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# News Media Objectivity: How Do We Ask the Questions?

Stephen Cooper<sup>1</sup>

*There is a lively and often public debate in progress concerning the objectivity of the news media, or the lack of it. Scholars have approached this topic from three distinct angles: content analysis, values, and the economics of the news industry. Their conclusions have varied markedly, apparently guided by their particular frames of reference.*

*This article suggests that while we seem to have lost our fix on objectivity as a measurable attribute of news products, the newswork routine of objectivity encourages fairness in our public discourse, and deserves attention in scholarly research.*

## Introduction

With politicians once again lobbing grenades at the press corps (leveling accusations of unfairness) and journalists donning flak jackets (invoking the sanctity of their watchdog role), it is time to revisit the question of news objectivity. Scholars, politicians, journalists, and various arbiters of the *vox populi* have been engaged in a raucous and sometimes hyperbolic debate about the forces or interests that bias the news, and the very purposes and social functions of the news media.

The central problem in the issue of media objectivity, at least as we have most often approached the issue, is how to identify it, and how to determine the "direction" in which reportage might be biased away from it. As in other inquiries, our definition of terms and choice of research methods have great influence on the conclusions we draw. We might take a macro view of the news industry. Then we would occupy ourselves with such structural characteristics as financial control of media outlets, advertisers' influence on content, dependence on government officials for news sources, or the professional and ethical codes of newswork.

Alternatively, we might take a micro view, and look at news products. Then we would look at such factors as the spin put on news stories, page position or sequence within a broadcast, length of print stories or duration of broadcast stories, the choice and length of quotes, the choice and qualifications of the expert opinions, the selection of graphics or pictures, and the personal belief systems of the people creating the news products.

Often we are trying to measure the deviation of real-world news stories from some kind of ideal content. Clearly our personal and group interests, whether we are a politician, a White House correspondent, a contemplative academic, or Jane Six-pack, heavily influence our vision of this ideal. The debate about news objectivity becomes largely a veiled question of which values are, and which values ought to be, expressed in the news media. When we fail to see and hear confirmation of how we think the world is, we are tempted to level the charge of press bias.

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In our postmodern miasma of conflicting social agendas, it is no surprise that shrill accusations come from virtually every position on the political spectrum.

Besides the difficulty of our choice of methods, we face problems in our concept of objectivity. Do we mean by objective that reportage accurately reflects reality? It is not at all certain that a single social reality exists. Do we mean by bias that the reportage favors (or opposes) a particular point of view? Our problem is to identify the perspective from which it can be judged.

Our concern about this issue is driven by a sense that news reporting has a powerful effect in shaping public discourse and thus a significant impact on the public welfare. We care about the media's objectivity because we want our mediated information to provide a good basis for our democratic decision-making process. It is interesting to note that while common today, concerns about the accuracy and fairness of the press are of fairly recent origin, first appearing in the middle nineteenth century with the rise of the penny press. Prior to that time newspapers played an openly partisan political role, and some editors even ridiculed the idea of impartiality. The shift from political activism to a public information role for the press ushered in both the ideal of objectivity and the watchdog function (Dicken-Garcia, 1989).

This paper surveys some ways of approaching the issue of objectivity. Rather than advocating a particular judgement of the media, it examines how we ask the questions about news objectivity, and possible consequences of the answers.

### **Content Analyses of News Coverage**

Much criticism of the news media is based on examination of the content of news products. Some analysts find evidence of conservative bias, other find a liberal bias. Gans (1979, p. 40) comments that "content analysis is often a comparison of the analyst's values with those that 'exist' in the content." Whatever the problems of content analysis, it nonetheless is a common basis for a complaint of media bias. It is instructive to review some examples.

Lichter (1991) studied television network news coverage of the Persian Gulf War with the intent of "judging its fairness and accuracy". By categorizing news stories broadcast during the war and tallying such items as favorable/unfavorable opinions, camera shots, and coverage of pro-/anti-war demonstrations, he concluded that the press took a decidedly anti-authority stance despite overwhelming public approval of government conduct of the war, including press pooling.

Lichter found that 59% of the opinions about U.S. policy expressed in the network stories were negative -- including an interview with Iraq's Minister of Information. Opponents of the war were depicted in television stories more often than supporters by a margin of 57% to 43%, although polling of the American public indicated wide support for the military action. Stories covering anti-war rallies outnumbered coverage of pro-war demonstrations by almost two-to-one, although polling reported that three times as many people actually attended demonstrations supporting the war as opposing it. While some critics of the Gulf War coverage have charged that the visual images of successful bombing runs produced a trivialized, arcade-game sense of mortal combat, Lichter tallied more camera shots of collateral civilian damage than shots of combat activity (p. 3).

The underlying assumptions of the analysis are worth examining. Is counting the number of favorable/unfavorable news items a valid index of the news industry's objectivity? Is reportage

objective when it has a 50-50 proportion of affirmative/negative opinions? Should the frequency of stories match some measure of public opinion? Do public issues in fact only have two sides?

The deeper question concerns media effects: is it the repetition of story themes and points of view that produces television news' impact on public opinion? A study by Gerbner and Gross (1976) supports this idea. While their study is devoted to television entertainment rather than news products, Gerbner and Gross hold that one effect of television is to "Cultivate" ideas about reality, largely by the repetition of character roles or story themes.<sup>1</sup> The opposite also applies: issues and perspectives appearing in the media exist in the public consciousness and become part of the viewers' reality, while those which do not receive coverage are less significant (Hunt & Ruben, 1993, pp. 12, 76), or even suppressed (Noelle-Neumann, 1984).

Viewed in this way, the media set the agenda of public discourse (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar & Simon, 1993) by the stories they choose to cover and how often they cover them. Much of the power of the media is in its gatekeeper role. The objectivity question becomes not so much what the facts are but rather "what facts should become news" (Gans, 1979, p. 306).

Accordingly, some observers are preoccupied with what is *excluded* from the news. Turow (1992, pp. 153-154) sees mass media in general *as* legitimating the established social order by failing to "challenge the nation's dominant institutional forces to the point of raising realistic alternatives." As support he offers the observation that the mainstream media rarely propose abolishing capitalism to solve economic problems, suggest disbanding the Army entirely as a way to end the arms race, or promote theft and "mocking the police" as a viable way to solve personal financial difficulties.<sup>2</sup> Herman and Chomsky (1988, p. 132-136) ran a quantitative analysis of issues they felt the *New York Times* should have covered, but did not cover, in the 1984 Salvadoran and Nicaraguan elections. Cohen (1989) complains that American news media are harsh critics of non-democratic foreign governments but not of our own institutions, and accuses the media of producing "centrist news propaganda".<sup>3</sup>

Similar questions occur here. While the charge is often raised, it is problematic to allege bias based simply on what does *not* appear in the press. Is it conceivable that every identifiable social or political viewpoint could receive extensive (and favorable) press coverage? Is it *prima facie* evidence that the press supports the powers that be, to note that stories near and dear to our ideologies are not written? And which masters do the press serve, since both ends of the ideological spectrum make equivalent accusations? Ironically, Postman (1988, p. 81) comments that "television news is at its most radical...not in giving publicity to radical causes, but in producing the impression of an ungovernable world."

### **Values and the News Professionals**

If reportage cannot be value-free, then it is useful to examine the set of values expressed in the media products. There are several distinct perspectives on the factors shaping the embedded values: economic interests, historical and professional traditions, and the personal values of the individuals.

Parenti (1993, pp. 40-41), using a Marxist framework, sees news professionals as victims of socioeconomic oppression: they write what they are told to write by upper management, which is comprised of members of the capitalist ruling elite. Although most reporters themselves state that they are autonomous in their work, Parenti insists this is because journalists have internalized a routine of self-censorship. Knowing in advance what angles their editors will favor or disfavor, reporters avoid challenging the ideas of the ruling class. Parenti sees the newsroom socialization

process as "on-the-job ideological conditioning" (p. 41); news professionals thus submit to and propagate the values of the ruling elite. Similarly, Solomon (1992) sees the mainstream news media serving the ruling class' need for legitimation, by framing stories within limits acceptable and nonthreatening to the existing power structure.

One difficulty of news analysis which relies on the notion of hegemony is explaining how oppositional stories, those critical of the power structure, come to be published, or even gain prominence. Solomon (1992, 63-64) observes that elite opinion is varied enough to allow some latitude in news content without jeopardizing the maintenance function the press performs for the power structure. Meyers (1992) finds that "hegemony is neither monolithic nor totalizing" (p. 86), and that sufficient diversity in reporters' ideologies and organizational situations (i.e., their beats) exists to produce significant oppositional reporting. Certainly it is not plausible to see newswriters as unwitting or helpless dupes of the ruling class, given their frequent and vocal assertions of press freedom, at all positional levels in news organizations.

Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter (1990) argue instead that the personal values of newswriters are the dominant influence on news content. After conducting extensive interviews with working journalists they found a "largely homogeneous group that is cosmopolitan in background and liberal in outlook" (p. 53), a slight majority of which feels the media should play an active role in social reform (p. 34). When asked what information sources they would rely on when writing about controversial topics, the responses indicated that "avowedly liberal individuals, groups, and journals constitute by far the largest sources of information on which these journalists would rely" (p. 57).

To examine how reporters frame their stories, this study asked them to summarize a number of sample stories resembling wire copy, purposely balanced in terms of viewpoints and social actors. Often, the journalists' summaries tended to favor the liberal angle of the issue, and rarely the conservative side (p. 71). Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter conclude that the liberal personal values of the newswriters are transmitted through the frames of their stories: "the conscious effort to be objective takes place within a mental picture of the world already conditioned by one's beliefs about it" (p. 87).

Gans sharply criticized the methodology of the Lichters and Rothman study, accusing them of misinterpreting their survey responses to suit an unacknowledged political agenda (1985). Gans (1979) maintains that media content is shaped not by reporters' personal values, but rather the values of the profession: a watchdog posture and a reformist (but not revolutionary) orientation which he traces back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Progressive movement (p. 69). The news industry in fact, Gans says, "defends a mixture of liberal and conservative values" (p. 68) which he terms the *enduring values*. While it is impossible for the news products to be value-free, working journalists for the most part express the values of their profession rather than their own personal values. Gans' list of enduring values includes altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, individualism, and moderatism. Journalists support these values not because they are coerced, but because the practice deflects criticism and builds public credibility (p. 206-207). The professional norm of objectivity thus restrains the news media from ideologically drifting too far from the center, regardless of the personal belief systems of the news professionals.

The dispute here is thus not over whether values shape the news and are embedded in the news. Rather, the issue is *whose* values dominate and the *level* at which the values operate: at the management/labor interface (Parenti's class dominance), at the level of professional standards

(Gans' "enduring values"), or at the level of the individuals constructing the news products (the personal ideologies in the Lichters and Rothman study).

### **Industrial Power, and Resource Dependency**

Some analyses focus on structural factors of the news industry. Instead of looking at media content or the workers' personal values (essentially an inductive approach), they consider reasons why we might expect the industry to be biased (essentially a deductive approach). Scholars following this line of argument tend to conclude that the news media are conservatively biased, since they are, at bottom, operating businesses.

The news media, as an industry, are to a large extent financially dependent on their advertising clients. Without the financial resources provided by advertising, a newspaper will stop publishing or a television program will be cancelled. Turow (1992, pp. 88- 89) suggests that fear of lost revenues inhibit a newspaper's editor from running stories critical of a key advertiser and thus build a bias into the paper's editorial stance. Parenti (1993, pp. 35, 37) bluntly refers to advertisers' influence over news media as "censorship".

Commercial interests can *also* exert power over the news media through "interlocking directorates" (Dreier & Weinberg, 1979), when individuals are on the boards of directors of both large corporations and news outlets, or through direct ownership of news outlets by conglomerates (Bagdikian, 1992; Turow, 1992, pp. 254-255).

Another form of resource dependency operates at the level of the individual news worker. Karp (1989) sees political reporters as dependent on their sources; the reporter foolhardy enough to offend a government official may be shut out, and see the inside story go to competitors. Gitlin (1980, p. 270) holds that "reporters tend to be pulled into the cognitive worlds of their sources" because of their necessarily close relationships. Soloski (1989) argues that in fact news outlets' policies of journalistic objectivity serve management (and by extension, big business) interests by unobtrusively constraining reporters' sources. When reporters accept objectivity as a professional standard, they tend to privilege news sources within the power structure, and thereby reinforce the legitimacy of that structure.

These writers see commercial and governmental institutions as having power over the news media, and controlling news content in their own interests. The news media are thus, in this perspective, structurally biased in favor of the existing economic and political order. The difficulty is in finding the "smoking gun": the press presumably operates on public opinion at the level of the news story, but the unit of analysis here is the news organization. To accept this model, one must view the traditional "Chinese wall" separating editorial and business functions as either ineffective or a sham, and dismiss the assertions of autonomy by the writers and editors themselves.

### **Conclusion (But Not the End...)**

For a working journalist, reporting the news is a trapeze act without a net. If there is no single objective social reality that can be uncovered and written about, no single truth that can accurately frame a news story, then the press will forever lack the comparative security enjoyed by the hard sciences, and the squabbling about news bias will likely go on endlessly.

Leftist media critique relies primarily on structural and power relationships within the news industry. Typical are the view of media as agents of the status quo (Parenti, 1993; Solomon,

1992), the assertion that the routine of objectivity precludes opposition to authority (Bagdikian, 1992, p. 180; Glasser, 1993, p. 110), or litmus tests of coverage of radical perspectives (Cohen, 1989; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Turow, 1992, p. 153-154).

Conservative media critique, on the other hand, often relies on data about the values and ideologies of the people working in the industry. Typical is research showing liberal personal preferences, reliance on liberal news sources, and a world view inclined toward liberal social agendas (Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter, 1990).

That the conclusions drawn by these studies of news media spring from their methodological choices, particularly their choices of variables and units of analysis, seems apparent. Those of the left are preoccupied with class struggle and economic power; those of the right instead see the aggregate effect of news professionals expressing their personal values in a marketplace of ideas. That the conceptual frames of these studies vary so greatly casts some doubt on our grounding of the idea of objectivity, both as a native concept in public discourse and as a technical concept in media research.

Beyond the often partisan rhetoric on either the academic or political front, there are some matters of substance here, both to public discourse and media research.

- \* Without a shared social reality, is there any purpose at all in the idea of journalistic objectivity?
- \* If the news media abandon the attempt to be objective, is there is a danger of our public information becoming propaganda? In fact, has that happened already? If so, whose propaganda machine is it?
- \* Since objectivity is impossible in an absolute sense, should either the news media or academic community deliberately cast themselves as participants in social reform? Should journalists or researchers see themselves as activists? If so, on what basis should they choose their advocacy positions: personal beliefs or group pressures?
- \* Do technological developments heighten these concerns? Does this dismal evolution seem likely: more communication channels leads to increasing segmentation of audiences and specialization of media products, which leads to fracturing of the mass audience into small, competing constituencies, which encourages individuals to consume information of only one perspective, which pushes a tribalization of society, leading ultimately to a breakdown of discourse?

While objectivity of news content, in the positivist sense of a correspondence to reality, is problematic at best, the traditional news routine of objectivity at least encourages representation of a variety of opinions and perspectives. If newswork is deliberately reconceived as an overtly subjective process, as some suggest, the obvious danger is that the news media will become propaganda tools. Rather than trying to climb the slippery slope of the objectivity idea, we might better think of *fairness* as the goal of the working press, and the parameter of most interest in news analysis.

Having reframed press objectivity as less an identifiable attribute of the reportage than an ideal of the profession, we should recognize that this time-honored routine tends to produce some measure of fairness in media products. Especially as we abandon the notion of a single

objective reality, the practice of balancing sources and points of view, of clearly distinguishing facts from interpretation, and of choosing neutral rather than insinualational or judgmental language, continues to have worth in shaping the raw materials of public discourse. So too, are these the variables of importance to the study of news, however difficult they may be to operationalize.

Working journalists are human beings, and as such their attempts to be fair are limited by their own perspectives. Reporters must sift through the glut of available information and possible sources in order to produce coherent stories in a time-stressed and economically competitive environment. Their individual perceptions of the social world inevitably will have an impact on the framing of their stories. Still, the ideal of objectivity, however ill-defined and unattainable in practice, remains the most powerful force driving the news media toward the balanced, multi-perspective content Gans (1979, p. 315) proposes as the long-term goal of journalism.

In an increasingly discordant and segmented society, the need for balance and fairness in news reportage is more critical than ever to our contentious public discourse. If nothing else, the public's awareness of the range of perspectives offers some hope of rebuilding consensus on questions of governance. The tradition of objective reporting offers the best relief from at least one of our postmodern dilemmas, and deserves scholarly attention as such.

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### Endnotes

- 1 It is interesting to note that while Gerbner and Gross use the method somewhat similar to Lichter's, and while their rationale supports Lichter's underlying assumptions, they draw the conclusion that television entertainment reinforces the existing power structure (via cultural stories) while Lichter sees the news media in an oppositional role, and a sometimes unfair role at that.
- 2 As I read his passage about theft as a financial alternative, I had to wonder if Turow would approve of me burglarizing his house! I suspect that city dwellers, forced to live behind barred windows and triple-locked doors by the threat of crime, would not be thrilled by the media valorizing criminal lifestyles.
- Nor does this appear to have been a casual thought to Turow...the same examples with slightly different wording appear in an earlier work (1985, p. 212).
- 3 Cohen describes his perspective on the domestic political spectrum in this way: "...we define the left as seeking substantial social reform toward a more equitable distribution of wealth and power and we define the right as seeking to undo social reform and regulation toward a free marketplace that allows wide disparity in wealth and power..." (1989, p. 12). Given the extreme value judgements in the definition, this is an interesting starting point for a critique of press objectivity!