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Commentary: Objectivity in other places and new times

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In her excellent and provocative essay, Stephanie Craft effectively argues that uncritical adherence to “professional” journalism ethics, particularly as enacted in misguided service of objectivity, does journalists and the public much more harm than good. Indeed, objectivity has become something of a straw man in academic circles, posited mainly for the purpose of being discredited. It is widely seen as a foundational norm of U.S. journalism but is an inherently flawed concept: typically misconstrued by both practitioners and audiences, more likely to lead to false equivalence than to meaningful explanation, almost laughably ill-suited to a digital information environment, and in any case unattainable by actual human beings.

As Craft points out, objectivity as a dominant professional norm also is historically and culturally specific. In this commentary, I would like to extend her ideas in both place and time. She focuses on American journalism, yet in many other Western democracies, journalistic work is not explicitly linked to objectivity. And she takes us through the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. But the story continues beyond that seminal moment, in ways that seem to me striking and significant.

The view from another place: Objectivity in British journalism

Collectively, U.S. journalists take a radical stance on autonomy. The First Amendment guarantees freedom from government (specifically, congressional) restraint; journalists have extended that concept to independence from market forces and, more problematically as Craft reminds us, from audiences. The notion of objectivity has become a declaration and safeguard of this over-broad construction of autonomy. It serves, again as Craft nicely argues, as not only a boundary marker but also as a barrier: Few inside the newsroom walls are interested in trading their perceived independence for interdependence with people whom they do not trust to be fair, impartial, balanced ... objective. Of course, those outside the wall increasingly do not trust journalists to be any of those things, either. The result is that journalists have grown insulated and isolated from large swaths of the public they profess to serve. Radical autonomy can be a lonely place.

Much, but not all, of this arguably harmful professional ethos also pervades newsrooms in other democracies. Objectivity per se gets relatively short shrift as a normative framework in much of the European press, for reasons extensively explored by cross-cultural researchers. Here I highlight a few structural issues, taking the British press as my exemplar – because scholars see the “Anglo” model as most closely linked to the American one, because many UK publications are widely read in the United States via digital and mobile platforms, and frankly, because I read them, too.

Two aspects of structural disparity stand out: Britain is a smallish country, and a diverse national press reaches every corner of it. Nearly 20,000 newspaper vendors operate across the United Kingdom, and each one sells print copies of the country’s 10 national dailies – compared with, depending on how you count, one (*USA Today*, though it is most visible in airports and hotels), two (plus *The New York Times*, which is not universally available in hard-copy form) or maybe three (adding in the business-sector *Wall Street Journal*) in the United States..

The British national newspaper market is therefore far more competitive than the U.S. one. The people who buy these papers make their choices for a variety of reasons, but a prominent one is alignment with their ideological positions. For both the quality press and the populist tabloids, those positions are integral to each newspaper's brand. The *Guardian* is overtly liberal, and everyone knows it. The *Telegraph* supports the Tories, and everyone knows that, too. Both are excellent, award-winning newspapers that strive to be accurate and honest in informing their readers, but they neither pursue objectivity nor profess to achieve it. Their partisanship is manifested every day in all sorts of ways, including their story selection and sourcing, on their news as well as their opinion pages. In appealing to a different demographic, the tabloid press is not notably less objective; it is merely (far) more outrageous.

However, although it generally sidesteps the problematically loaded term, there is an "objective" media outlet in Britain, one whose very existence is contingent on demonstrable neutrality as mandated by the charter under which it operates. The BBC is emblematic of a second structural difference between the media markets separated by the north Atlantic. On the European side – particularly in northern Europe, including Britain and the Nordic countries – a strong, financially stable public sector broadcaster overwhelmingly dominates the provision of news to the citizenry. This stands in obvious contrast to the United States, where PBS and NPR – under constant threat of fresh cuts to already minuscule government-allocated funds – struggle to reach even a tiny fraction of the mega-audiences commanded by partisan cable news outlets.

In the UK and elsewhere, the public broadcaster is funded primarily through a universal license fee: Everyone in Britain who owns a television must pay this annual fee, and in return, the BBC must ensure that its content fairly serves them all. The BBC is expressly mandated to be both inclusive and neutral in its news coverage. "Impartiality lies at

the heart of public service and is the core of the BBC's commitment to its audience," the broadcaster explains on its website. "News in whatever form must be treated with due impartiality, giving due weight to events, opinions and main strands of argument."

Note that the emphasis is not on "objectivity" but on "due impartiality" – meaning, as the BBC defines it, coverage that is "adequate and appropriate" but not necessarily requiring "absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles." With such phrasing, the BBC extricates itself from the trap of false equivalence; it pledges not to take sides but also not to abrogate its responsibility to investigate the credence of information.

The BBC does so not only because of its unique charter but also by virtue of simply being a broadcaster in Britain. The country has three other free TV channels that provide news daily, as well as the subscription-based Sky News satellite channel; all operate under the auspices of Ofcom, a broadcast communications regulator established by Parliament. Ofcom requires that news be reported "with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality." Again, the emphasis is on impartiality rather than objectivity. The Ofcom guidelines ramble on for 155 pages, in which are buried just three references to objectivity. "Exorcisms, the occult, the paranormal" should be "treated with due objectivity", as should religious programmes containing claims of "special powers or abilities." And presenters offering on-air investment advice should declare any financial interest. None of these, then, has much if anything to do with "objectivity" in the U.S. journalistic sense.

Ofcom oversees only broadcasters, but the British press also operates under the watchful eye of a "regulator," albeit one not as closely linked to government. Most European nations have a press council, and one has existed in Britain since the early 1950s. It has operated over the years by various names and with various structures (and under various challenges to its purview and procedures), but its broad remit has consistently been to

maintain ethical standards in print journalism, primarily by adjudicating complaints about press practice and performance. Its main iteration today is the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), which seeks to “hold newspapers and magazines to account for their actions,” while encouraging “high standards of journalism” within an overarching commitment to a free press.

Like the Society of Professional Journalists in the United States, IPSO is perhaps best known for its ethics code – though unlike SPJ, IPSO has the authority to investigate complaints and to compel publication of their resolution. This code never mentions objectivity. On the contrary, it expressly states that the press is “free to editorialise and campaign,” albeit while clearly distinguishing between “comment, conjecture and fact.” (The SPJ code makes no direct mention of objectivity either. But it lists independence as one of just four broad guiding principles; the IPSO code does not mention independence or autonomy at all. As Craft shows, a fierce commitment to autonomy is tied to U.S. journalists’ use of objectivity in framing their resistance to external influences.)

None of this is to say that the UK media perspective on objectivity is necessarily better than the U.S. one. Certainly, the British tabloid press is guilty of egregious ethical abuses of its freedom to propagate overtly ideological positions; the shockingly xenophobic, fundamentally misleading and civically calamitous coverage of the run-up to the “Brexit” referendum in 2016 offers ample evidence. Nor are U.K. journalists inherently more open to or engaged with their audiences than those in America. My point is that the concept of objectivity as Craft deconstructs and critiques it is specific to the U.S. media landscape. Expanding the consideration to other advanced democracies can add nuance to our understanding of how, or whether, objectivity as a foundational journalistic norm is construed and enacted.

The view from a later time: The Trump effect

I want to extend Craft's analysis in time as well as place, to identify some changes in how U.S. journalists think about objectivity: It seems to be losing ground, and fast.

Examples abound, but I focus here on the two newspapers that long have been the opinion leaders not only for the nation's elite but also for U.S. journalists. *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* are widely viewed by other news industry practitioners as the paradigmatic "professional" publications among the American press. Both exert strong agenda-setting effects on other media outlets' civic coverage. Both arguably represent how American journalism likes to see itself: big and important enough to hold the powerful to account, wielding such tools as autonomy and objectivity in the process.

Yet for some time now, change has been in the wind, blown by technical, economic and social storms. It was evident in the emergence of journalists' blogs in the early 2000s (including at the *Times* and *Post*), in the rise to ubiquity of a journalistic presence on social media, – and in the rapidity with which those and other formats enabling journalists not only to have an identifiable "voice" but also use it to express a personal view became normalized within U.S. newsrooms.

At some point, those genetic mutations to the corpus of "objective" journalism in America jumped to the news pages. Different people will identify different markers of when this evolutionary leap occurred, but December 5, 2015, stands out for me: The day the *Times* ran an editorial calling for gun control at the top of its front page. This was the first time in 95 years that the paper had printed a Page One editorial; it did so, *Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. said, "to deliver a strong and visible statement of frustration and anguish about our country's inability to come to terms with the scourge of guns."

Within the year, Trump had gained the keys to the White House. In the Orwellian world we now inhabit, the nation's leader incessantly labels real news as fake and truth as a

lie. The baby steps taken up to and through the 2016 election, away from the narrowly construed objectivity that Craft describes, have become giant strides. Consider the explosion in fact checkers, who identify the truth based on information that can be verified, as opposed to merely asserted. Consider the on-going deconstruction of Trumpian tweets, the president's favored means of communication. Consider the outright mockery that greeted administration attempts to portray inflated inauguration attendance figures as "alternative facts" when photos clearly showed a relatively small crowd, and the active debunking of administration whoppers virtually every day since. The *Post*'s list of Trump's "false and misleading claims" topped 1,000 items in early August 2017 and continues to grow. At the *Times*, journalists have compiled a "definitive list" titled "Trump's Lies," each one refuted by a link to the evidence. (And let's not overlook another *Times* list of "The 363 [as of this writing] People, Places and Things Donald Trump Has Insulted on Twitter.")

Or consider daily news coverage. The nation's leading newspapers report what the president or his mouthpieces say and what opponents say: so far, so like the old days when objectivity ruled U.S. news pages. But they also report, prominently, what the evidence – visual, documentary, historical, whatever – shows. They explicitly label lies for what they are. And they leave no doubt as to what conclusions should be drawn. Trump sees this as the malicious work of "bad people" seeking to undermine him. Most of the rest of us probably see it as speaking truth to power and being transparent about why the truth is true.

At the risk of being overtaken by yet more changes in this chaotic political and media environment, let me attempt some broad brushstrokes to paint a portrait of change:

* Trump has succeeded in doing what previously may have seemed impossible: definitively separating credibility from objectivity in journalists' minds. His constant lies are so easily refuted that there is no point in presenting "the other side." No other side is

credible. Even the most minimal verification process exposes the falsehood. Journalists either can be complicit in the lie or call it out.

In choosing the latter, journalists find themselves in the unfamiliar but happy position of making friends as well as influencing people. The *Times*, the *Post* and other high-quality news outlets are gaining paying customers at a pace that outstrips anything they have seen since the internet was an infant. Sure, many people despise the President and are seeking publications that – all protestations to the contrary – are perceived to take a generally liberal view. But maybe some of them were just waiting for the nation’s self-declared watchdogs to show some teeth.

* The threat to journalists and journalism has become all too explicit in the time of Trump. That threat is both metaphysical, with multi-faceted challenges to the role of the press in democratic society, and frighteningly physical, in the form of actual assault. These violent shocks may jolt journalists into thinking about norms in ways they otherwise never do. As Craft points out, concepts such as objectivity and autonomy normally are kept inside a sort of occupational (or, if you like, professional) “black box”; they are simply part of how things are done and are rarely questioned or thought about critically. The contemporary environment provides, even encourages, the opportunity for rethinking.

* Autonomy likely will prove a tougher nut to crack. Independence from government entities does serve a purpose, and if anything, ethical journalistic coverage of a Trump administration does more to foreground its value than its limitations. But greater openness to collaboration hints at a counterforce to the “go it alone” approach to journalism. The *Post* and *Times*, for instance, have for several years worked together on an initiative called The Coral Project, designed to facilitate reader comments and other tools for engagement. The massive Panama Papers reporting project, which involved more than 100 media organizations (including the *Times* and the *Post*) in analysing millions of leaked documents about offshore

financial holdings of the wealthy, was a more traditional journalistic collaboration. In France, the CrossCheck project brought together a large number of otherwise competing national and regional news organizations to check claims and provide reporting during the 2017 presidential campaign. The examples go on, but the point is this: News organizations are finding that collaboration instead of competition is a viable way to do meaty journalism despite resource constraints.

* This leaves transparency, which Craft and others highlight as a norm especially in sync with a digital world. Arguably, the increasingly pervasive, yet difficult to detect, presence of bots and other artificial intelligence agents in generating false and misleading information speaks to a correspondingly greater need for transparency from news organizations striving to be accurate and truthful. Yet it can be difficult to imagine how this need might be met beyond providing documentary or other evidence to support assertions. That said, fact checkers again represent a step toward a greater commitment to transparency. Most, including the *Washington Post*'s Fact Checker, not only thoroughly document the evidence behind their ratings but also encourage public input, from suggesting statements to check to flagging erroneous information. More broadly, journalists increasingly look to transparency to foster a sense of trustworthiness, much as BuzzFeed editor Ben Smith asserted; while sceptics remain, more should come around as the evidence mounts.

To conclude on a less optimistic note: Newspapers in Britain, as described above, make no claims to “objectivity” as American journalists traditionally – and, as Craft argues, detrimentally – have defined it. But by and large, the UK press serves **A** public, some population segment whose views broadly mesh with the ones the newspaper puts forward. Service to **THE** public, the British population as a whole, is largely left to the BBC and, to a lesser extent, its smaller commercial competitors.

U.S. newspapers have always professed to serve the overall public. Who else, after all, could do it? Given the pressures of a commercial marketplace, and the lack of a viable public broadcaster with the resources or the mandate to fill that role, there has never been a good alternative. No good alternative exists in America today, either. But there are a great many bad ones: content providers that pollute the nation's airways, litter the internet, and pervade social media both overtly and covertly. I agree that objectivity has done more overall harm than good as a defining trait of journalistic professionalism. And I applaud attempts such as those outlined above and in Craft's essay to jettison objectivity in the interests of speaking more meaningful and useful truth to power and expressly engaging citizens as well as informing them. But the clear and more troubling implication of contemporary forces is that in the United States, too, even our best newspapers – like those in Britain – increasingly will serve an audience rather than “the public.” In the absence of a BBC equivalent or some other unifying voice that speaks for us all ... will anyone even try?