The myth of objectivity

By David Deitch
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The American press is under attack from the left, the Right and the harassed middle. It needs reform and it 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 soceity in which they operate.

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. 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 inequiable system. The confused middle is rapidly losing 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 the 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 of stems from the widening circle of paranoia that seems endemic to a highly centralized society.

A committment to the notion of objectivity has in effect become a sign of manipulations, 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.

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

"We are proud," said an editor of Le Monde, "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 reputation 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 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.

In the American 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. The trouble with using a subtrefuge — 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 writers 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 their elusive goal, much less what it really means. Most reporters and newspapermen fall back on the idea that the proper solution is a kind of "balance", a presentation of pro and con that lends itself to mathematical analysis; that is, always try to get the other side of the story, even for just a couple of lines.

It is a puzzle why reporters continue to insist that objectivity, or balance, is the key to good journalistic life, but one explanation may be that it permits a kind of psycological anonimity. 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. Other correctly perceive that they lack the confidence to be advocacy reporters, that they do not really know their "beat". A reporter cannot express his convictions about, say, education unless he has made himself an expert on the problems of school 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.

What is to be done? One possible course for an adventurous management could be to experiment with a program that devotes a limited amount of space each day to the opinions of those reporters who have sufficient confidence in their abilities.

The space would be clearly identified as containing advocacy accounts by the writers involved, and the content would be under the control of those producing it. It would be understood by all concerned that the judgements were those of the reporters, who have acquired the privilege of stating them by demonstrating good sense, knowledge and general competence. If the experiment succeeded, it should cause a re-evaluation of space and assignment priorities.

It would also cause newspaper managements to reevaluate themselves politically, as they re-define the purpose and public need for the daily newspaper in the context of broadcasting competition.

Excellent newspaper men are forever complaining that they have no time to do the investigative and interpretive reporting of which they are capable. It is odd that a newspaper will boast that its state house reporter has been on the job for twenty years, but never given the readers the benefit of his opinion on state politics, or about how that construction firm got the big contract. A reporter who knows his beat should be expected to tell readers what's on his mind as a basic part of his job.

Those who see themselves as reporters of facts should be confined to factual sections of the newspaper — accidents, sports, births, and deaths — and those who want to use facts to expose larger issues should not be burdened with a technicians job. Ideally, an idea man should be paired with a facts man, or two or more frankly biased reporters.

Press releases, if important, might be printed verbatum just like the text of a speech. Rewriting them is worth no one's time.

The marlet 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 conceivable in 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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Co-Editors: Bruce M. Lantz
Glenn Wanamaker 424-2507

Advertising and Business Manager:
Marg Bezanson 424-2507
General Calls: 424-2350
Room 334 — Student Union Building