

opinions on

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 newspaper 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 wellbeing of their dailies. On the national level, a new Washington journal, Straus Editor's Report has been formed to monitor the press.

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However, all attempts thus far to accommodate newspapers to the needs of society have failed and all the evaluations have to be 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.

Right wing 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 became 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 ed-

itors, 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 dominated the political economy. It makes no difference how they identify those powers, or whether their evaluations is right or stems from the widening circle of paranoia that is 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 practices, 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 a 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 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 automation. 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.