

**“From Neutral to Pragmatic Objectivity: Practical Lessons about Inquiry From Journalism”<sup>1</sup>**

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**I. Introduction: Pragmatism, Inquiry & the Democracy-Creating Publics**

Today, our workshop is exploring the concept of objectivity. Because objectivity is a notoriously woolly concept, I hope to contribute pragmatically by looking its practical bearings in one important area of inquiry, journalism. I’ll summarize why some critics believe that journalism’s dominant conception, “neutral objectivity,” has been the source of major problems and how a reconstructed version, “pragmatic objectivity,” would provide a better standard for journalists and improve their contribution and participation in democratic, public inquiry.

Here, in brief, is my talk’s outline. (Slide)

I. Pragmatic Inquiry & Democracy-Creating Publics;

II. Journalism and Objectivity

III. Pragmatic Objectivity

IV. Democracy as an experiment

If you are like me, you are someone who cares both about your fellow human beings and the truth. (These cares may even be related!) If you are like me, you understand that an honest and vigilant press is integral to a healthy, functioning democracy. Much of what one sees in journalism is not, however, *vigilant*. Even if one pushes aside the distracting clutter of celebrity and crime gossip or those pseudo-scientific statistical reports (about health, business, *everything*), the more serious stories needing historical context, fact-checking, and follow-up reporting are too often missing from what journalists provide. Indeed, it has become hard to know who is a journalist, anymore.

Through a pragmatic lens (especially a Deweyan one) problems with journalism portend more significant problems with a democratic way of life. For journalism uncovers crucial facts necessary for important public inquiries; facts about political corruption or environmental accidents provide two robust examples. Using those facts, publics form; they (a) may mediate the conflicts naturally arising among pluralistic groups or (b) imagine and plan how to reach shared goals.

When public inquiry is failing—when, for example, public conflicts become violent or when political stalemate become prevalent—philosophy can help analyze the dysfunctions attending such inquiries and offer suggestions.

Today, I wish to focus on *objectivity* as one component to journalistic practice, and, by extension, to public inquiry. For clearly what is missing from much of the half-hearted journalism we witness is “objectivity.”

We need more responsible accounts of reality, more earnest and magnanimous efforts to find the truth. But, what *are* the metrics, to use a fashionable term, for “reality” and “truth”? And who gets to decide which metrics we use?

Pragmatism argues that best metric we have is *experience*. The test of true conclusions depend upon what works, and what works is always tested by *particular* persons or groups with concrete histories, values, and purposes. While generalizations may provide indispensable tools for further theorizing (and design of experiments) their legitimacy is tied to future experience, widely considered. The truer conclusion is the more stable one, and such conclusions emerge more readily from social processes that are more “democratic” than “dogmatic.”

This kind of democratic process does not arise from nowhere, of course; our standpoint reflects who we are: problem-solving inquiry is frequently social, shaped by standing *normative* commitments (to local communities, laws, customs, and institutions); inquiry also arises based upon standing *epistemic* commitments: impartiality, transparency, and warranted conclusions, to name just three.

Our persistent challenge is *reinvention*; will we be able, in the face of new “needs, problems and conditions of...social life”(LW13:299) to reinvent democracy? Answering that question requires that we examine *how* we are inquiring: are we patient and thorough in gathering evidence? Do we deliberate imaginatively and pluralistically? Are we courageous in implementing our judgments?

If we're troubled by *how* we're inquiring, we should examine those most shaping our habits, asking, who is *modeling* inquiry? Surely the two institutions with a predominant influence our inquiry habits are education and journalism. Today, I'll focus on journalism, but we should not forget that journalism's function is as much educative as informational.

We need to ask, how journalism is modeling inquiry and how the people are responding. To begin, let's look briefly at journalism's core standard, neutral objectivity. Afterwards we'll examine a better, alternative standard, pragmatic objectivity. Then I'll conclude.

## II. Journalism and Neutral Objectivity

Journalism has been a primary contributor to democratic life; in America, journalism moved

from a partisanship model to one we might call a “neutrality” model. Many argue this neutralist position has been a failure—I agree. By looking at this issue, we can survey various practical meanings of “objectivity” as these have bearing on democratic inquiry. This survey will indicate why a more pragmatic construal is preferable for journalism and, perhaps, *that practicality will reflect back upon what we take to be a philosophically satisfactory conception.*

### **Journalism’s Objectivity**

A little background. “Objectivity” has a history in journalism which has shifted over time. As Robert McChesney notes, the present notion “that journalism should be politically neutral, nonpartisan, professional, [and] even ‘objective,’ did not emerge until the twentieth century. During America’s first two or three generations, the notion of an objective press would have been nonsensical, even unthinkable. The point of journalism was to persuade as well as inform, and the press tended to be highly partisan.” (McChesney, 2003, p. 300)

Standards changed in the late 19th century—away from partisanship and toward “truth,” which journalists initially called “realism.” As newspapers separated from political affiliations and corporate consolidation got underway, journalism faced an identity crisis: who *were* journalists and *on whose behalf* did they speak?

Journalism addressed this crisis by professionalizing—by developing schools and methods *for creating* “professional” journalists. Professional journalists now spoke not for partisans but for *truth*. As Bill Kovach summarized journalism’s turn, “The idea [was] that if reporters simply dug out the facts and ordered them together, truth would reveal itself rather naturally.” (CCJ, 2007)<sup>2</sup> This stance was refined in the 1920s in response to public concerns over the rise of public relations professionals and propaganda. Walter Lippmann advised that journalists defend their craft rhetorically by embracing “objectivity” (rather than “realism”) so they might associate themselves with natural science’s rigor and value-free neutrality.

Many codes developed around this time are still operating, tending to reinforce the ideology of naïve “pure facts” realism. As University of Wisconsin Journalism School Director Stephen Ward writes,

Proponents of objectivity drew a hard, clear line between news and opinion in the newspaper...For objectivists, news did not differ from opinion by having less interpretation or comment—it had *no* interpretation or opinion...only statements of facts.... Interpretations contained value judgments—one person’s subjective

"opinion." (Ward, 2005, p. 217)

Today, the situation is largely unchanged. The doctrine enunciated by CBS's Richard Salant in the early 1970's could just as easily have been uttered by the head of the BBC today. Salant said, "Our reporters do not cover stories from their point of view, they are presenting them from *nobody's* point of view." (quoted in Mindich, 1998, p. 7) And while in 1996 the term "objectivity" was officially dropped from the *Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics*<sup>3</sup> one still finds media scholars such as Julia Fox describing the norm of "journalistic objectivity" prescribing that reporters be "neutral, unbiased, and balanced...void of personal ideology and values, opinions, and impressions." (Fox, 2006, 37) Indeed, this claim is a mainstay for marketing the commodity of news.

Unfortunately, as you might predict, the actual implementation of journalism's code is a mess. There have been no systemic or coherent attempts to make journalism's "objective method" consistent. As the Project for Excellence in Journalism's Bill Kovach put it, "There is nothing approaching standard rules of evidence, as in the law, or an agreed-upon method of observation, as in the conduct of scientific experiments." (Foregoing quotations, Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007, 85) Such failures to develop something which can be meaningfully or univocally be called "objectivity" leaves journalism in an untenable position. As Jay Rosen puts it "it's not an exaggeration to say that *journalism is the last refuge of objectivity as an epistemology*. Nobody else takes this notion seriously anymore....Yet...in journalism...this concept remains. Even journalists are beginning to lose their faith in their own epistemology...[and they frequently exclaim] 'Of course, no one can be really objective. But we try to be fair.'" (Rosen, 1993, my emphasis)

### **Contemporary Critiques of Journalistic Objectivity**

Professional journalism's allegiance to *neutralist* objectivity has inspired voluminous and withering criticism. I'll mention just two vicious problems which help make manifest why journalists are better served by *pragmatic* objectivity.

#### **Impartial Voice**

News organs assert their objectivity by requiring that journalists adopt an "impartial voice." Problematically, the impartial voice often disguises intentions and, as the Community for Concerned Journalists put it,

"creates a veneer covering something hollow. Journalists who select sources to express what is really their own point of view...[and who] use the neutral voice to

make it seem objective, are engaged in a form of deception." (CCJ, 2007)

### **Frame-free Coverage?**

The so-called "impartial voice" advances a more general deception, namely the notion that stories are being reported *free* of frames or angles. But clearly, as Rosen points out, journalists "talk about politics and public life" using frames which "are *very* identifiable and narrow": one popular frame sees everything *tactically* with an emphasis on prognostication, "winning and the game aspects of politics." (Rosen, 2001, p. 216). Other frames, neither announced nor explicit, weight toward certain economic interest groups and values; they emphasize selected stories while omitting others entirely. (Witness the breathless attention given to the stock market at the expense of, say, the poor.)

### **Upshot: Epistemic Effects**

Journalism, as a profession, believes that their use of these kinds of tropes licenses their claim to objectivity. As noted, such tropes warrant no such claim; looking at them pragmatically, we can see they have damaging practical effects.

First, they isolate journalists from their public; by claiming that they are *just* presenting the facts (in a frame free and impartial way), they are implicitly asserting they have a special claim to neutrality which others don't have. This both misleads the audience (the journalist *has* a perspective) and prevents real conversation about journalism and *its* values in the wider political culture. (See Rosen, 2001, p. 216)

Second, they elevate journalists to an unassailable position. Maintaining this position frequently requires the manufacture of "balance" in just about every arena debate exists—excluding, of course, the Holocaust or ethical implications of capitalism. Such "balance" is arranged by setting up a "discussion" between polarized extremes and then placing the (impartial and frameless) journalist in the *indispensable* center, the "authoritative middle ground between extremes." Again, this stagecraft sets the journalist apart and aggravates the estrangement between journalist and public.

There's a great danger here, for the journalist, of nihilism. By operating "professionally," journalists raise themselves above the various "sides." Increasingly, this position makes criticisms of them seem "partisan" and permit them to "devalue and deflect *all* criticism." From the standpoint of inquiry, this stance flirts dangerously with a kind of *a-priorism*, insulating them from correction by experience. (Foregoing quotations from Rosen, 1993)

### III. Alternative: Pragmatic Objectivity

What should take the place of journalistic objectivity? A different construal, "pragmatic objectivity," has been proposed by both historians and journalism scholars. Drawing upon Dewey and Peirce's pragmatism, they're pressing that objectivity be understood as a stance, a way of *doing* things, as in the phrase, "objectively speaking." To speak or think "objectively" is to inquire in an epistemically responsible way which enacts certain rules and virtues.

What are these rules and virtues? In his book "*Objectivity is Not Neutrality*," historian Thomas Haskell spells them out while identifying their roots in classical pragmatism. Reconstructing "objectivity" requires divorcing it from "neutrality" but *not* from fairness, honesty, or detachment.

You might wonder at the word "detachment." Yes, we need to think differently about "detachment." Detachment not in the form of monkish self-abnegation, but rather as a shorthand for a collection of epistemic virtues which discipline inquiry. Inquiry that "abandon[s] wishful thinking, assimilate[s] bad news, and discard[s] pleasing [but illogical] interpretations." Such detachment *assists* objectivity by coercing us to "suspend or bracket one's own perceptions long enough to enter sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspectives of rival thinkers." (Haskell, 1997, p. 60) By transcending our own parochial viewpoints we take others more seriously and enter into a wider, and possibly more efficacious community of inquiry. Note that Haskell is not calling for something novel or outré. Detachment is a capacity we use everyday—when we referee a journal article, grade a student's paper or coworker's report, or try to suspend judgment in a meeting. Such detachment, moreover, promotes not antiseptic neutrality but productive intellectual contact. The full flower of the exercise of this detachment is the stance or attitude I'm calling "pragmatic objectivity."

Similar pragmatic proposals from journalism scholars have come from James Carey, Michael Schudson, Jay Rosen, and Stephen Ward. Ward, mentioned earlier, has explicitly called for "pragmatic objectivity" arguing that "Without a thoughtful reform of objectivity we risk losing a much-needed ethical restraint on today's news media." (Ward, 2005, pp. 4, 5) According to Ward, journalistic "pragmatic objectivity" would utilize a *limited* kind of detachment--not one that attempts to bracket all emotions, perspectives, purposes, or values.

Still, suppose someone raises the following skeptical question: "Look, if journalists aren't supposed to be "neutral" and they *are* allow to operate with personal perspectives, purposes, and

values, then why isn't this just a slippery slope to relativism?"

The pragmatist can reply that epistemic detachment is still required. Moreover, the relativism threat is neutralized by re-framing the journalist's understanding of her "public." By seeing the public as Dewey did, as problem-centered, rather than as "a market for information, an audience for spectacle, or a pollster's random sample," journalism's essential nature would change. (Rosen, 2001, p. 75, my emphasis) In this shift, journalists would change both their methods and anchoring values. Pragmatic objectivity would direct journalists toward an engaged and *dialogical* relationship with the public, not one set apart by value-free impartiality. "Public journalism," Rosen writes, would "place the journalist *within* the political community as a responsible member with a *full stake* in public life." (Rosen, WAJF, 75, my emphasis) The journalist would come to understand "the public" as "an *achievement* of good journalism—its intended *outcome* rather than its assumed audience." (Rosen, 2001, p. 75, my emphasis) We might reasonably infer that this more interdependent and staked vision would disseminate, positively affecting the publics' own self-image.

#### IV. Conclusion: Democracy is an experiment

This talk has advanced several simple ideas. I'll conclude by connecting them.

**First, democracy is special because it is a CHALLENGE, an experiment in public inquiry.** A shared future is entrusted to those who can inquire together, with patience, with rigor, and with empathy; the inquiry is understood as *open*...open to improvisation and revision, as experience dictates.

**The second idea is that public inquiry demands certain attitudes and abilities.** Citizens must be able to inquire critically and experimentally, unchained from blind obedience to old formulas, laws, and classifications. Such attitudes and abilities are not spontaneous, but must be taught and modeled, especially by those in education and communication.

**Thus, the third idea understands journalism as a kind of teacher, one that models inquiry and bears a special responsibility to conduct inquiry for democratic ends.** Professional journalism's creed of "neutral objectivity" has failed to adequately model inquiry. Ironically, it has also failed to help journalists retain the public's respect. Too often, neutrality served as the excuse to pander to the dictates of entertainment; the public tunes in, expecting to learn something, and instead sees a pathetic pantomime of shouting matches, pseudo-debates, and an absence of context necessary to make sense of the subject matter.

**The final idea is that a reconstructed "pragmatic" objectivity can provide an alternative for journalism.** Not only could journalism reject neutral objectivity (and all its negatives), it could reconnect with the public.

In conclusion, I hope this example--the tension between two kinds of objectivity in journalism--provides us with an illustration of some of the practical implications and stakes of objectivity in an arena outside of philosophy. Because the discourses of journalists bears upon public inquiry and democratic life, we are all implicated in what develops, if not as philosophers, then as everyday human beings.

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<sup>1</sup> Material for this workshop talk adapted from several sources including a Public Philosophy Network talk "Journalism's Destructive Addiction to Fake Objectivity: How Dewey Can Help Journalists Re-connect with the Public Once Again" (2011), "Pragmatic Objectivity In History, Journalism And Philosophy," (Presidential Address, Southwest Philosophical Society), *Southwest Philosophy Review* 27:1 (2011).

<sup>2</sup> While this quotation comes from a website, identical portions can be found at Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 82. The Committee of Concerned journalists (CCJ) began as a task force of The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, but has been independent since July 2006. CCJ, based in Washington, D. C. , is affiliated with the University of Missouri School of Journalism and the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute.

<sup>3</sup> The journalism profession now says, instead, "seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues."