CHAPTER 6

Inside the Profession

Objectivity and the Political Authority Bias

> "Objectivity" demanded more discipline of reporters and editors because it expected every item to be attributed to some authority. No traffic accident could be reported without quoting a police sergeant. No wartime incident was recounted without confirmation from government officials.
>
> "Objectivity" placed overwhelming emphasis on established, official voices and tended to leave unreported large areas of genuine relevance that authorities chose not to talk about. . . . It widened the chasm that is a constant threat to democracy—the difference between the realities of private power and the illusions of public imagery.
>
> —*Ben Bagdikian*

Can the news be objective? Should it be? These questions fuel much public debate and offer instant topics for pundits on 24/7 cable channels. At the time of this writing, a Google search on "journalism bias" produced a healthy 2,260,000 hits. Among the more reflective entries in this list is an NPR *Talk of the Nation* program that asked: "Does the ideal of balance distort the news? What if there are more than two sides to the story—or the sides aren't equal?"[1] Yet if you ask most people what's wrong with the press, the concerns are seldom this deep. The most common complaint is that journalists fail in their obligation to be fair or objective.

You may recall from discussion in Chapter 2 that the issue of ideological bias is confounded because most people view the world through their own political biases and think that perspectives deviating from their views are unbalanced. Because there are so many different views operating in the public on almost any issue, the quest for news coverage that strikes a majority as fair, balanced, or objective appears to be an impossible dream. The paradox of converting something as value-driven as politics into generic news does not keep people from demanding it. As explained in Chapter 2, it is commonly assumed that news bias involves journalists abandoning their professional norms about balance and objectivity to insert their personal prejudices into their reporting. In this chapter, we will consider the disturbing possibility that the most serious biases in the news occur not when journalists abandon their professional standards, but when they cling most closely to the ideal of objectivity.

The weak link in the idea of trying to be balanced or objective is that, in practice, news organizations default to authorities and officials as surrogates for objectivity. If democracy works perfectly to represent all citizens, then this is probably a reasonable working standard. However, if there are any biases in politics (see Bagdikian's opening comments) that distort what officials say or do, then giving authorities the main role in defining the news also builds these general and situational biases right into the news. Because authorities of all political stripes often filter what they say and do through political calculations, this makes the news more a window on power and political strategy inside government than a platform that examines politics critically in some broader democratic context.

What kinds of political calculations do officials make when thinking about how to spin the news? The case study in Chapter 4 illustrates one sort of political calculation that introduces distortion into news coverage: corporations dependent on a carbon fuel economy spending huge amounts of resources on think tanks and political candidates willing to discredit climate science in order to delay action on global warming. In cases like this, the efforts of news organizations to achieve balance can turn stories that have just one dominant side into two-sided reports that confuse or weaken our understanding of an issue. To cite another example of this, a good investigative report on election improprieties by one of the political parties may make a nervous editor ask the reporter to develop the possibility that the other party is doing the same thing. This may "balance" the story with an accusation by the guilty party that it has been wrongly accused (never mind the evidence) and that the other party is actually trying to rig elections. Such reports only reinforce popular perceptions that everyone in politics is crooked and that the story can be dismissed as politics as usual.

In contrast to one sided stories that somehow develop other sides, there are also two sided stories that somehow lose the other side simply because the kinds of official sources that journalists seek are silent, or occupy weak power positions in a conflict, or both. This happened as described in the case study in Chapter 5, when the Democrats were helpless to do much about the invasion

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of Iraq. They did not organize an opposition to a then popular president, which, in turn, deprived the press of a strong counter voice to a war that turned out to be ill considered and eventually unpopular. Meanwhile, the doubts raised by potentially credible sources such as United Nations weapons inspection officials (who could not find any weapons of mass destruction) did not qualify for much sustained coverage because they were not engaged directly in political conflict with powerful U.S. officials.

Beyond the one-sided stories that arguably have more sides, and two-sided stories that arguably have only one credible side, there are stories that are essentially made up for political purposes. Scandals, rumors, and viral innuendo are often released into the digital mediascape where they gain traction among bloggers and partisan networks, and eventually surface as attractive audience-building topics for radio and TV talk show personalities. True or not, these inventions may also be attractive for some politicians who see them as low cost opportunities to appeal to angry voters and to attack political opponents in the mainstream media. For example, Barack Obama was haunted throughout his term as president by charges that he was a Muslim and that he was not born in America (the latter charge challenging his constitutional eligibility to be president).

Rather than dismiss these charges as untrue (and fueling prejudice and intolerance), the mainstream media often reported them as serious political issues. How did this work? Start with the vast networks of unfiltered information in cyberspace. Even several years after these rumors surfaced in the 2008 election, a Google search on the term "birthers" (the name for the movement that continued to raise doubts about the political legitimacy of the president's birth) produced 2,130,000 hits. A news search (also at the time of this writing) showed that the term was still actively circulating in the news. What was the bridge from cheap Internet rumor to serious news? Many conservative political officials (e.g., Republican Senators, Representatives, state and national party officials) echoed these rumors to stir up negativity in news reports and punditry. An analysis in a *Washington Post* blog showed more than 20 Republican politicians validating these charges one way or another in the news.[2] Not only was the president helpless to make these pseudo issues go away, but they continued to erode his political credibility: fully 20 percent of the public believed he was Muslim, and less than half were certain about his birth status.

Mr. Obama understood both the impossibility of countering such news fantasies, and the insidious online networks that feed the news system with them. In an interview in 2010, he seemed frustrated that these invented charges had been dogging him for years, saying: "I can't spend all of my time with my birth certificate plastered on my forehead." He also noted the difficulty of keeping these stories out of the contemporary news system: "The facts are the facts. We went through some of this during the campaign—there is a mechanism, a network of misinformation that in a new media era can get churned out there constantly."[3]

Thus, the formulaic application of balance, fairness and objectivity can produce results that seem anything but balanced, fair, or objective. In an acerbic

look at how so many competing news organizations manage to converge on such an unhelpful information format, Joan Didion describes the code of Washington reporting:

> The genuflection toward "fairness" is a familiar newsroom piety. In practice the excuse for a good deal of autopilot reporting and lazy thinking but in theory a benign ideal. In Washington, however, a community in which the management of the news has become the single overriding preoccupation of the core industry, what "fairness" has often come to mean is a scrupulous passivity, an agreement to cover the story not as it is occurring but as it is presented, which is to say, as it is manufactured.[4]

These simple reporting codes explain a great deal about the information system that the American people live with. Cut into this system where you will, each player—whether political actor, journalist, or citizen—has a different view of it. As noted in the last chapter, the system produced by this core reporting code is competitive, adversarial, and fully captivating for those insiders (politicians and the press) who are caught up in it. Yet the result is a remarkably standardized information system that displays the clearly recognizable biases that we explored in Chapter 2. Perhaps equally important for democracy, this system is held in substantial disapproval by majorities of the public, who often see themselves as outsiders.

JOURNALISTS AND THEIR PROFESSION

Some things have changed and other things have stayed much the same in the ways journalists view their jobs. For example, the speed of communication has increased greatly in the past quarter-century, and journalists correspondingly sense the importance of getting the news out quickly. In the early 1970s, 56 percent of journalists surveyed regarded getting information to the public quickly as extremely important. By the 1990s, 69 percent felt that news speed was a top priority. Perhaps due to the pressures to produce news quickly, the perceived need to provide analysis of complex problems in the news dropped from 61 to 48 percent. The avoidance of complex stories may, in turn, account for a somewhat diminished sense of the importance of investigating government claims—long the hallmark of journalism's contribution to democracy. The perceived importance of investigative reporting dropped from 76 to 67 percent between the 1970s and the beginning of the 1990s.[5] Indeed, the latest edition of the classic study *The American Journalist in the 21st Century* shows a sharp drop in the number of journalists covering the news, yet the same basic standards of reporting persist.[6] All of this comes at a time when the amount of political information passing as news through more communication channels is increasing.

Despite the rapidly changing business and audience contexts, one feature of the profession that has remained nearly constant since the rise of a professional press in the 1920s to the present day is the overriding commitment to objectivity, neutrality, or balance. Because journalists do not have a scientific

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Case Study in this chapter.

CASE STUDY

Why Mainstream Profes
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method through which to deploy these professional values, they quickly resolve into the idea that political situations involve some essential facts that can be reported and that they should be reported through the words and facts offered by authoritative sources.[7] The irony is that this notion of objectivity is not easy to defend: Officials are known to have biases, facts are easily disputed, and the news can never include all the viewpoints that may be important to understanding events.

As charges of press bias have become more intense in recent years, many journalists backed away from the term *objectivity* and used words such as *balance* and *fairness*. Whatever its name, there is a broad, exceptionally American, cultural ideal to cast politics in generic public interest terms and essential procedures that are free of, well, "politics." Journalists are both the carriers of this ideal and its major casualties.

Despite opening journalism to charges of bias from all sides, the commitment to objectivity or neutrality also provides a defense mechanism in a difficult job: If everyone is mad at us, we must have gotten it right. Sociologist Gaye Tuchman called objectivity a "strategic ritual" that offers a defense against career-threatening moments in which a risky report might receive the brunt of official or other public condemnation.[8] The curious result of seeking a common reality is perhaps the most standardized reporting system in the free world—a system that blurs the lines between objectivity and political authority, and between fact and political spin. Indeed, when questions of truth are raised, journalists often seem unable to engage with them, as illustrated in the Case Study in this chapter.

CASE STUDY

Why Mainstream Professional Journalism Favors Spin over Truth

The case study in Chapter 1 talked about the concept of "truthiness" made popular by comedian Stephen Colbert. This is a way of thinking about how much distortion and spin becomes news, and how little news organizations seem able to do about it (indeed, how much they assist in promoting it). The continuing assault on reason in the news has made this concept part of the national vocabulary. Even after Colbert had stopped using it as a comedy schtick, fans lobbied to bring it back with an online movement that made "restoring truthiness" one of the top Google trends of 2010.[9]

Seeking the truth can be an elusive goal, particularly in the value-laden and disputed world of politics. However, journalistic practices that end up giving a select set of often-partisan actors the main say in defining political situations are highly unlikely to offer publics the kind of information they need to deliberate or to reach sound opinions. A small proportion of attentive citizens who roam widely for their information and engage in open

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exchanges may reach independent understandings, but the news makes it difficult for ordinary citizens to assess political situations beyond the shrill, competing, and often incomplete claims of the partisan officials who are given the power to define stories. In particular, the journalistic practices that support the ideal of objectivity or balance result in several common information gaps that may actually undermine clear understandings of news events: *omissions* of story elements that are not sanctioned by officials, *artificial balance* even when clear evidence suggests one side is more correct, and *deception and lies* entering the news through unchallenged official pronouncements.

Omissions

News stories often oversimplify larger and more complex realities. In many ways, this is good. People want heuristics to use to simplify distant and complex situations. However, the news may radically simplify realities to the point of distortion or omission of important information for various reasons: some situations are just too complex for editors to want to present to audiences thought too distracted to pay attention; officials deny certain aspects of stories and thereby remove the easiest basis for continuing to report them; or pressures are applied by officials or political groups to stop reporting those elements and return to being "fair and objective." Thus, pressures from politicians and conservative media personalities pushed reports of civilian casualties in the war in Afghanistan out of the U.S. news. By contrast, the foreign editor of the British paper *The Independent* noted that his reporter covered an American strike against an area where Osama bin Laden was suspected of hiding, but instead of hitting Osama or his troops, the strike missed the target and killed 115 innocent men, women, and children in a nearby village. Such elements of stories might be useful for the American people to know about, yet a CNN correspondent stood atop the same pile of rubble witnessed by the British reporter and reported the Pentagon line that the strike targeted Osama and that civilians were not involved.[10]

Similarly, in the coverage of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, the fact that many innocent civilians had been rounded up and subjected to mistreatment was seldom discussed in the news, although it was widely known and reported in the region. Whatever one may think of torturing terrorists, it might have been relevant to consider if interrogation policies were applied with any more precision than the air strikes just noted. As for civilian casualties of the lengthy war in Iraq, the vast numbers of dead and displaced were barely noted in U.S. news. At the same time, many world relief organizations and news reports termed Iraq a vast humanitarian disaster. On the fifth anniversary of the war in 2008, U.S. headlines were filled with a speech by President Bush proclaiming conditions to be vastly improved and the Iraqi people supporting the continuing American liberation effort. And in 2010 when President Obama announced the end of the war (during a slow news period just ahead of the Labor Day holiday), there was little news analysis of the levels of chaos, political corruption, escalating violence or impending insurgency. Vice President Biden visited Baghdad as part of the ceremonies to end U.S. combat operations. He was asked about the violence throughout the country, and he replied simply, "It is much safer."[11] Meanwhile, reporters accompanying him wore helmets and body armor, and the delegation seldom left the heavily fortified Green Zone. The war was simply not a political issue in Washington any longer, and the press and public seemed happy to look the other way from a painful episode in history.

Artificial Balance

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Lies and Deception

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Artificial Balance

The editor of *The Independent,* Leonard Doyle, said regarding pressures to tone stories up or down that "the loudest demands for objectivity are made by groups or lobbies who want to ensure that they get equal time in any story."[12] Recall, for example, the story from Chapter 5 involving a reporter who investigated voting abuses in St. Louis and concluded that the Republicans appeared to be involved with disenfranchising far more voters than the Democrats, yet his editor insisted on playing the story as a more balanced look at the "charges" that each side lodged against the other. It is easy, of course, to make empty charges in politics; indeed, politics is full of such occurrences. The question is whether journalists should pass them along to the public as though they hold equal weight.

In another example, pressures on editors to be fair and balanced drove a second side to the story of global warming long after the vast majority of scientific experts felt that there was very little support for another side to that story. Similar stories can be told about a number of scientific areas (such as evolution and stem cell research) that were part of heated political battles and became two-sided science stories in the news. The point here is that political challenges may be lodged against almost anything, but reporting the claims from both sides in balanced fashion as though they have equal weight factually may leave audiences confused and unable to distinguish the credibility of any side. This not only undermines faith in science and knowable realities, but it signals that it is acceptable to challenge almost anything just for political gain. The result is that political partisans learn to subordinate facts to their ideologies, while those in the middle often become confused and disillusioned.[13]

The tendency to let politics define social realities is perhaps most pronounced in coverage of political campaigns. For example, in campaign 2004, the Bush team put out a press fact sheet proclaiming that "109 million American taxpayers will see their taxes decline by an average of $1,544." The implication was that most people would get this size cut. In reality, a small portion of wealthy taxpayers received huge cuts, jacking up the average, and leaving the majority to get far less than this figure. Rather than doing the math, most news stories simply ran the Democratic challenge to the claim, making it a partisan but balanced story, where it could have been sorted out easily in newsrooms on factual grounds. Quick to recognize this tendency in the press, the Kerry campaign invented its own special economic measure by cherry-picking economic indicators that looked bad for Bush, and naming the result the "misery index." Many news stories ran Kerry claims about Bush economic failure and Bush rebuttals without investigating the dubious origins and credibility of the index itself.[14]

Lies and Deception

It is a small step from adopting a forced balance in reporting to simply letting untruths and deceptions go unchallenged. An interesting moment that revealed how difficult it is for journalists to independently write stories about the truthfulness of official claims also occurred in the 2004 election following the vice presidential debates between Dick Cheney and John Edwards. Chris Matthews, host of MSNBC's *Hardball* pundit program, asked CBS correspondent Bob Schieffer about getting the facts right in campaign debates and other news settings. While Matthews felt that Cheney had won the vice presidential debates, he,

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was disturbed by a couple of glaring factual errors that Cheney made without being challenged by the press, either at the time or in subsequent coverage. One was Cheney's continuing assertion of a connection between Iraq and 9/11 long after repeated efforts to establish one had failed, and the other was Cheney's claim that he had never met Edwards while they had appeared sitting side by side at a major event earlier. Here is a portion of the exchange:

MATTHEWS: What do you think is more important? The drama of the hour and a half we watched together as a country. . . . Or the analysis later. . . . I'm talking about who was right on the facts. Do the facts . . . ever catch up to what these guys say in these major prime-time performances?

SCHIEFFER: Probably they don't. Substance is important. Content is important. But you know, Chris, as well as I do, the vote for president is much different than any other vote that we cast. . . . We vote for a president, it's a gut vote. It's a vote from the heart. It's who we feel most comfortable with in the time of a crisis. And so I think that's why manner, if a person appears in control, if he appears cool, collected, I think that's a big thing for people in deciding who they're going to vote for for president.[15]

Matthews came back on the point that Cheney seemed to be spreading an important misconception about the Iraq War, and in the end, Schieffer had no answer for what journalists can do independently when politicians are simply not telling the truth. What journalists do, of course, is let other political elites say that their opponents are lying, but this reduces the situation to the usual political finger pointing and shouting, while conveying the impression that it is acceptable to make the truth subject to political dispute without offering citizens anything beyond choosing the truth they prefer to believe.[16]

THE PARADOX OF OBJECTIVE REPORTING

"If only the press would be more objective. . . ." Every embattled politician since George Washington has accused the press of adversarial coverage, and most members of the public seem convinced that the news, at worst, has a liberal, rather than an establishment, slant.[17] Nowhere in this popular view is there much room for the idea that the news follows the lead of powerful elites and well-organized interest groups, while underreporting the interests of large numbers of silent Americans. Consider a *Newsweek* report on a new plan for improving the lives of poor people in Chicago. The article featured the mayor of the city who proclaimed: "What people want is education, jobs, and job training." Lines like this are repeated so often by politicians that they ring true by sheer force of familiarity. Yet an unreported survey by a community organization found that people actually wanted better health care, more things for children to do, and more cultural activities in their communities.[18]

This chapter confronts the paradox of objective journalism by showing that the news is biased not in spite of, but precisely because of, the professional journalism standards intended to prevent bias. The central idea is that the professional practices embodying journalism norms of independence and objectivity

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DEFINING OBJECTIVITY: F
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also create conditions that systematically favor the reporting of official perspectives. At the same time, the postures of independence and objectivity created by the use of these professional practices give the impression that the resulting news is the best available representation of reality. In short, professional journalism standards introduce a distorted political perspective into the news yet legitimize that perspective as broad and realistic.

DEFINING OBJECTIVITY: FAIRNESS, BALANCE, AND TRUTH

Journalists sometimes substitute terms, such as *accuracy, fairness, balance,* or *truth* in place of *objectivity* to describe the prime goal that guides their reporting. Objectivity is a tough standard to achieve, particularly with so many critics and citizens charging that journalists today do not even come close to achieving it. *Accuracy*, *balance*, and *fairness* are softer terms. They seem to be more reasonable reporting goals in light of all the obstacles to objectivity:

- The values inherent in political events
- The deceptions of newsmakers
- The difficulty of achieving a wholly neutral point of view
- The impossibility of covering all the sides and gathering all the facts
- The rush to meet unreasonably short deadlines
- The pressures of breaking information online and the 24/7 news cycle

Because of these difficulties, the press is sure to come under fire no matter how hard it tries to present the facts. To many embattled journalists, accuracy, balance, or fairness sound like more defensible goals. One sign of the times is that the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics dropped the word *objectivity* in 1996 after many years of featuring it as the core principle. However, journalist and historian David Mindich notes that *objectivity* was replaced in the code with terms, such as *truth, accuracy,* and *comprehensiveness*. In his view, the decision to replace *objectivity* with these synonyms signals that many journalists are tired of defending an embattled word, yet remain committed to its meaning and guiding spirit.[19] There is strong evidence that no matter which name it goes by, the vast majority of journalists subscribe to an ideal of objectivity. For example, in a national survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, three-quarters of journalists polled agreed that their ideal standard is to report the "true, accurate, and widely agreed upon account of an event."[20]

Changing the names of reporting ideals might be more laudable if there were also changes in the actual practices that create the news information biases discussed in Chapter 2. The new terms, however, refer to much the same journalistic practices that once passed under the lofty claim of objectivity. Moreover, fairness, accuracy, or balance may be even more misleading than objectivity as a description of news content. At least objectivity stands in sharp contrast to the reality of personalized, dramatized, fragmented, and

authority-oriented (whether normalized or chaotic) news. *Fairness* or *accuracy* are fuzzier terms that invite rationalizing these information biases as the best we can hope for given the limits within which well-meaning journalists operate.

Consider, for example, the case for the term *fairness*. One may say, isn't presenting the facts offered by both sides and giving them equal time about as close to accuracy as we can get? Isn't *fair* a better description of this approach than *objective*? Consider the number of dubious assumptions on which the term *fairness* rests. First, there is the problem of limiting complex, multisided issues to two sides. Second, there is the question of which two sides to admit through the news gate. The two sides that appear in most stories are anything but a broad sample of possible viewpoints. For example, fairness in reporting presidential addresses means that the opposition party will be given an opportunity to reply. Fair enough, right? But this definition is based on the poorly examined, commonsense notion that the two political parties are the two most legitimate other sides in American politics. This assumption is reinforced every time journalists build a story upon it, yet the gradual weakening of ties to parties by both voters and candidates in recent years raises serious doubts about this premise.

A second hallmark of fairness is equal time (as in allowing both sides to present their positions). Given equal time, the information edge goes to the most predictable, stereotypical, official pronouncements in almost every case. New ideas take more time and effort to communicate intelligibly than old, familiar ideas. The press could devote extra time to make new ideas accessible to people, but that would seem unfair to the dominant actors and their supporters. It is safer to stick with an easy idea of fairness that involves granting equal time to the statements of the two most vocal—and often most stereotypical—sides.

All this raises the possibility that seemingly simple ideas such as balance and equal time are not as simple as they may appear. To raise just one more troublesome issue, should balance be achieved in every news story or over a period of time? That is easy, you say. Indeed, most people look for balance in every story, meaning that they cry foul if a report emphasizes one point of view over another. However, as noted earlier, what if one point of view is seldom heard, and it is more complicated than the already established positions? Why not give new perspectives more time, without interruption from a perspective that is heard every day?

When people encounter new ideas alongside familiar ones, the psychological tendency is to discount the new and embrace the old. When we look at fairness this way, the attempt to achieve balance within every story between new ideas and familiar political formulas hardly seems fair at all. If the goal of the news is to present information so that new perspectives can be grasped along with the old, then a new conception of information balance over time might replace the currently popular assumption that balance within each story is the ideal.

These reporting standards are so familiar and sensible that they seem to have been put there to serve obvious and laudable purposes. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any other function for adversarial roles or documentary

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reporting or standards of good taste than improving the quality and objectivity of the news. Yet, the following discussion suggests that the evolution of norms such as objectivity, fairness, and balance had more to do with the somewhat haphazard course of the developing news business than with the rational or determined pursuit of truth. In short, practices were dictated more by historical, technological, or business circumstances than by rational human design. The resulting reporting practices later became rationalized as good and even noble things.

The historical story of these modern reporting standards involves a radical shift over the course of the nineteenth century from a press supported largely by political parties to one supported by business models based on the sale of advertising. Journalism historian Gerald Baldasty describes this transformation in these terms: "In the early nineteenth century, editors defined news as a political instrument intended to promote party interests. By century's end, editors defined news within a business context to ensure or increase revenues. News had become commercialized."[21] This commercialization, and its continuing evolution to this day, resulted in what we now understand to be sensible and proper ways to report on the world we live in.

THE CURIOUS ORIGINS OF OBJECTIVE JOURNALISM

It is tempting to think that modern journalism practices derive logically from the norm of objective journalism. However, there is considerable evidence that the practices preceded the norm. The first modern journalism practices can be traced to mid-nineteenth-century economic and social conditions surrounding the rise of mass-market news.[22] According to David Mindich's historical analysis, various components of objective journalism emerged at very different points in time and often under odd circumstances. For example, the "inverted pyramid" style may have originated with a nonjournalist, secretary of war Edwin Stanton, who wrote a series of important communiqués about the Civil War.[23]

Mindich claims that the foundations for all the practices that go into objective reporting were established, one at a time, by the end of the 1800s.[24] However, the idea that what many reporters were already doing might be called "objective journalism" did not appear until after the turn of the century. In many ways, this retrospective ideal of objectivity can be viewed as both an ennobling claim on the part of a journalism trade looking to become a profession, and as a rhetorical appeal to an increasingly educated middle-class news audience who responded favorably to those claims about professionalism.

In the early days of the American republic, the news was anything but objective. Most newspapers were either funded by or otherwise sympathetic to particular political parties, interests, or ideologies. Reporting involved the political interpretation of events. People bought a newspaper knowing what its political perspective was and knowing that political events would be filtered through that perspective. In many respects, this is a sensible way to approach the news about politics. If one knows the biases of a reporter, it is possible to

control for them in interpreting the account of events. Moreover, if reporting is explicitly politically oriented, different reporters can look at the same event from different points of view. The idea was that people would encounter different points of view and bring them into face-to-face debates about what the best course of action might be—an idea that came directly from some of the nation's founders, such as Jefferson.

The commitment to political analysis in news reporting began to fade as the nature of politics itself changed after the age of Jackson from the late 1830s on. As Baldasty notes, politicians became less dependent on party papers to communicate with voters as, among other things, strict norms against candidates campaigning directly in public began to change.[25] With these changes, party financial support for papers began to dry up. The early papers were modest operations with small, local readerships. These small and increasingly impoverished newspapers could not compete for large audiences as the nation and its communication system grew.

As the country grew, the economics of the news business changed. For example, the population began to move to the cities, creating mass audiences for the news. Also, the expansion of the American territory during the nineteenth century created a need for the rapid and large-scale distribution of national news. Breakthroughs in printing and communication technologies made possible the production of cheap mass media news that could be gathered in the morning on the East Coast and distributed by evening on the West Coast.

These and other patterns in the development of the nation produced dramatic changes in the news. By 1848, a group of newspapers made the first great step toward standardized news by forming the Associated Press (AP).[26] Pooling reporters and selling the same story to hundreds, and eventually thousands, of subscribing newspapers meant that the news had become a profitable mass-market commodity. Of course, the broad marketability of the news meant that it had to be stripped of its overt political messages so that it would be appealing to news organizations of all political persuasions. An early prototype of objective reporting was born. Moreover, the need to send short messages through an overloaded mail system was followed by the transmission of national news over telegraph wires that also dictated a simplified, standardized reporting format. The *who, what, where, when,* and *why* of an event could be transmitted economically and reconstructed and embellished easily on the other end.

As the market for mass media news grew, the demand for reporters grew along with it. Whereas writing a persuasive political essay required skill in argumentation and political analysis, it was far easier to compose stories, which are the basic media for communicating about everyday events. The use of stories also guaranteed that the news would be intelligible to the growing mass-news audience.

In this manner, the overlapping effects of communication technology, economic development, and social change gave rise to large-scale news-gathering and news-marketing organizations. Along with these organizations came a standardized set of reporting practices. As mentioned previously, news services

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like the AP ushered in the *documentary report*. The use of wire transmission, along with untrained reporters, promoted the shift to the *story form*. The discovery that drama sold newspapers promoted the first *adversarial reporting*. Early reporters were rather like provocateurs stirring up controversy and conflict in order to generate dramatic material for their stories.

As news bureaucracies grew in response to the papers' economic success, editorial review practices became expedient means of processing the huge flow of news. *Standards of good taste* guaranteed that a news product would be inoffensive to the mass market. Much of today's news format in the mainstream establishment press evolved at the turn of the century with the growth of a large, educated middle class of affluent consumers who wanted serious reporting and bought the household products that were advertised along with the news. There was initially stiff competition between this highbrow press and the tabloids or "scandal sheets" (also known as the yellow press) at the turn of the twentieth century. These highly sensationalized versions of news were marketed to a less-educated, working-class population seeking escape as much as information from the media.

By the 1920s, urban life and local politics became dominated by an affluent middle class of business and professional people with formal education. Representing the news as objective, nonpartisan, and tasteful was an effective marketing ploy geared to the lifestyle of this group. Consider, for example, the early slogans of the *New York Times*, "All the News That's Fit to Print" and "It Will Not Soil the Breakfast Cloth."[27] This professional image dressed existing practices in a new style. This image also became a convenient means to discredit the muckrakers on the journalistic left and the sensationalistic scandal sheets on the political right.[28]

Finally, there was a growing expectation among intellectuals following World War I that democracy was in trouble and could be saved by a professional press dedicated to the mission of providing objective information to the public.[29] This noble purpose helped define a movement for a professional press and a code of objective journalism. Led by persuasive spokesmen like Walter Lippmann,[30] journalists began to regard objective reporting as both a description of their existing work practices and as a high moral imperative.

In these ways, journalism, like most professions, developed a set of business practices first and then endowed those practices with an impressive professional rationale. Successive generations of reporters began to regard their work as a skilled occupation that should demand higher status and better wages. The move toward a professional status both enhanced the social image of reporting and paved the way for higher wages by restricting the entry of newcomers off the street into the journalism ranks. Professionalism meant that formal training and screening could be required for skills that had been acquired formerly on the job.[31] As a result, journalism programs emerged at universities and began to formalize and refine the received practices as professional standards. Perhaps the best capsule summary of this curious transition of journalism from a business into a profession is Lou Cannon's observation that what began "as a technique became a value."[32]

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM IN PRACTICE

Because the ideas of accuracy, balance, truth, and fairness have their roots in what was originally called *objective reporting*, the following discussion will use the term *objectivity* to preserve historical continuity. If the reader prefers the alternate terms, feel free to substitute them; bear in mind, though, that the words may change, but the underlying practices remain much the same.

A review of journalism texts by David Mindich finds a common set of perspectives and practices that reporters are taught and that bring objectivity into their daily work. These defining ingredients of objectivity include *detachment, nonpartisanship, reliance on "facts," balance,* and the use of the *inverted pyramid* writing style (which puts the most important facts in the lead paragraph).[33] The following discussion shows how the ideal of objectivity is embedded in these and other defining journalistic methods; it thus remains a key to understanding the general workings of news organizations. Drawing from the review by Mindich and other sources, the standards and practices that embody objective journalism include the following:[34]

1. The professional journalist assumes *the role of a politically neutral adversary,* critically examining both sides of an issue and thereby ensuring impartial coverage. Journalists see adversarialism as an important counterpoint to becoming too close to their sources, ensuring detachment and balance in their reporting. As discussed in the last chapter, the adversarial role has been corrupted by "gotcha" journalism in recent years, but many journalists and scholars continue to think of this as adversarialism.
2. The journalist resists the temptation to discuss the seamy, sensationalistic side of the news by *observing prevailing social standards of decency and good taste*. Standards of taste establish boundaries as a story makes its way toward becoming "objectified." Like adversarialism, this norm has also become strained with the increase of sex scandals and tabloid coverage in the mainstream press. Many critics wonder if news organizations are losing their commitment to sticking to important issues and avoiding rumor and gossip.
3. The truthfulness and factuality of the news is guaranteed by *the use of documentary reporting practices* that permit reporters to transmit to the public "just the facts" that can be observed or supported with credible sources.
4. News objectivity is also established by *the use of a standardized format for reporting the news: the story.* Stories serve as implicit checks on news content by requiring reporters to gather all the facts (who, what, when, where, how, etc.) needed to construct a consistent and plausible account of an incident. Because stories are also the most common means of everyday communication about events, they enable the public to judge the consistency and plausibility of news accounts. Within the story format, journalists use other conventions, such as writing in an inverted pyramid style, meaning, as noted earlier, that the most important elements of the story appear in the lead paragraph.
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The Adversarial Role of the Pre

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5. Because they share the methods just listed, news organizations often favor the idea that reporters should be generalists, not specialists. The use of standardized reporting formats enables any reporter to cover any kind of story, further separating reporters from personal bias vis-à-vis the subject matter of the news. The *practice of training reporters as generalists,* as opposed to specialists, also helps minimize undesirable interpretive tendencies in news reporting.[35] In recent years, specialization has appeared in areas such as the environment, health, science, and technology, but many key areas such as business and politics still favor generalists.
6. Practices 1 through 5 are regulated and enforced by the important practice of *editorial review,* which is a check against violations of the practices and norms of the profession.

Each of the defining elements of objective journalism just listed makes a direct contribution to news bias by creating or reinforcing conditions favorable to the reporting of news filtered by Washington officialdom. This should not be surprising in light of the previous capsule history of the news profession. The basic practices that later became known as professional journalism were developed to sell mainstream social and political values to a mass audience. As diverse political perspectives gradually disappeared from the news or became discredited as not objective, it became easier to convince people that the officiated political perspective that remained was somehow objective. The logic of such a claim is simple: As one reality comes to dominate all others, that dominant reality begins to seem objective. The absence of credible competition supports the illusion of objectivity. The following discussion shows how each element of objective journalism actively promotes narrow political messages in the news.

The Adversarial Role of the Press

If the media were always adversarial in their dealings with politicians, they would face a serious dilemma: The news could end up discrediting the institutions and values on which it depends for credibility. To a remarkable degree, then, maintaining the illusion of news objectivity depends on the general reliance on and acceptance of official views to certify reports as credible and valid. As sociologist Gaye Tuchman put it:

> Challenging the legitimacy of offices holding centralized information dismantles the news net. If all of officialdom is corrupt, all its facts and occurrences must be viewed as alleged facts and alleged occurrences. Accordingly, to fill the news columns and air time of the news product, news organizations would have to find an alternative and economical method of locating occurrences and constituent facts acceptable as news. For example, if the institutions of everyday life are delegitimated, the facts tendered by the Bureau of Marriage Licenses would be suspect. One could no longer call the bureau to learn whether Robert Jones and Fay

news of such motives; yet, somehow, the resulting product does seem to display a particular slant:

> The press isn't "racist," though as the skins of the participants become darker, the lengths of the stories shrink. The press isn't "pro-Israeli," though it is very sensitive to Jewish-American feelings. The press isn't afraid of the "vested interests," though it makes sure Mobil's or Senator Scott's denials appear right along with the charges. The paranoids are wrong: there is no news conspiracy. Instead there are a lot of editors and executives making decisions about what is "the news" while constrained by lack of time, space, money, talent, and understanding, from doing the difficult and/or hidden stories.[81]

In short, the editorial review standards pointed to as the fail-safe mechanism for preventing news distortion are, paradoxically, the very things that guarantee it.

OBJECTIVITY RECONSIDERED

A number of observers (including many journalists when they are not being pressured by critical academics) have argued persuasively that whatever the news is, it is not a spontaneous and objective mirror of the world. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to leap from this to the conclusion that both the ideal of objectivity and professional reporting practices do not matter. Professional standards still work in several ways that are worth noting. For example, high-minded norms such as objectivity, even if they are not clear themselves, hide the connection between the news and its economic, organizational, and political contexts. Above all, the objectivity norm gives the press the look of an independent social institution. Moreover, even though actual reporting practices distort the political content of the news, they can be rationalized and defended conveniently under the objectivity code, thereby obscuring their political effects. In this fashion, journalistic norms and reporting practices operate together to create the aforementioned information biases in the news—biases that are well hidden behind the facade of independent journalism. Indeed, the cluster of practices with objectivity or fairness at their center may have the ironic result of often replacing the pursuit of truth with the best available political spin, as discussed in the following case study.

As explained earlier, claims about "objective" (or even fair and balanced) reporting rest on shaky foundations. For every source included, another is excluded. With each tightening of the plot line, meaningful connections to other issues and events become weakened. Every familiar theme or metaphor used in writing about an event obscures a potentially unique feature of the event. Above all, when officials are allowed to script the news, journalists give up their most important democratic function: to assess and critically examine public officials and business elites on behalf of the public interest. Although these and other factors make it impossible for the news to be objective, it is important that it seem objective or, in the terms of the trade, "believable." Perhaps most important of

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all, the practices and perspectives that go into creating the appearance of objectivity or believability depend heavily on striking the right balance between adversarialism and deference toward official sources. It is this balance that seems most in danger of tipping in ways that damage the credibility of news. Not only do reporters and officials seem to vacillate wildly between cooperation and antagonistic posturing, but these displays clearly leave most of the public cold toward both sides of the news process.

"Gotcha" Journalism and the Crisis of Credibility

As explained in Chapter 2, even though representations of authority and social order appear to have tipped toward the negative in recent years, the reason may have little to do with whether officials are really more venal, government is more corrupt, or levels of social disorder are objectively higher. Instead, the increasingly negative images of public authorities and social disorder can be traced at least partly to commercial news pressures for more sensationalism, emotion, and drama and to generate new story developments to feed the 24-hour news cycle. This trend toward sensationalism is also supported by politicians whose use of negative rhetoric and public attacks on opponents also feeds the news formulas. Both news producers and politicians seem to have bought the formula of "scare them and they will watch." The trouble is that after watching for a moment, people often change the channel.

Recall the argument by sociologist Gaye Tuchman from earlier in this chapter: The illusion of news objectivity depends on journalists treating the world of officialdom as authoritative.[82] If this is true, then "gotcha" journalism may have the effect of undermining the very essence of news objectivity. No matter how much journalists dedicate themselves to the professional ideal (by whatever name it goes), the legitimacy of the news may suffer under the burden of "gotcha" adversarialism. *This is not to imply that achieving credibility by blindly reporting the pronouncements of officials is a good idea either. It is simply to say that the ideal of objectivity may be flawed, no matter how journalists try to pursue it in a given era.* What matters is not debunking objectivity but understanding that the endless debate about it may keep people from seeing that the underlying biases in the news are created by the very efforts of journalists to achieve it.

It is also important to understand that just as the basic practices that define objectivity evolved over the course of the nineteenth century, and just as the idea of objectivity became a solid foundation of American journalism in the twentieth century, the pace of change in the news business will surely continue to affect both the ideal and the practice of objective journalism in the twenty-first century. Changes such as the 24-hour news cycle, the viral flows of the Internet, or the introduction of marketing people into the editorial offices of news organizations (discussed in the next chapter) are characteristic of the kinds of changes that have spurred the historical evolution of reporting practices and news values discussed throughout this chapter. In short, what accounts for any particular change in the news may be a combination of economic, technological, and social conditions. The results of such change may appear far from rational or coherent.

Yet journalism, as much as any profession, continues to try to make sense of its practices and even glorify them with such sobriquets as fair and balanced (formerly known as objective) reporting.

When journalists and their audiences grow as far apart in their perceptions of whether a defining concept such as objectivity is really being practiced properly, we know that serious tensions exist among the different elements of the news system. Those who produce news and those who consume it appear to have different understandings of what they are doing. In the process, they may have lost an important measure of respect and understanding for each other. Is objectivity possible, or even desirable? That is a question for the reader now to decide. One thing, however, is sure: We live in a time where there is little consensus on just what good reporting might be.

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