

INTRODUCTION

THE IDEAL OF OBJECTIVITY

AMERICAN JOURNALISM has been regularly criticized for failing to be "objective." Whether it was Democrats in 1952 complaining of a one-party press biased against Adlai Stevenson or the Nixon-Agnew administration attacking newspapers and television networks for being too liberal, the press has repeatedly been taken to task for not presenting the day's news "objectively."

But why do critics take it for granted that the press *should* be objective? Objectivity is a peculiar demand to make of institutions which, as business corporations, are dedicated first of all to economic survival. It is a peculiar demand to make of institutions which often, by tradition or explicit credo, are political organs. It is a peculiar demand to make of editors and reporters who have none of the professional apparatus which, for doctors or lawyers or scientists, is supposed to guarantee objectivity.

And yet, journalists, as well as their critics, hold newspapers to a standard of objectivity. Not all journalists believe they should be objective in their work, but the belief is widespread,¹ and all journalists today must in some manner confront it. But why? What kind of a world is ours and what kind of an institution is journalism that they sustain this particular ideal, objectivity? That is the problem this book addresses. I shall not ask here the familiar question: are

newspapers objective? I shall ask, instead, why that question is so familiar.

The question assumes special interest when one learns that, before the 1830s, objectivity was not an issue. American newspapers were expected to present a partisan viewpoint, not a neutral one. Indeed, they were not expected to report the "news" of the day at all in the way we conceive it—the idea of "news" itself was invented in the Jacksonian era. If we are to understand the idea of objectivity in journalism, the transformation of the press in the Jacksonian period must be examined. That is the task of the first chapter, which will interpret the origins of "news" in its relationship to the democratization of politics, the expansion of a market economy, and the growing authority of an entrepreneurial, urban middle class.

There is an obvious explanation of why the idea of news, once established, should have turned into nonpartisan, strictly factual news later in the century. This has to do with the rise of the first American wire service, the Associated Press. The telegraph was invented in the 1840s, and, to take advantage of its speed in transmitting news, a group of New York newspapers organized the Associated Press in 1848. Since the Associated Press gathered news for publication in a variety of papers with widely different political allegiances, it could only succeed by making its reporting "objective" enough to be acceptable to all of its members and clients. By the late nineteenth century, the AP dispatches were markedly more free from editorial comment than most reporting for single newspapers.² It has been argued, then, that the practice of the Associated Press became the ideal of journalism in general.³

While this argument is plausible, at first blush, there is remarkably little evidence for it and two good reasons to doubt it. First, it begs a key question: why should a practice, obviously important to the survival of the institution of the wire service, become a guiding ideal in institutions not subject

to the same constraints? It would be just as likely, that newspapers would take the available service news as license to concentrate on difficult reporting. If the AP style became a model for day one would still have to account for its affinities and needs. But this brings us to the second serious problem: objective reporting did not become a norm or practice in journalism in the late nineteenth century when the Associated Press was growing. As I will discuss in the second and third chapters, at the turn of the century there was as much emphasis in leading papers on telling a story as on getting the facts. Sensationalism in its various forms was the chief development in newspaper content. Reporters as often to write "literature" as to gather news. Even in the bawdiest days of yellow journalism, the *Times* began to climb to its premier position by adopting an "information" model, rather than a "story" model. Where the Associated Press was factual to a politically diverse clientele, the *Times* was information to attract a relatively select, socially homogeneous middle class. It was the well to do. As in the Jacksonian era, so in the late nineteenth century changes in the ideals of journalism did not translate into occupational norms so much as into newspaper ideals and practices consonant with the dominant social classes.

But into the first decades of the twentieth century, when the *New York Times*, it was uncommon for journalists to draw a sharp divide between facts and values.⁴ Yet the ideal of objectivity is just this: the belief that one can separate facts from values. Facts, in this view, are about the world open to independent validation, beyond the distorting influences of any individual preferences. Values, in this view, are an individual's or unconscious preferences for what the world should be seen as ultimately subjective and so without

to the same constraints? It would be just as likely, or more likely, that newspapers would take the availability of wire service news as license to concentrate on different kinds of reporting. If the AP style became a model for daily journalists, one would still have to account for its affinity with their interests and needs. But this brings us to the second, still more serious problem: objective reporting did not become the chief norm or practice in journalism in the late nineteenth century when the Associated Press was growing. As I will show in the second and third chapters, at the turn of the century there was as much emphasis in leading papers on telling a good story as on getting the facts. Sensationalism in its various forms was the chief development in newspaper content. Reporters sought as often to write "literature" as to gather news. Still, in 1896, in the bawdiest days of yellow journalism, the *New York Times* began to climb to its premier position by stressing an "information" model, rather than a "story" model, of reporting. Where the Associated Press was factual to appeal to a politically diverse clientele, the *Times* was informational to attract a relatively select, socially homogeneous readership of the well to do. As in the Jacksonian era, so in the 1890s, changes in the ideals of journalism did not translate technological changes into occupational norms so much as make newspaper ideals and practices consonant with the culture of dominant social classes.

But into the first decades of the twentieth century, even at the *New York Times*, it was uncommon for journalists to see a sharp divide between facts and values.⁴ Yet the belief in objectivity is just this: the belief that one can and should separate facts from values. Facts, in this view, are assertions about the world open to independent validation. They stand beyond the distorting influences of any individual's personal preferences. Values, in this view, are an individual's conscious or unconscious preferences for what the world should be; they are seen as ultimately subjective and so without legitimate

claim on other people. The belief in objectivity is a faith in "facts," a distrust of "values," and a commitment to their segregation.

Journalists before World War I did not subscribe to this view. They were, to the extent that they were interested in facts, naive empiricists; they believed that facts are not human statements about the world but aspects of the world itself. This view was insensitive to the ways in which the "world" is something people construct by the active play of their minds and by their acceptance of conventional—not necessarily "true"—ways of seeing and talking. Philosophy, the history of science, psychoanalysis, and the social sciences have taken great pains to demonstrate that human beings are cultural animals who know and see and hear the world through socially constructed filters. From the 1920s on, the idea that human beings individually and collectively construct the reality they deal with has held a central position in social thought.⁵

Before the 1920s, journalists did not think much about the subjectivity of perception. They had relatively little incentive to doubt the firmness of the "reality" by which they lived. American society, despite serious problems, remained buoyant with hope and promise. Democracy was a value unquestioned in politics; free enterprise was still widely worshipped in economic life; the novels of Horatio Alger sold well. Few people doubted the inevitability of progress. After World War I, however, this changed. Journalists, like others, lost faith in verities a democratic market society had taken for granted. Their experience of propaganda during the war and public relations thereafter convinced them that the world they reported was one that interested parties had constructed for them to report. In such a world, naive empiricism could not last.

This turning point is the topic of my fourth chapter. In the twenties and thirties, many journalists observed with growing

anxiety that facts themselves, or what they had seen, could not be trusted. One response to this anxiety was the institutionalization in the daily press of genres of subjective reporting, like the political column. Another response turned the journalists' anxiety into a virtue and encouraged journalists to replace a simple faith in facts with an allegiance to rules and procedures created by the profession in which even facts were in question. This was "objectivity." Objectivity, in this sense, means that a person's statements about the world can be trusted if they are supported by established rules deemed legitimate by a professional community. Facts here are not aspects of the world, but conventionalized statements about it.⁶ While naive empiricism disappeared in journalism and survives, to some extent, in other fields of us, after World War I it was subordinated to a more sophisticated ideal of "objectivity."

Discussion of objectivity as an ideal (or ideology) in fields like medicine, law, the social sciences, journalism, and other pursuits tends to two poles: either it seeks to undermine the profession in question or to glorify it. It is either debunking or self-serving. Debunkers show that the claims of professionals about being objective or expert or scientific are really attempts to legitimate power by defining political and social terms in technical terms. This is often true. But, first, why is "objectivity" the legitimation they choose, and, second, why is it often convincing to others? When professionals make claims to authoritative knowledge, why do they base them on their objectivity rather than on, say, divine revelation or electoral mandate? Debunking by itself does not provide an answer.

The opposite stance is to Whiggishly identify objectivity with journalism or in law or other professions with "science," where science is understood as the right or true or best knowledge. This is the point at which science, g

anxiety that facts themselves, or what they had taken to be facts, could not be trusted. One response to this discomfiting view was the institutionalization in the daily paper of new genres of subjective reporting, like the political column. Another response turned the journalists' anxiety on its head and encouraged journalists to replace a simple faith in facts with an allegiance to rules and procedures created for a world in which even facts were in question. This was "objectivity." Objectivity, in this sense, means that a person's statements about the world can be trusted if they are submitted to established rules deemed legitimate by a professional community. Facts here are not aspects of the world, but consensually validated statements about it.⁶ While naive empiricism has not disappeared in journalism and survives, to some extent, in all of us, after World War I it was subordinated to the more sophisticated ideal of "objectivity."

Discussion of objectivity as an ideal (or ideology) in science, medicine, law, the social sciences, journalism, and other pursuits tends to two poles: either it seeks to unmask the profession in question or to glorify it. It is either debunking or self-serving. Debunkers show that the claims of professionals about being objective or expert or scientific are really just attempts to legitimate power by defining political issues in technical terms. This is often true. But, first, why is "objectivity" the legitimation they choose, and, second, why is it so often convincing to others? When professionals make a claim to authoritative knowledge, why do they base the claim on their objectivity rather than on, say, divine revelation or electoral mandate? Debunking by itself does not provide an answer.

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understood as opposed to ideology, threatens to become ideology itself. But that, in a sense, is just what interests me here—not the internal development of science as an institution or a body of knowledge and practices, but the reasons the *idea* of science and the *ideal* of objectivity are so resonant in our culture. Even if science, as we know it today, is in some sense getting us nearer to truth than past systems of knowledge, we can still inquire why twentieth-century Western culture should be so wise as to recognize this. And that is a question that glorifications of science and objectivity do not answer.

It should be apparent that the belief in objectivity in journalism, as in other professions, is not just a claim about what kind of knowledge is reliable. It is also a moral philosophy, a declaration of what kind of thinking one should engage in, in making moral decisions. It is, moreover, a political commitment, for it provides a guide to what groups one should acknowledge as relevant audiences for judging one's own thoughts and acts. The relevant audiences are defined by institutional mechanisms. Two mechanisms of social control are frequently said to underwrite objectivity in different fields. First, there is advanced education and training. This is supposed to provide trainees with scientific knowledge and an objective attitude which helps them set aside personal preferences and passions. Thus the training of physicians enables them to sustain detached attitudes at times when persons without such training would submit to panic or despair at the human agony they face. Law students are taught to distinguish "legal" questions (generally understood to be technical) from "moral" issues (generally understood to be outside the proper domain of legal education and legal practice).

A second basic form of social control is insulation from the public. Technical language or jargon is one such insulating

mechanism. Others may be institutional. For instance, scholars argue that courts are able to be more objective than legislatures because judges are institutionally further from the pressures of electoral politics than are legislators. Objectivity in the professions is guaranteed, then, by the autonomy of professional groups—the collective independence of professions from the market and from popular will, the personal independence of professionals, assured by training, from their own values.

In this context, the notion of objectivity in journalism appears anomalous. Nothing in the training of journalists gives them license to shape others' views of the world. Journalists have esoteric techniques or language. News is directly dependent on market forces. They appeal to popular opinion. Journalism is an uninsulated profession. To criticize a lawyer, we say, "I'm not a lawyer, but—" To question a doctor, we say, "I'm no expert on medicine, but—" We feel no such compunction to qualify criticism in the morning paper or the television news. I do not subscribe to the view that journalism is thereby inferior to other professional groups; I simply mean to identify the problem of objectivity in the case of journalism. How is it that an occupation without the social organization of self-regulation and authority there is still passionate controversy about objectivity? Of course, one answer is that the less a profession is self-evidently objective, the more passionate the controversy will be. But this is not answer enough. Where is objectivity in journalism, where none of the features that guarantee objectivity in law or medicine exist or are likely to exist, is objectivity still be a serious issue? Why hasn't it been given up altogether?

By the 1960s, both critics of the press and defenders of objectivity to be the emblem of American journalism had improved over a past of "sensationalism" and a controversy

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the party papers of Europe. Whether regarded as the fatal flaw or the supreme virtue of the American press, all agreed that the idea of objectivity was at the heart of what journalism has meant in this country. At the same time, the ideal of objectivity was more completely and divisively debated in the past decade than ever before. In the final chapter, I will examine how changing subject matter, sources of news, and audience for the news precipitated this debate in journalism. Government management of the news, which began to concern journalists after World War I, became an increasingly disturbing problem with the rise of a national security establishment and an "imperial" presidency after World War II. In the Vietnam war, government news management collided with a growing "adversary culture" in the universities, in journalism, in the government itself, and in the population at large. The conflagration that followed produced a radical questioning of objectivity which will not soon be forgotten and revitalized traditions of reporting that the objective style had long overshadowed. The ideal of objectivity has by no means been displaced, but, more than ever, it holds its authority on sufferance.

I originally conceived this work as a case study in the history of professions and in the genesis of professional ideology. I saw objectivity as the dominant ideal that legitimates knowledge and authority in all contemporary professions. If I could excavate its foundations in one field, I could hope to expose its structure in all. While this book has not entirely outgrown that ambition, it came to be moved equally by another. I grew fascinated by journalism itself and convinced there were important questions, not only unanswered but unasked, about the relationship of journalism to the development of American society as a whole. Where standard histories of the American press consider the social context of journalism only in passing, this work takes as its main subject the relationship between the institutionalization of modern

journalism and general currents in economic, political, and cultural life.

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CHAPTER 5

OBJECTIVITY, NEWS MANAGEMENT, AND THE CRITICAL CULTURE

IN THE 1960s "objectivity" became a term of abuse. In the thirties, critics who had attacked objectivity favored interpretive reporting as a way of maintaining professional standing in a world which had outgrown the blunt approach of "just getting the facts." But, in the sixties, the goal of professionalism itself had become suspect. Critics claimed that urban planning created slums, that schools made people stupid, that medicine caused disease, that psychiatry invented mental illness, and that the courts promoted injustice. Intellectuals, no longer seen as the source of dispassionate counsel, were dubbed the "new mandarins," while government policy makers were called "the best and the brightest" in a tone of most untender irony. And objectivity in journalism, regarded as an antidote to bias, came to be looked upon as the most insidious bias of all. For "objective" reporting reproduced a vision of social reality which refused to examine the basic structures of power and privilege. It was not just incomplete, as critics of the thirties had contended, it was distorted. It represented collusion with institutions whose legitimacy was in dispute. And there was an intense moral urgency in this view. By the

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late sixties, many found Walter Cronkite's nightly assertion that "that's the way it is" too smug and preferred the challenge to "tell it like it is"—as if the reality to be reported was too wild to be tamed by grammar.

"Objectivity is a myth," announced reporter Kerry C. Conover of the *Raleigh Observer*, and many young journalists shared her view. Sydney Gruson, her father and the assistant publisher at the *New York Times*, claimed, in contrast, "Maybe I'm old-fashioned but I feel very strongly about the purity of the news columns. Pure objectivity might not be possible but you have to strive for it anyway." The remarks of Sydney Grusons were brought together by Stanford Sesser in an article in the *Wall Street Journal* in the fall of 1969. Sesser was reporting on antiwar activism among journalists. Sydney Gruson had turned down the request of 308 employees at the *Times* to hold a 15 moratorium against the war in Vietnam. Kerry Conover believed her father's decision was wrong. She herself wore a black armband while covering stories on October 15.¹

The *Journal* article was a set piece for the conflict between generations as it was seen in American journalism in the sixties—a conflict between the old defending objectivity and the young attacking it, between those who had fought in World War II and those born to the affluence and anxiety of the cold war, between those reluctant to abandon support for American policy in Vietnam and those angry at it, between the institutional responsibilities of powerful newspapers and the individual bravado of young reporters. Not least, the *Journal* story was itself a part of the set: in the sixties, never before, news writing was itself a topic for journalistic coverage.

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tasks at hand, different interests to protect, and different ambitions to serve; younger journalists and older journalists are at different points in their careers and have different concerns. That these differences should yield correspondingly different attitudes toward reporting the news is not surprising.

But in the past, the resentment of young reporters against editors was occasioned *only* by a conflict of interests on the job. It was not connected to broader political currents, and it did not express itself in a political idiom. In the sixties, however, the generational rebellion was part of a general cultural crisis. Young reporters still wanted to express their passion and personal style in print, but the rebellion at the conventions of "straight news" emerged more as a serious political challenge than as an adolescent stage in the passage to professionalism. Young reporters not only called for a more active journalism, a "participant" journalism skeptical of official accounts of public affairs; they also claimed pointedly that journalism had long been *too* participant. "Straight news" was not only drab and constricting—it was in itself a form of participation, a complicity with official sources whose most alarming feature was that it so self-righteously claimed to be above partisan or political considerations.

In the sixties, one might still criticize a newspaper for following the bent of its publisher or the intentional biases of its editorial staff. And much of this criticism was deserved. But the most original critics of the past decade have stressed, instead, that journalists were "political" unwittingly or even unwillingly. Their political impact lay not in what they openly advocated but in the unexamined assumptions on which they based their professional practice and, most of all, in their conformity to the conventions of objective reporting. In this view, objectivity was not an ideal but a mystification. The slant of journalism lay not in explicit bias but in the

social structure of news gathering which reinforced viewpoints of social reality. Correspondingly, news of the past decade—especially those most prestigious, meritorious, and with most resources to devote to news gathering—have sought autonomy from official views and promoted a new concept of what is news."² There is more interpretive journalism, or "news analysis," more investigative or "entrepreneurial" journalism, and more tolerance for new varieties of news writing. But why at this time should criticism of conventional news gathering have been so pointed, and why should new ideas and new institutions in journalism have found so much support as they have?

I will suggest in this chapter that two conditions make new criticism of journalism possible and popular and that changes in newspaper content seem desirable. First, there is increasing government management of the news and increasing awareness of it. It has been said too often and too easily that all governments lie and that all presidents back to George Washington have tried to mislead the press and the public.³ The modicum of truth in such assertions obscures the fact that management of information has been an organized, funded, and staffed function of government for just a few years. Indeed, only since World War II has the impact and relative isolation of a national security establishment and an "imperial presidency" made government news, especially on matters of foreign policy, the symbolic center of the relationship between the government and the press.

The second basis for new developments in journalism is the emergence, in the 1960s, of an "adversary culture," an adversary, or critical, culture denied to government a long-trusted it had come to expect and provided an audience for more aggressive and more skeptical journalism. The conflict in the late sixties between news management and the

social structure of news gathering which reinforced official viewpoints of social reality. Correspondingly, newspapers in the past decade—especially those most prestigious, most powerful, and with most resources to devote to news gathering—have sought autonomy from official views and promoted what Max Frankel of the *New York Times* called “an exploded concept of what is news.”² There is more interpretive reporting or “news analysis,” more investigative or “enterprise” journalism, and more tolerance for new varieties of feature writing. But why at this time should criticism of conventional news gathering have been so pointed, and why should new ideas and new institutions in journalism have found as much support as they have?

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The second basis for new developments in journalism was the emergence, in the 1960s, of an “adversary culture.” The adversary, or critical, culture denied to government a level of trust it had come to expect and provided an audience for a more aggressive and more skeptical journalism. The collision in the late sixties between news management and the adver-

sary culture over the Vietnam war changed journalism in significant and, I think, lasting ways, which the final section of this chapter will consider.

Government and the Press: "News Management"

The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 symbolized the modern relationship between government and the press. It undercut the self-image of the press as a key actor in decision making at exactly the moment the press was most enchanted with its own powers. Wars are good for journalists as for generals. After the war, however, editors and reporters found themselves not partners to government, but instruments of government. They were valued—and feared—not for their capacity to represent public opinion, but for their power to control it.

Ray Stannard Baker, onetime muckraker who was President Woodrow Wilson's aide in Paris running the American Press Bureau, expressed the high hopes of the fourth estate:

One fact stands out at the Paris Peace Conference as distinctive and determining: the fact that the people of the world, publics, were there represented and organized as never before at any peace conference. At the older congresses, the diplomats occupied the entire stage, bargained, arranged, and secretly agreed; but at Paris democracy, like the blind god in Dunsany's play, itself comes lumbering roughly, powerfully, out upon the stage.⁴

When Baker said "publics" and "democracy," he meant reporters from the newspapers and wire services. It was typical of liberal thought of the 1920s that the press was taken to be the very incarnation of democratic government. Press coverage of the Peace Conference, in Baker's view, was to open a new epoch in world diplomacy. From that moment on, national policy would have to be formulated in the presence of

public opinion and with the need for public assent in

Baker himself was disappointed, then, that the negotiations at Paris turned out to be shrouded in secrecy. He knew Wilson's promise of "open covenants of peace openly made" meant only, as Wilson explained, "that no secret agreements should be entered into" and not that "there should be no private discussions of delicate matters."⁵ Baker did not object to governments keeping some of their meetings confidential from the news-reading public, but he did criticize Wilson for keeping them secret from the press. "It has been proved over and over again," he asserted, "that no group of men can be more fully trusted to keep a confidence or to act more wisely than a group of experienced newspaper correspondents—if they are honestly informed and trusted in the place."⁶

Paris did not mark a new era in open diplomacy as decisively as Baker had hoped, but it did announce a new relationship between the press and the government in which he had not anticipated, for it made publicity itself a political issue. For the first time in the history of American foreign policy, political debate at home concerned not only the substance of decisions the government made but also the process in which the government made decisions. Foreign policy began to be domesticated; the legitimacy of procedure, as well as the effectiveness of outcome, became an issue. In the second week of the Peace Conference, American correspondents wrote in protest to Wilson regarding rules of secrecy the American commissioners had adopted, and Joseph Tumulty in Washington warned the President of the distrust his adherence to secrecy would engender. Five months later there was considerable opposition to public release of the treaty draft, and the Senate passed a resolution calling on Wilson to transmit the draft to the Senate. From beginning to end, publicity was a political issue of the first importance.⁷

This peacetime resort to managing the news was a