

Objectivity

The Myth That Is Destroying Journalism

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The North American press is under attack from the left, the right and the harassed middle. It needs reform and knows it, but nothing less than profound structural changes will make a qualitative difference sufficient to insure the survival of newspapers as credible agents of information about the society in which they operate.

Structural changes are imperative because the reforms now most often proposed do nothing except increase the existing fantastic level of journalistic self-consciousness. Newspaper managements and editors already get together frequently to discuss the shortcomings of their daily efforts; newspaper men already deliver scathing critiques of their profession.

For example, the monthly Journalism Review was initiated recently by Chicago journalists who had been unable to print the stories or make the reforms they felt were necessary to the well-being of their dailies. On the national level, a new Washington journal, Straus Editor's Report, has been formed to monitor the press.

However, all attempts thus far to accommodate newspapers to the needs of society have failed, and all the evaluations have turned out to be indexes of failure rather than progress toward some satisfactory result. Criticism that does not lead to structural change is simply an exercise in reformist frustration, and the effect has been that the press today is one of the least trusted of the country's national institutions, public or private.

Rightwing critics complain that the papers undermine confidence in democratic institutions by striking at the government. The left insists that, by adhering to so-called balanced reporting they in fact stabilize the worst features of an inequitable system. The confused middle is rapidly losing its faith in the ability of the daily press to sustain the image of impartiality that newspaper managements — not readers — have demanded.

It thus becomes obvious that the press will not begin to cope with its credibility problem until newspaper managements acknowledge that mystifying standard, "objectivity", cannot be adequately defined or achieved, that in fact it is pernicious to the society as

well as to the institutions of journalism. This neutrality is demanded by newspaper administrators and editors, concerned that the news content remain under tight control; there is no evidence that it serves a public interest.

At a time when people are becoming politically more aware, a newspaper loses credibility when readers believe themselves to be manipulated and propagandized on behalf of those who dominate the political economy. It makes no difference how they identify those powers, or whether their evaluation is right or stems from the widening circle of paranoia that endemic to a highly centralized society.

A commitment to the notion of objectivity has in effect become a sign of manipulation, whether newspaper managements like it or not, and the way to deal with it is to admit that the editorial function is inherently biased, that reporters have opinions of their own and that newspapers, like other large institutions, are political entities.

There is nothing new about these concepts. Newspapers no less than universities, must be seen as instruments of either social change or stagnation. The European press has known this for a long time. Le Monde, widely regarded as one of the world's greatest newspapers, is described by the Paris correspondent of the New York Times:

"Unlike the American practice, there is no copy desk and no division of function between copy editing and reporting. Each staff member is a "journalist" in charge of a speciality. He may cover a story directly or rewrite or edit the news agency reports on his subject. Department chiefs check headlines and make space allotments but do not change copy."

As is the rule in European journalism, there is no clear line between reporting and opinion.

"We are proud", said an editor, "not of our objectivity but of our objectivity but of our independence." The assumption is that the reader knows the viewpoint of the reporter and expects it to be reflected in his copy . . .

Le Monde makes itself credible by rejecting the myth of objectivity. It exposes all its biases to the reader, who automatically learns the security of reading "news" that is placed in a readily identifiable context. Le Monde

journalists — the best in the world — have established their reputations over time on a newspaper that has given them their heads.

Readers take issue with Le Monde journalists, not with Le Monde, and do not feel that they are being propagandized by an objective automaton. The context of the news becomes as important as the news itself — indeed the one can never really be divorced from the other — journalist and reader engage in a relationship similar to that of actor and audience.

The refusal of American newspapers to consider Le Monde's methods is a kind of mistrust of the public that claims management knows best what readers need or want. Hollywood and TV magnates hold similar views. In the press, however, the fact is that many reporters try to make editorial points between the lines of their objectivity, thus inserting surreptitiously what they should be writing candidly.

Says one ex-Newsweek man: "If you wanted to express an opinion, there was no problem. Insofar as I recall the techniques, you invented a quote and ascribed it to somebody . . . made up a person if necessary. It's very devious, of course, but it's a substitute merely for doing the sensible thing which would have been to write a first-person story in the first place. Newspaper men are always finding ways to get around whatever inhibitions there are to personal journalism."

But the trouble with using a subterfuge — however much it may clarify the point of a story — is that it still leaves the reader wondering how objective the news story is, how responsible the reporter is, what his biases may be.

The notion still prevails among reporters that they should strive to be as objective as possible. It has a nice, clear-cut ring to it, but nobody has been able to tell them how to approach that elusive goal, much less what it really means. Most reporters and newspapers fall back on the idea that the proper solution is a kind of "balance", a presentation pro and con that lends itself to mathematical analysis: that is, always try to get the other side of the story, even just for a couple of lines.

It is a puzzle why reporters continue to insist that objectivity, or balance, is the key to the good journalistic

life, but one explanation may be that it permits a kind of psychological anonymity. A reporter need not reveal what sort of person he is, uncover his biases. More important, by clinging to the myth that he is indeed being as objective as humanly possible, he can evade personal responsibility for his work; he is only a technician of the news. Advocacy, on the other hand, openly admitted, requires an exposure of self, a willingness to undergo scrutiny, and a commitment to excellence that seems very demanding.

Some reporters are thus afraid of advocacy. Those who don't feel strongly about things see no reason to take sides. Others correctly perceive that they lack the competence to be advocacy reporters, that they really do not know their "beat". A reporter cannot express his convictions about, say, education unless he has made himself an expert on the problems of schools and the theories of learning.

It follows that the opportunity to become an advocate would cause responsive reporters to acquire the background necessary to acquit themselves creditably. The informed reporter would make himself known as competent to act in his new professional capacity, thus raising the general level of the profession. Those who saw the advocacy role as an opportunity to dispense propaganda would be exposed as soon as the public judged their work against the progress of events.

Many newspapers would

maintain that they already permit reporters to become advocates — usually on or opposite the editorial page, but occasionally in the news sections. However, managements inevitably insist that these contributions be identified as "columns" or "news analysis". In the absence of a systematic attempt to orient either the public or reporters to the uses of advocacy journalism, these few columns have nothing to increase the credibility rating of the profession.

The market for objective "facts" has been saturated by TV, as newspaper managements well know. Newspapers must provide something more than a statistical expansion of the eleven o'clock news, but no amount of "reform" discussion will produce a new product; the conditions must change. This requires structural innovation, a radical transformation of the American daily newspaper into a social participant, not a mere observer.

Neutrality is conceivably only a political vacuum and nothing is more political than a newspaper. The public knows this and withholds its belief from journals that venerate objectivity.

The key element in journalism, as in all writing and all art, is risk, sometimes personal risk. Newspapers will never be "ready" for personal journalism, for major changes, for a role in the events around them, until reporters and editors are willing to stick their necks out.

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