

## **Objectivity in Action: Journalism as an Epistemic Practice**

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### **Introduction: Crisis of Objectivity and Journalism**

In his 2010 paper “Pragmatic Objectivity in History, Journalism and Philosophy”, David Hildebrand stated that there is a “constant and practical need of discussing and debating what objectivity should – and should not be. The term is too important: practically, epistemically, and morally.”

This statement resonates especially loudly for journalism, if we still – in these times of “crisis in journalism” – accept at least the sterling variants of journalistic reporting and analysis of events and actions to retain significance in a democracy of well-informed citizens (cf. Fuller 2010; Glasser et al. 2009)<sup>1</sup>. We probably should, because “[s]ince the introduction of radio and television news, journalism has gone through multiple transformations, but each time it has been sustained by a commitment to basic values and best practices” (Meyers 2010, vii). From this point of view, journalism is also an interesting epistemic practice for studying and developing a pragmatist conception of objective knowledge (Hildebrand 2010; Ward 2004).

However, some of the more critical philosophical takes on objectivity, most notoriously advocated by the fellow pragmatist Richard Rorty (1991; 1982), have called for the abolition of the whole concept. The philosophical reasons for getting rid of objectivity vary from epistemological disbelief in the plausibility of its philosophical characterizations to ethical and ideological concerns regarding the potentially authoritarian connotations of the concept. The idea of objectivity has been widely criticized in a similar vein in journalism studies (see e.g. Gillmor 2005; Poerksen 2011).

While journalistic objectivity has been subject to charges of naïve realism relating to dichotomies between subject and object, fact and value, etc., it has been criticized for being too demanding an ideal. Allegedly, it sets superficially strict standards that forbid viewpoints, analysis and interpretation, and it is considered anti-democratic due to its insistence on sidelining opinions while adhering to non-biased factuality (Ward 2010, 144–145; 2004).

Thus, journalistic objectivity is either rejected for pretending to present a “non-perspectival perspective”, or journalism is accused of doing just that philosophically impossible thing (see Nagel 1986; Putnam 1990).

These philosophical and practical objections to journalistic objectivity should not, however, be taken lightly. The relativist challenges to objectivity, put forward from the “constructionist” school of thought and summarized as the doctrine of “equal validity”, could have significant consequences for society as a whole (Boghossian 2006, 5)<sup>2</sup>. As relativism has spread from universities to newsrooms, the epistemic culture of journalism is going through a conceptual change that is bound to have profound effects on the democratically relevant knowledge-seeking enterprise, with its various practical forms. Indeed, objectivity has already been replaced by many journalists and journalistic organizations with the alternative ideals of “fairness”, “balance”, “neutrality” and “transparency” (See e.g. Knowlton & Freeman 2005; Overholser 2004).

As the preconditions for journalism’s survival are generally considered to be the practice’s *trustworthiness* and its consequent *credibility*, it’s worth taking a critical look on the above-mentioned alternative norms – before arguing that trustworthiness and credibility, indeed, require epistemic objectivity (see Meyers 2010).

## Insufficiency of the Substitute Norms

When journalistic objectivity is reduced to “balanced” or “neutral” reporting, the active quest for truth – or “what really happened” – disappears from the journalistic agenda: among the many voices in a pluralistic world, the journalist following these epistemic norms will end up reporting mutually disagreeing voices (usually, though, polarizing them into two opposing views) without having to go through the trouble of finding out which one of the views is perhaps better supported by argument or evidence (cf. Rosen 2000).

Similar problems arise with the norm of “non-bias” that also presumes a non-perspectival “view from nowhere” (Nagel 1986; cf. Putnam 1990). These norms require that all takes on reality appear to be “equally valid” – or are at least journalistically represented as such – in spite of any objections based reason, evidence or sense of justice (Kaplan 2010, 29–35). Thus, by obeying the standards of neutrality, balance and non-bias, journalism acts as a mirror of global cacophony with no philosophical justification for this passive role.

“The spectator theory of knowledge”, criticized by Dewey for its unrealistic abstractness, comes to mind.

The main problem with “fairness” – let alone Fox News’s advertising its coverage as “fair & balanced” – is the epistemic vagueness of the concept. Often, fairness contradicts neutrality and balance: two opposing views might be expressed by two parties with immense differences in their respective economic, political or social status, in which case it would be unfair to represent them as equals (McChesney 2004; c.f. Taylor 2011).

As for “transparency”, it easily reduces, as an epistemic goal, knowledge into mere information. An example is Wikileaks that has, however, mostly subjected its information to journalistic assessment before publication. This satisfies the ethical norm of “responsibility”, but doesn’t that contradict “transparency”?

The so called “data journalism” of the internet era, it must be noted, does not mean (or should not mean, according to journalistic standards) data as journalism, but the plentitude of data as journalism’s material.

The common problem in all of the ideals considered thus far from “neutrality” to “transparency” is that they are insufficient alone, or even together, as normative guidelines for journalistic knowledge. This is a professional shortcoming in journalism, eroding its trustworthiness and credibility. The philosophical weaknesses of these norms come into view when they are examined in the wider context of the epistemic practice of journalism and in relation to the epistemic norm of objectivity.

Against this background, a new conception of *pragmatic objectivity* has been outlined to facilitate the incorporation of the epistemically and ethically relevant norms among these alternative ideals as normative parts of a method for acquiring journalistic knowledge. In the more general pragmatist context they are treated as normative epistemic tools, as opposed to these norms being epistemic goals of journalism, i.e. its ideals or aims of inquiry (Ward 2010; 2004; for other sketches of pragmatic objectivity see e.g. Haskell 1998; Hildebrand 2010; Ward 2004; Newell 1986 cf. Moser 1993; Pihlström 2003; Rescher 1997).

In this paper, the focus will not be on the media-technological or on the related economic aspects of the “crisis of journalism”; journalism being a medium-dependent form of communication, it has been changing throughout its existence as an epistemic practice providing knowledge of current affairs.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the paper will outline a context in which the epistemological questions of journalism could be answered in pragmatist terms. As for the “relativist menace” troubling journalism studies, a brief sketch will be drawn at the end.

## Journalism against the Four Senses of Objectivity

The common misunderstanding about journalism and the related norms stems from a confusion of its three aspects (Rupar 2010). Firstly, journalism means the representation of reality in descriptive or explanatory reports, i.e. the journalistic product such as a news clip or an editorial assessment. Secondly, journalism as an epistemic practice is representation as action, i.e. the activity of news gathering and story construction in accordance with certain epistemic standards and ethical norms (see Ward 2004). Thirdly, journalism is an institution with a role in “the construction of social reality”, i.e. as part of Popper’s “world 3” (Searle 1995).<sup>4</sup>

At the outset, this kind of threefold characterization of journalism seems to support the constructionist, or antirealist, understanding of journalistic knowledge. Surely, the journalistic product is human construction and the journalistic institution is social construction. Furthermore, the activity of journalistic representation is a social practice in which knowing includes human perspectives and human interpretation (Ward 2010, 145). This suggests constructionism, that knowing is done by using various conceptual schemes, and seems to play into the hands of the opponent: journalism is constructed both epistemologically (as a conceptual activity) and ontologically (as an epistemic product and institution), so it is difficult to think of it non-relativistically.

Before facing relativism by outlining a pragmatist notion of objectivity, it is useful to present a classification of four (4) interlocking senses of objectivity. The purpose of this introduction is to provide a context and a reference point for the later delineation of pragmatic objectivity in relation to other notions of objectivity.

Allan Megill’s (1994) multidisciplinary taxonomy of four senses of objectivity combines theory and practice in a way convenient for pragmatist assessment. The first type, the “absolute or philosophical sense of objectivity”, is familiar to pragmatists as objectivism (Bernstein 1983), representationalism (Rorty 1991) or realism (Hildebrand 2003). The idea is that all subjective factors should be excluded from knowledge in order for it to be faithful to reality alone as it is in itself. Its proponents want to have universal validity for their knowledge claims. However, it is plausible only normatively, not methodologically, since there can be unachievable aims of inquiry but no perspectiveless views, those perfectly neutral “views from nowhere”.

Due to constructionist, or antirealist, criticism toward the absolute sense of objectivity, authoritative validity for knowledge claims has been sought, instead, within different institutional social groups. Megill calls this second type “the disciplinary sense of objectivity”, and stresses its importance in the post-Kuhnian world of academic research (presumably reductionist physicists excluded). The doctrine of “equal validity” doesn’t fully apply to disciplinary objectivity since the paradigm-relative particularity of these inquiries still allows for a temporary and “proximate convergence of accredited inquirers within a given field” (Megill 1994, 5). It would be nice to categorize journalism thus, but as an epistemic practice it has no “discipline” of this kind – quite the contrary, the claims made in journalism, especially in news, most often call for universal validity.

The third type is called “the dialectical sense of objectivity”, with which Megill refers to the only type of objectivity whose adherents are willing to acknowledge the subjective contribution of the inquirer to the inquiry. His tracing the history of this sense of objectivity to “mental objects” and their “constitution” can be misleading; the real point is the emphasis on the active and dialectical process of knowledge-seeking; the recognition of knowledge as doing and acting, and of the interaction between the knower and the known.<sup>5</sup> This is the sense closest to the pragmatist conception of inquiry as knowledge-seeking in general (ibid, 8).

The fourth and final sense of objectivity is “procedural” and hence practical yet “impersonal” in character. Megill calls it an application of dialectical objectivity, a “rule-bound mode of action” that attempts to expel all subjectivity including all views and actions from interpretation and selectivity to artistry and “judgment itself”. In procedural objectivity, of which bureaucracy is an example, “[t]he rules provide an alternative to

personal judgment”. Epistemic values “true” and “best” are now replaced by “fair” or “correct”. (Ibid. 11.) Like the other three conceptual senses of objectivity, the procedural one overlaps with the others in practice.

### **Journalism among the Four Senses of Objectivity**

Despite the philosophical lightness of the above-mentioned categorization, journalistic objectivity can now be studied in relation to the four types of objectivity – before outlining the pragmatist outlook on objectivity.

The absolute sense of objective, as said, is not forbidden as an unattainable goal of journalistic inquiry any more than any other ideal is: one can strive for it in spite of the fact it is humanly impossible to actually achieve it. In journalistic practice, however, the belief in the attainability of absolute objectivity, not any less than the current belief in “neutrality” or “non-bias”, can only be held at the expense of trustworthiness and credibility. Why so? Failing to achieve a publicly set goal tends to erode people’s faith in the capacities of the operator.

As for the disciplinary sense of objectivity, regardless of the reservations mentioned earlier, there is a certain parallel between it and journalism as an institution. So called serious journalists are committed to a set of professionally shared values and epistemic norms, albeit journalism is not a disciplinarily closed professional practice such as medicine and law. In the absence of a neutral view (a view from nowhere), the sought for epistemic authority in journalism, trustworthiness and credibility, is attributed to particular news producers (certain newspapers, channels and websites of high quality) rather than according to medium of transmission.

For example, many consider the New York Times to be more credible than the Daily Mail, and the BBC to be more trustworthy than Fox News. Variation in epistemic standards, thus, does not seem to be medium-relative, pace McLuhan’s idea of “the medium as the message”. Rather, each medium is a tool: smart-phones with their apps are used to distribute real-time information from crisis zones as well as racist propaganda.<sup>6</sup>

The dialectical sense of objectivity, with its take on knowledge as doing and acting in the world rather than just viewing it, comes closest to the holistic account of pragmatic objectivity that will be outlined in the next section of this paper. For now, suffice it to say that this is the most relevant sense epistemologically among the four, recalling that the absolute sense of objectivity could also be argued to be a part of it (see footnote 5). However, holism means taking into account the epistemic practice as a whole, including the final sense of objectivity.

The procedural sense of objectivity could be incorporated into the practice of journalism in terms of the impersonal routines, i.e. the practical collective rule-following, with which journalistic communities attempt to “expel subjectivity”, “through the imposition of constraints intended to limit the exercise of personal judgment” (Megill 1994, 10-11). There are correct and incorrect ways to cover a news event, and the regular editorial meetings, the fact-checking desks and proof-reading processes are routines for ensuring correctness.

The setting of the day’s news agenda and the critical assessment of yesterday’s news coverage are not, pace Megill, procedures “untouched by human hand”, but neither are his (bureaucratic) rules as “alternatives to personal judgment” – the rules are most certainly human-made. Nevertheless, their practical significance for epistemic practices mustn’t be overlooked: “In a situation where values are in conflict and consensus elusive, such rules may well be the only thing that permits agreed-upon public action to continue at all (ibid. 11).”

In the next section of this paper, such rules and normatively more binding disciplinary rules will be studied as parts of the holistic knowledge-seeking process of journalism that can also be called pragmatic objectivity.

It is because of the 1) impossibility of absolute objectivity and 2) insufficiency of the alternative ideals (neutrality, balance, etc.) as goals of journalistic inquiry that journalism needs a pragmatist conception of objectivity. “Pragmatic objectivity” draws together the vital norms of the alternative ideals but strips them of their status as goals – instead putting them in their places as parts of the epistemic practice in which an objective stance of the knowledge-seeking agent is supported by certain epistemic standards and methods.

### **Philosophical Context for Pragmatic Objectivity**

In his outline for pragmatic objectivity, Hildebrand (2010) employs recent pragmatist takes on objectivity both in historiography (Haskell 1998) and “its first draft”, i.e. journalism (Ward 2004). In this paper, the focus will be on journalism in order to evaluate the philosophical significance of the account sketched by Stephen J.A. Ward. The “practical starting point” shared by both accounts, though, must be acknowledged: “what truth requires is not unassailable foundations but self-correcting social processes” (Haskell 1998, 10), and to “reserve the word ‘real’ for that which precedes all mediating influences [...] is to play games with words, transforming ‘reality’ from that which all need to know and some know better than others, into something that no one either could know or has any need to know” (ibid. 3). (See Hildebrand 2003, 4–7.)

Ward’s strategy for developing “a redefinition of objectivity so that it is appropriate for the journalism of today and the foreseeable future” is “to follow Dewey by applying the conceptual inventiveness of philosophy to redefine epistemic notions surrounding the problem of journalism objectivity” (Ward 2004, 261, 271). He starts by dividing the objectivity question into 1) ontological, 2) epistemic and 3) procedural.

Ontological objectivity concerns facts, the accuracy and factuality of journalistic descriptions of events, and – in Ward’s epistemologically innocent jargon – includes notions of truth, mind-independence and correspondence (Ward 2010, 138–139). However, his approach becomes more plausible in pragmatist terms when studied from the epistemic viewpoint, from which objective beliefs should be “well-grounded on *evidence* and unbiased *methods* of inquiry; satisfying *the best methods* and *standards* of verification” (ibid. italics mine).

As for procedural objectivity, Ward’s sense is less rigorous than that of Megill’s, including procedures in non-theoretical public areas of life such as law and government, but also activities demanding objective criteria like “marking exams, hiring and promoting employees, procedures for settling disputes” (ibid.).

The holistic approach makes Ward’s objectivity pragmatic: “One’s beliefs are ontologically objective – correspond to the real – if they were formed by epistemically objective methods. Also, procedures arrive at correct decisions if they are based on facts that satisfy epistemically objective standards (ibid.).”

The philosophical, i.e. pragmatist, context for outlining pragmatic objectivity is, in this paper, summarized as an attempt to avoid (at least radical) relativism by emphasizing a naturalist approach to both ontological and epistemological questions. Humans are natural agents in a natural, including cultural, environment, coping in there by, among other means, making judgments about that environment. Judgments are susceptible, in the pragmatist spirit of fallibilism, to the concrete resistance of the physical reality in which the agents operate as well to the normative evaluation of their peers – institutional or not, they had better be rational (see Rescher 1988).

A particular group of peers using a mutual understood language can be philosophized into the notion of *conceptual scheme* without losing the game to the relativist (Lynch 2009; 1998). Despite the conceptual context in which beliefs and judgments are made and uttered (moves made in a language game, if you will,

self-reflection included), they are always constrained by causal forces and the social-normative (linguistic, if you will) rationality of the environment.

In this context, the idea of pragmatic objectivity at its most basic form is this: pragmatic objectivity requires 1) an objective stance or attitude of detachment by the epistemic agent, and 2) correct method, including a set of guiding epistemic criteria and reliable procedures of knowledge-seeking (cf. Megill above). These two aspects of pragmatic objectivity will be investigated in the final section of this paper.

As a teaser, compare Nagel's (1986) method for objectivising a viewpoint to that of the American poet Karl Shapiro, who wrote his autobiography in the "fourth person", "because it's the poet standing outside himself looking at all those other people [and the rest of the world], which include him" (Phillips 1986).

### **Pragmatic Objectivity: the Stance and the Method**

Nagel's (1986) strategy for objectivity is a gradual distancing or detaching oneself from one's original viewpoint in order to include both that viewpoint and its object in a new, more objective viewpoint. For Ward, the objective stance means "intellectual virtues such as willingness to place a critical distance between oneself and the story, to be open to evidence and counterarguments, to fairly represent other perspectives, and to be committed to the disinterested pursuit of truth for the public as a whole" (Ward 2010, 146–147).

It is questionable, can Nagel's way of conceiving objectivity be called a naturalistically defensible "stance" in its attempt to reach the "fourth person" mode of thinking (see e.g. Pihlström 1996). In any case, a detached or "objectivized" viewpoint is still a viewpoint, and requires methodological support to pass as objectivity.

Before studying the methodological side of pragmatic objectivity, it's worth comparing the pragmatically objective stance to the conception of traditional, or "philosophical", objectivity. The idea of an objective stance, by acknowledging the pluralism of conceptual schemes, implies that certain criteria of traditional, or "absolute", sense of objectivity should be rejected. Being a "stance", the objective stance does not allow for neutrality as a non-perspectival viewpoint. As a method, pragmatic objectivity not only includes but insists on interpretation being an unavoidable yet essential ingredient of epistemic inquiry. Interpretation, not unlike Dewey's "experience", is the habit or means for humans to know about the world; interpretative experience being the specifically human way of coping with the environment; norms being incorporated in social action.

As said above with reference to judgment-making, interpretation is constrained causally and normatively. The pluralism of conceptual schemes is, in this respect, not only philosophically exaggerated in relativist terms but also democratically abused by restraining journalists from employing objectivity in practice.

Knowledge is a process of active perception and verification (Dewey 1958, 154). Epistemic inquiry, such as journalism, allows for objective interpretations when it employs a method based on criteria independent of untested hypothesis and irrational, i.e. argumentatively unsupported, epistemic norms (cf. Newell 1986, 27).

Interpretations and arguments are critically tested against these criteria, which are not immune to criticism either, in different practical and conceptual contexts with methods and standards proven, so far, to be the best for aiming at truthful, e.g. journalistic, accounts of events and actions. The holistic process of journalistic interpretation of them includes 1) *acquiring* (searching, selecting, evaluating), 2) *testing* (verifying, falsifying, criticizing) and 3) *presenting* (writing, depicting, twittering) knowledge (cf. Ward 2004, 264).

Instead of being passive representation of events and actions, journalism with the stance and the method of pragmatic objectivity is active describing and explaining of them in epistemic practice (see Ward 2010; cf.

Ward 2004, 261–316). Whether the epistemic (journalistic) agent is an editorial community or a solitary citizen journalist, her objective stance combined with the norm-governed method<sup>7</sup> helps her bring things out of obscurity, interpret them rationally and explain complex events and phenomena, summarizing the essential. Journalistic inquiry hence moves towards judgments better supported by evidence and argument (ibid.). This serves journalism and its audiences by providing them with more trustworthy, more credible information.

To conclude, the melioristic double-aim of the project of developing a conception of pragmatic objectivity can be expressed by the dead metaphor of “a two-way street”:

- 1) Journalism as an epistemic practice can be studied to outline a pragmatist account of objectivity.
- 2) This account of objectivity could, then, be adopted by journalists to apply it in epistemic action.

As an interdisciplinary bonus, pragmatism with its contributions to the on-going conversation on objectivity and the idea of journalism as a norm-governed epistemic practice could also provide answers to the main problems of *journalism studies*. They have been summarized to include a) the lack of a general conceptual framework for the study of journalism, b) unwillingness to give up the artificial dichotomy between theory and practice, and c) the difficulty of defining journalism as an independent practice (Rupar 2010, 10).

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1 For a fuller discussion on the purpose of journalism, its historically and politically grounded social function, and the journalistic values that emerge from these, see Elliot & Ozar (2010).

2 Similar worries about the relativist doctrine have been expressed in the philosophy of history: “When the push comes to shove, I am convinced, it is the villains who have the most to gain by truth’s demise” (Haskell 1998, 10). Cf. the idea according to which facts cannot be separated from fiction without objective standards, as a consequence of which the question ‘What should I believe?’ will be answered with brute force (Bouveresse 2010; Russell 1961). Also, assertability, essential to public discourse, is meaningful only if assertions can be evaluated against objective criteria to be true or untrue, correct or incorrect (Rosat 2010).

3 On the history of journalistic objectivity, see e.g. Kaplan 2010; Schudson 1990; Ward 2004.

4 Journalistic institution is here seen as the social-normative context in which journalists practice their trade, whereas democratic society is the wider context for the journalistic institution. Democracy is thereby taken as a theoretical given since free and independent, i.e. functional, press is unthinkable outside a democratically organised social system with freedom of speech and other basic rights in order. However, according to Hildebrand (2010), “pragmatic objectivity” requires a theory of democracy.

5 Megill suggests, by stressing the active character of the rational knowing subject that, presuming here that knowing is based on Kantian universal categories, “one might even see absolute objectivity as a special case of dialectical objectivity, requiring the construction of a particular *sort* of knowing [Kantian / universally equipped] subject”.

6 As an introduction to journalism as an epistemic practice and the notion of pragmatic objectivity to come: “Mainstream media has held the status of trustworthiness because it has insisted on *methods* and *processes* that merited it (Meyers 2010, viii)” (italics mine).

7 There are at least three levels of norms followed by journalists: 1) the juridical ones (i.e. laws), 2) the profession-specific ethical and epistemic norms (quite similar in different countries) and 3) the publication-specific news standards. In addition to these, the editorial routines of newsrooms are of course norm-governed human activities.

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