

## Objectivity in Journalism

Objectivity means that when covering hard news, reporters don't convey their own feelings, biases or prejudices in their stories. They accomplish this by writing stories using a language that is neutral and avoids characterizing people or institutions in ways good or bad. The real core of journalism is objectivity — seeing the truth whole and being fair about it. Thus the answer to liberal bias is not conservative bias. It is objectivity. There is some dispute about whether objectivity can really exist. How do we know the truth? Well, I'm not a relativist on the subject. Journalists have to be able to see reality wholly and truly to maintain objectivity. As George Orwell said, they have to face unpleasant facts just as much as anybody else.

Newspapers have traditionally been expected to maintain fair and impartial methods of storytelling. But that concept is possibly more theory than absolute practice, especially in contemporary society.

Readers' interests have changed, as have the variety of media platforms, most notably the inclusion of the Internet with its near-instantaneous-snippets of information from all around the globe.

Fair and balanced storytelling is still the goal of most newspaper journalists. Their traditional purpose is to attempt to provide readers with facts with which the public can form opinions and make decisions regarding political elections, civic matters and, in general, the truth of who did what, when, where, how and why.

But some journalists are calling into question the necessity to maintain such a rigid guideline that may not be possible, may not be so truthful at all, and may be no longer as relevant in an age when information is so readily available around the clock.

## Stages of Objectivity

What are the stages of getting to objectivity? The first stage is what somebody called negative capacity — the ability to suspend judgment while looking at the facts, surely the first stage is the ability to look at all the facts, whether they make reporters feel good or not.

The second stage is modesty. It's about playing a role in society — a socially useful role: It's about doing a job for society.

The third stage is the Fairness. Fairness means that reporters covering a story must remember there are usually two sides — and often more — to most issues, and that those differing viewpoints should be given roughly equal space in any news story.

Fourth stage of objectivity is the ability to ignore stereotypes. This is the oldest rule of Journalism. Walter Lipmann once noted that most journalism is about the confirmation of ~~an~~ ~~objectivity~~ preexisting generalizations we all have in our heads. The ability to ignore Let's see the types is crucial to objectivity.

## Can Today's News Be Objective?

With accusations of bias flying from both sides of any conflict, the question of whether or not today's news programs are, or indeed can be, truly objective seems almost moot. Perhaps, there's a question that might put the entire situation in a different light, namely this: Has any news report, ever, been objective? Or how about, should news be objective?

It is automatically assumed by most people that reported news is "just the facts." Local evening news programs tell us about next week's weather, a child who has been kidnapped, or yesterday's parade. There isn't much room for bias in such stories. But the bigger the issue, the more subjective the news reports are likely to be. Many people seem to be not only contented with this but also positively jubilant about it. Why else would ultra-conservative or ultra-liberal radio talk shows and television "news programs" be so popular? (Yes, I admit, I'm thinking about Fox News right now.) Is it just that humans in general like to be told what to think? Perhaps, but is there also something else at play?

How could objectivity be subjective like that? The answer is easy: Pure objectivity would be as simple as it sounds in a world of people with objective views, but no one in this world can have a completely objective viewpoint on anything. We bring our own bias to anything we discuss, argue over, or just think about. We can't help it; we're only human. Therefore, even a straight report of "just the facts" can actually be much more subjective than you might think. It's all about the psychology of words and attitudes. Add to that the fact that there are so many things we take for granted, and it becomes nearly impossible to decipher what's really "hard news" and what's not.

Imagine you're listening to your favorite news program, and you hear the following from the reporter: "President Bush visited the troops today to bring cheer to our men and women in uniform." Sounds innocuous enough, right? But think about how that reporter knew why President Bush was visiting the troops. He was told so, either by someone from the White House or by a press release that came from the White House.

Reporters are not omniscient; they have to take a certain amount of information on faith, as well. For all they know, the President might have been conducting a secret meeting under the guise of a visit to the troops. If so, nobody lied about it; they just left out that particular detail in the report. It may be important for the President to conduct meetings in secret sometimes, but the point is clear: Things may not be as simple as they seem.

Try this one: A newspaper prints a story about the kidnapping of a local child that says, "Police are searching the area thoroughly for any clues." Sounds promising. But once again, we're making an assumption. We're trusting law enforcement to be thorough. The sentence could have read, "Police are searching the area for any clues." It would have been just as accurate and wouldn't have made any assumptions about the skill or determination of the individual police officers involved in the search. We want to be optimistic, of course. But optimism can color objectivity as easily as pessimism.

One more: "The township clerk, responsible for the township's money and equipment, kept the heavy equipment on his own farm. When several neighbors attempted to view the equipment, as the law says they can, they were told by the clerk that they were trespassing and had to leave immediately." This story paints the township clerk in a rather bad light. Let's see how it would sound if it were written somewhat differently: "Several neighbors

entered the township clerk's property, and when he observed them, he informed them that they were trespassing and asked them to leave."

Neither version tells whether the township clerk knew of the residents' harmless intentions or not, but the second version definitely sounds more like he was simply trying to keep trespassers off of his property. We don't know whether he would have welcomed them had they explained themselves, and we don't know whether they bothered trying. But one story seems to accuse the clerk of unfairness, and the other sounds more objective. Even the more objective version could be misunderstood, of course; for instance, someone sympathetic to the clerk might read it and complain to the newspaper, saying that they were trying to implicate him in some sort of cover-up. And that is where the reader's bias comes into play.

It's bad enough that the reporter can write something with an unintentional bias to it. Even if they have carefully crafted their words to weed out any potential personal opinions, a reader or viewer may still make assumptions of their own, or they may feel so strongly about a particular issue that they hear bias where there is none. Human beings are virtually incapable of writing, reading, or hearing anything without putting a personal spin on it. So what's the point of trying? Should we give up and let personal opinions become the new "news?" One of my former co-workers expressed a view very much like that once. She felt that individual newspapers should have their own viewpoint, as directed by the editor or influenced by the individual writers, and that pure objectivity was a goal so unattainable as to be undesirable. This opinion of hers might have had something to do with the fact that she was editor at the time, but I still wonder how many newspeople out there feel the same way. And I still disagree.

I maintain that just because something is difficult, or even nearly impossible, doesn't mean that it should be abandoned altogether. I don't consider the extremist talk shows or opinionated television news programs to be real news. Certainly, you can glean some facts from them, but in some cases, doing this can be harder than getting the facts from a comedy news program like that one with comedian Jon Stewart. And a lot of major news sources today are hardly much better. I doubt that objective news reporting has ever been easy; I'm sure there were people arguing about objectivity when they were signing the Declaration of Independence. As long as people have had opinions and differing viewpoints, they have looked for ways to express them. Remember, reporters are human, too:

A reporter's job is to inform people. With any luck, and a little hard work, we should be able to inform people of just the facts. It may be the hardest part of the whole job, just to write or speak these facts without bias creeping into the words. Anything worth doing is generally hard to do. But anything worth doing is worth doing well. We may be hard pressed to find a fairly objective report of the news to inform us about the state of our world, but we should still keep trying to find it, or to create it. Even if we only come close, it means we nearly made it, and we may do better tomorrow

## Reporter

The words "reporter" and "observer" are intricately entwined in the job role society calls "reporter". In fact, many early and current newspapers used the words "Observer-Reporter" in the newspaper's title.

The reporter uses all of his or her senses, along with training, writing or spoken skills, and common sense to tell AND show readers or listeners what this fire looked like, smelled like, acted like, what and who the fire damaged/injured or killed, and to place this individual story into a larger context using knowledge and research of statistics, etc.

A reporter not only brings "news" but follows up on old news. A reporter is, in effect, the eyes and ears to the larger world. A good reporter makes "a" story important to the readers. Rather than just giving sensationalized bits, a reporter can take a reader or viewer "in depth. The role of a reporter (the term implies news reporter) is to report news. Now the term news has not yet been fully defined. Academics do try to explain in various ways. A news reporter follows his gut feeling, or works on the chief reporter's advice. Besides, we have some news elements like proximity, timeliness, human interest to help journalists to smell news.

A reporter's job is to essentially report NEWS. It involves two steps: To collect information (from all possible sources) and then write down the story in a journalistic style.

### HOW DOES A REPORTER COLLECTS NEWS –

We call a news report a news story. Unlike fiction, these are factual stories - events that have happened or things that are going to happen. Like a good story teller, the reporter has to narrate the story before the reader or listener or viewer.

Reporters get news stories from various sources. The following are the main sources:

a) Listening: A reporter can get good stories by listening to others. While traveling in a bus, the reporter overhears the conversation between two passengers. "Did you go to the town today? There was a terrible accident. A school bus overturned. Twenty children were taken to hospital." By listening to this, the reporter gets a clue to a story. He now has to find out more details of the accident. Which school bus was involved? How many children were injured? Were there any casualties? In which hospital were they been admitted? The reporter goes to the accident site to collect all this information. The reporter's job does not end there. He has to inform the photographer about the accident. The next day's newspaper should also carry some good photographs about the accident.

b) Covering events : "India-Pakistan cricket Test in Mumbai", " Kumbhmela in Haridwar", " International Film Festival in Goa ", these are all events. Reporters cover these events for their publications, channels or new bulletins. The coverage depends upon the importance and magnitude of the event. A small panchayat level meeting will be covered locally, whereas a state level function will get wider coverage. If it is a national event, it will receive nationwide attention.

c) Press conferences: Another major source of news is the press conference. Leaders of political parties hold press conferences regularly. Ministers also hold press conferences to announce various programmes and policies of the government. Business houses arrange press conferences to launch their new products. Organisations and Associations also held press briefings.

d) Reports and statements: These are another major sources of news items. Various commissions and committees submit their reports to the Government which are a goldmine as far as news reporters are concerned. Statements or press releases by leaders and businessmen also make news.

e) Parliament and Assemblies:- Parliament and state assemblies when in session generate lot of news. Questions in both the houses of parliament, proceedings, calling attentions, zero-hour mentions, debates and various acts passed by the parliament also make news. The general budget and railway budget are presented in parliament. State budgets are presented in state assemblies.

f) Police sources: The police are in charge of law and order. So the police always maintain a close vigil about various activities of citizens. Reporters get details about crime, accidents etc. from police sources.

g) Interviews: Interviewing people connected with an event or incident is a very common practice used by reporters to get details. Television reporters take the opinion of people which are called reactions. Occasionally, reporters of newspapers and channels conduct long interviews with important people.

## Source of News

Newspaper get news, features and photos of state, national, and international interest by teletype or mail from the international and national wire services. In addition, the newspaper have full time staff reporter in many major cities. In other cities, newsmen to work on papers which are members of the network are assigned to furnish the services with news that breaks in their area. These all are called the sources of news of news paper.

### A daily newspaper obtains news in the following ways:

#### Local

- Beat reporters responsible for definite sources, such as city hall or the police station.
- Assignment reporters given special stories by the city editor, feature editor, society editor, or sports editor.
- City news bureaus that exist only in large cities and are primarily news gathering and distributing agencies for routine news.
- Small town and rural correspondents.
- Publicity and press releases of clubs, schools, and business organizations.
- Residents of a community who either bring or telephone news to the newspaper office.

#### Non-local

- News Agencies (national and international).
- Foreign press associates, such as the British Reuters and the Russian Tass.
- Special correspondents in important state capitals and capitals of major foreign countries.
- District correspondents
- Press syndicates.
- Publicity releases.

#### Other sources

- Common sources (common people, organisation etc).
- Others media (Electronic media, on line media for print media).
- Free lancer.

## Other people

A journalist meet many people from time to time. What are they talking when they are not talking business? What have they heard lately? Journalists have to listen even if it means eavesdropping while having a cup of tea. What do you think interest people? There is no better source of story ideas than the people you meet while you are off-duty or on duty. They are, after all, your readers. Therefore, take note of others and always try to find out what's on their mind.

## News releases

Releases from Public Relations persons are valuable sources of story ideas. Try to follow up on some of these regular releases that come to media organization. He may never knows where they will take him to or predict the end.

## Social services directory

Many cities and localities have a composite listing of all agencies providing social services. These listings could throw up different kinds of ideas about the society which a reporter could follow through. He should therefore take note that each of those agencies and their clients could lead to a potential story.

## Himself

In the final analysis, reporter is the one who must be alert enough to look and listen to what is going on around him. Always raises posers for himself and attempt to answer them. Remember, reporters who are attuned to people rather than institutions will find the world around them a rich and fertile source of human interest. Don't tune out. Look and see!

**Local and area telephone directories:** This could be used to verify the spelling of names and addresses etc. They are usually reliable, but they are not infallible.

**City/Town Directories:** These provide the same information as the telephone directory but also provide information on the occupations of citizens and the owners or managers of businesses.

**State Manuals/Brochures:** These provide information on various government agencies.

**Maps of the City:** County, State, Nation and World Local maps are usually posted in the newsrooms. Others may be found in atlases.

**Bartlett's Familiar Quotations:** This will help you not to quote anyone out of context or state a quotation as anonymous when it actually has an author.

**National Assembly Records, Gazettes and Hansards:** These are where Government establishments and parastatals store its official information for retrieval and reference.

**Facts on File (Facts on File Inc):** This is a weekly compilation of news from metropolitan newspapers.

**Guinness Book of World Records:** Anybody who has done any notable thing and probably what no one has done before then gets listed in Guinness Book of World Records.

**Current Biography:** You no longer need to worry that you can find the date of birth of a notable personality or his middle name or even place of birth. Check Current Biographies.

**Trade and Professional Journals and Newsletters:** This will obviously contain useful information on businesses and related matter.

**Reader's Guide and Reader's Digest:** Any reporter who is not reading Reader's Guide or Reader's Digest is obviously missing out on an important information loaded book that could be useful to the modern reporter.

**Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language:** This is a good reference material for journalists.

## NEWS GATHERING AND SOURCES

Every story begins as a stream does "from a source". You cannot find a great story today that does not have a source. This reminds me what one of my great Professors told me-that every PhD is a story! Such stories also have a beginning. This is the major reason most persons who are unfamiliar with the news gathering process often wonder how reporters gather and assemble their information, how do they get access to information and information sources, and how do they sustain the daily publication of news in their media organizations. This shall be our concern in this section. There are three broad categories of sources of news stories thus:

### 1. Predictable Sources 2. Unpredictable Sources 3. Anticipated Sources

#### Predictable Sources:

These are sources that regularly service the news industry either because of their function that make their activities of public interest or by their nature that help generate events that attract a large number of people. Predictable Sources include diary of news, published reports in form of newspapers, magazines, journals, and handouts, broadcast on Radio/TV and prepared speeches. It also includes active or dramatic newsbreaks, which include news from the police, hospitals, fire service, hotels, schools, religious organizations, labour and political associations. With predictable sources, you are sure to get something from there all the time.

#### Unpredictable Sources:

This means a nose for news that borders on the ability, training, exposure and experience of the reporter to determine what news is and report it accordingly. Unpredictable sources are the likely sources where breaking news or tips that could lead to scoop could come from.

#### Anticipated Sources

This is similar to predictable sources except for the fact that anticipated sources are restricted to planned events that a reporter knows will definitely happen. Such events include a national day celebration, budget speech and special anniversaries, Labour Day etc. No matter the sources of getting news, a good reporter should have the ability to listen, see and possess attributes of a good interviewer. These are needed in dealing with those sources. In summary, a reporter gets news by:

1. Going to the scene of the news event and observe events unfold;
2. Talking to people who witnessed the event happen or what you will consider as using eye witness accounts;
3. Consulting secondary sources like records, reports, documents, files, etc to cross check and corroborate facts and figures.

Sources could also be human in nature, physical or online. Human sources are those personal contacts you have build over time. They are also authorities and people involved in news events. The physical sources are consists of records, documents, reference works etc. The Online sources include a vast array of human and physical sources, from academics to government data

#### HOW TO HANDLE SOURCES

Journalists and the profession rely heavily on dependable sources to succeed with the reportorial assignment. One of the trade secrets of any reporter/journalist is the contact with people who confide what is happening in their places of work and interest, whether in politics, business or society. As such, sources are as necessary as notebooks. Here are some suggestions on how to manipulate and/or manage sources:



### LANGUAGE SKILLS

Ability to read, analyze, and interpret common scientific and technical journals, financial reports, and legal documents; effectively present information in court and/or public meetings.

### MATHEMATICAL SKILLS

Ability to calculate figures and amounts such as discounts, interest, commissions, proportions, percentages, area, circumference, and volume; apply concepts of basic algebra and geometry.

### REASONING ABILITY

Ability to define problems, collect data, establish facts, and draw valid conclusions; interpret an extensive variety of technical instructions in mathematical or diagram form, and deal with several abstract and concrete variables.

### OTHER KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, & ABILITIES

Knowledge of principles of record keeping, case files and records management; legal and law enforcement terminology; court processes and procedures; Nevada court procedures, legal terminology and legal requirements for court operations and case processing; principles and protocols