will and the ways to understand the world.[4] And we do possess, even if to an imperfect degree, the will and the ways.

The Politics of Objectivity

I hope to have shown in the foregoing discussion not only why we must make the assumption that objectivity is possible, but also why critics have thought otherwise. Nevertheless, we still do not have a complete answer to the question (although hints are strewn along the way) why many of these critics not only deny that objectivity is possible but express hostility toward the idea. Why are they angry rather than sorry?

The main reason is that they see the claim of objectivity as the expression of an authoritarian, power-conserving point of view. Michael Schudson (1978: 160) describes this attitude, as it arose in the 1960s:

> . . . 'objective' reporting reproduced a vision of social reality which refused to examine the basic structures of power and privilege. It was not just incomplete, as critics of the thirties had contended, it was distorted. It represented collusion with institutions whose legitimacy was in dispute.[5]

Is this view right? I think in many ways it is. But there are a variety of accusations implicit here that need to be sorted out.

First the assertion of objectivity seems to heighten the status of claims to which it attaches. To insist not only that the enemy is winning the war, but that this statement is objective seems to elevate it to a higher plane of truth or credibility. The assertion of objectivity then appears to involve a certain arrogance, a setting-up of oneself as an authority. Now in one sense this is silly. Ordinarily when we say 'The sky is blue' we imply 'It's an objective fact (for all to see) that the sky is blue'. My belief that what I say is true or objective adds nothing to the belief itself. At the same time, to the extent that we are convinced of our own objectivity or that of others, we are less likely to be open to other points of view. Belief in one's own objectivity is a form of smugness, and may lead to a dangerous self-deception. Belief in the

objectivity of others (such as the news media) enhances their credibility, often unjustifiably.

So acceptance of the ideology of objectivity – the view that institutions like the news media are generally objective and are sincerely committed to objectivity – has significant political consequences, as the critics suggest. Your belief that a newspaper always and only publishes true and objective information will serve as an impediment to your political and intellectual enlightenment, whether you are a consumer or a producer of news. However, for the ideology of objectivity to have the political consequences the critics suggest, we must add a further premise: not only that people believe the press is objective, but also that the news provided favours the powers-that-be. (We can imagine an alternative: an opposition press with a great deal of authority and credibility.)

Is the press biased in favour of the powers-that-be? One reason to think so is that mass media organizations are vast corporate entities; they are *among* the powers-that-be, and so have interests in common with them. I am interested here in a different question, however. Does the commitment to objectivity *itself* create biases in favour of the conservation of political power? This is the implicit claim of some of objectivity's critics: that the methods associated with the ideal of objectivity contain an inherent bias toward established power.

One reason for thinking that objectivity is inherently conservative in this way has to do with the reporter's reliance on sources. Among the canons of objective journalism is the idea that the reporter does not make claims based on her own personal observation, but instead attributes them to sources.[6] Yet sources must seem credible to perform the required role, and official, government sources – as well as other important decision-makers in the society – come with ready-made credentials for the job. In addition, they often have the skills and the resources to use the news media to their advantage. Yet such sources are not typically disinterested observers motivated only by a love of truth.

Journalists therefore confront a dilemma. If they provide to such sources an unfiltered mouthpiece, they serve the sources' interests. In order not to provide an unfiltered mouthpiece, journalists must make choices about which of the sources' statements are sufficiently controversial to call for 'balancing' with another point of view, and they must choose the balancing points of view. If, in cases where the official view is doubtful, they merely balance the official source's view without even hinting at the probable truth, they mislead the audience. Each of these policies raises troubling questions about objectivity.

The first alternative, simply to provide an unfiltered mouthpiece, characterizes the press's response to Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. This example, widely cited by objectivity's critics, has helped tarnish its reputation. Although we can see why journalists might have worried about challenging McCarthy's accusations, however, it is just as clear that leaving them unanswered does not satisfy any intelligent conception of objectivity. We care about objectivity because we care about truth; giving credibility to baseless charges – whether by commission or omission – cannot count as objective.[7]

It follows that journalists must make judgements about the credibility of sources and what they say. Objectivity does not mean passivity. But when does a source's statement invite challenge? The obvious answer is: when it seems controversial. What seems controversial, however, depends on the consensus existing in the culture at a given time. That consensus derives partly from powerful ideological assumptions that, while unchallenged in the culture, are by no means unchallengeable. So it is that I. F. Stone argues that 'most of the time objectivity is just the rationale for regurgitating the conventional wisdom of the day' (quoted in Hertsgaard, 1989: 65–66). What goes without saying may be dogma rather than truth.

Supposing, however, that, the journalist does recognize that an official view is sufficiently controversial to invite challenge, she must choose which opposing sources to cite and how to frame the debate between the opposing points of view. Is the dispute taken to span a fairly narrow range of the political spectrum? If so, the press may be criticized for perpetuating the status quo by reproducing the conventional wisdom. Is the opposing point of view chosen an 'extreme' one?[8] In that case the press may sensationalize the matter at hand or marginalize the opposition by making them seem like crazies. Either way, the journalist cannot avoid exercising judgement.

These dilemmas explain another of the standard criticisms of journalism's commitment to objectivity: not that it necessarily favours established power, but that it leads to a destructive agnosticism and scepticism.[9] Objectivity must be 'operationalized', and this is done through the idea of balance. In exploring controversial issues, the journalist does not himself commit to a view, but instead gives voice to different sides of the story. The reader is left to judge the truth. If the journalist truly balances the views, however, there may be no rational way for the reader to decide between them. So she comes to the conclusion that 'there's truth on both sides' – or neither. Every view is as good as every other. Rather than connecting with truth, objectivity, according to this way of thinking, leads to cynicism and scepticism.

Yet both these criticisms – that objectivity favours established power, and that it leads to scepticism and indecision – suffer from too mechanical a conception of objectivity. It is easy to see how the problems they address arise in the transition from objectivity-as-an-ideal to objectivity-as-a-method. In part, they stem from a confusion between objectivity and the appearance of objectivity. Questioning the remarks of an important public figure may look partisan, while leaving them unchallenged does not; but the appearance is misleading and only skin-deep. Similarly, leaving two opposing points of view to look equally plausible where one has the preponderance of reason and evidence on its side is a charade of objectivity. It reflects the common mistake of confusing objectivity and neutrality. The objective investigator may *start out* neutral (more likely, she is simply good at keeping her prior beliefs from distorting her inquiry), but she does not necessarily *end up* neutral. She aims, after all, to find out what happened, why, who did it. Between truth and falsehood the objective investigator is not neutral.

The confusion between objectivity and neutrality arises, I think, because of the belief alluded to earlier that 'values' are not objective, true, part of the 'fabric of the universe'. According to the positivist outlook of which this is part, the objective investigator will therefore remain 'value-neutral' and his

inquiry will be 'value-free'. Yet the identification of neutrality and objectivity within a given realm depends on the assumption that there is no truth within that realm. Leaving aside the question of whether values are objective, if facts are objective the objective investigator will not be neutral with respect to them.

As a journalistic virtue, then, objectivity requires that reporters not let their preconceptions cloud their vision. It does not mean they see nothing, or that their findings may not be significant and controversial. Nevertheless, it is easy to see why many people confuse objectivity and neutrality. Often the outsider cannot easily tell the difference between a reporter who has come to a conclusion based on a reasoned evaluation of the evidence, and one who was biased toward that conclusion from the start. The safest way to seem objective, then, may be to look neutral.

The Inevitability of Objectivity

We have good reasons, then, to suspect claims to objectivity. People who insist on their own objectivity protest too much; they are likely to be arrogant, overconfident, or self-deceived. In fact, those who acknowledge their own biases and limitations probably have a better chance of overcoming them than those who insist they are objective. Those who have faith in the objectivity of others may be complacent or dangerously naive. They fail to see the many obstacles – inborn and acquired, innocent and insidious, inevitable and avoidable – on the way to truth.

My defence of objectivity, moreover, in no way amounts to the claim that the press (in general or in any particular manifestation) is in fact objective or free of ideological or other bias. Sometimes the biases of the press result from overt economic or political purposes, as when news organizations suppress damaging information about corporations to which they belong; sometimes from structural or technological features of media institutions, such as television's reliance on good pictures. It is also true that, paradoxically, the aspiration to objectivity can contain biases of its own, by advantaging established sources or by encouraging an artifical arithmetic balance between views and tempting reporters to maintain the appearance of neutrality even in the face of overwhelming 'non-neutral' evidence. These tendencies are genuine, although not, I have been arguing, insuperable.

To believe in objectivity is not, then, to believe that anyone *is* objective. My main purpose has been to show that, nevertheless, in so far as we aim to understand the world we cannot get along without assuming both the possibility and value of objectivity. That the questions reporters ask have answers to which people of good will and good sense would, after adequate investigation, agree is the presupposition that we make, and must make, in taking journalism seriously.

Notes

1. I should add that although Schudson is sympathetic to this view, in this passage he is characterizing it rather than espousing it.
2. Whorf's views can be found in Whorf (1956). For a clear critique of Whorfian relativism, see Devitt and Sterelny (1987: 172–84).
3. For evidence of this change, see Schmidt (1990: A1), reporting a New York Times/CBS News Poll on changes in American attitudes toward Israel and the Palestinians.
4. The idea of a regulative principle or ideal comes from Kant: 'the ideal in such a case serves as the *archetype* for the complete determination of the copy . . . Although we cannot concede to these ideals objective reality (existence), they are not therefore to be regarded as figments of the brain; they supply reason with a standard which is indispensable to it, providing it, as they do, with a concept of that which is entirely complete in its kind, and thereby enabling it to estimate and to measure the degree and the defects of the incomplete' (Kant, 1965: 486 [A569 B597]).
5. See also Hallin (1986: 63–75). For a good discussion see West (1990).
6. This is not strictly speaking true: as an eyewitness to events, the reporter often enunciates facts directly; even when not an eyewitness, he does not attribute every statement made to a source. Reporters could not get their stories off the ground if they had to attribute every statement to a source. The question of when a statement is thought sufficiently important and controversial to require attribution goes to the heart of disputes about objectivity and the appearance of objectivity, as I. F. Stone's remark, quoted on p. 239, illustrates.
7. Note in this connection Schudson's discussion of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's approach in the Watergate investigation. Schudson believes that the ideal of objectivity implies the conventional, passive model of journalism associated with the press's response to McCarthy. Yet he remarks that Woodward and Bernstein 'insisted that they did nothing exceptional. They denied that their manner of reporting was distinctive; to them, "investigative reporting" is just plain reporting . . . They make a case for a journalism true to an ideal of objectivity and false to the counterfeit conventions justified in its name' (Schudson, 1978: 188–89). Even Schudson, one of objectivity's influential detractors, here acknowledges (what Woodward and Bernstein have no trouble seeing) that much of what goes under the name of objectivity reflects a shallow understanding of it. The distinction often manifests itself in the use of quotation marks: is it objectivity or 'objectivity' that's the culprit?
8. Obviously what we characterize as extreme depends again on the prevailing consensus at the time, and may therefore involve controversial political judgements. The dilemmas – and journalists' common capitulation to the prevailing political consensus – are hilariously illustrated in Cockburn (1987).
9. The criticisms are not unconnected. If Nature abhors a vacuum, then even a precise balancing between two opposing views will give the advantage to the more prestigious view that is associated with established power.

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