

# Post-truth and the Journalist's Ethos

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## Introduction

Determining what precisely constitutes “news” is challenging. One reason for this is that the social mechanisms involved in that constitution are often ignored or misunderstood. On a basic level, the news is often seen as certain construal of a sequence of events, packaged in such a way as to be interesting and intelligible, and, importantly, identifiable as news. Even if the ideal of neutrality remains at the core of journalism, values and convictions are unavoidable in the selection and prioritization of material. Moreover, there are issues of capacity and impact, i.e., that are must be taken into consideration in any discussion of the role of mass media (Peters 2017a). An accurate reporting of events may well avoid explicit ethical assessments, but it cannot help but depend on judgments about what is out of the ordinary (“newsworthy”) or significant. Thus, a given report of events can be both true and factual, at the same time as the choice to report those events is born out of interests having to do with a political agenda, or, more likely, an economic one on behalf of the publisher. But the picture becomes more complicated and the issue of objectivity more complex with the advent of the Internet, social media, and the like. Here, one is tempted to rely on method is evidence of good practice with respect to neutrality. In other words, the aim of objective reporting, even if it is always inevitably a matter of negotiating between competing functions of journalism, must remain a core value (Berry 2016). Ethical norms are thus an essential component of routine journalism. At the same time, reporting is not merely a reflection of occurrences and tendencies in society, but also an important influence on those events and movements (Mihăilă et al. 2016). The public, monitoring the main topics in the press, becomes cognizant of their collective and opposing values. In and through journalism, a society disputes how to restructure its organizations (Lăzăroiu 2010a) and confront the

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future. The vitality of the public realm of the postindustrial society is directly affected by the caliber of its media and the expertise of its journalists. Democratic self-governance relies on organized form of relaying events accurately to the public. Thus, the question of objectivity or neutrality ultimately involves the issue of how journalists are trained, since they produce narratives that shape the public realm. Accuracy, comprehensiveness, neutrality, and autonomy are considered normative standards essential to that training (Ward 2015).

## Journalistic Norms and Social Relevance

The ethic of impartiality is a benchmark of good journalism. It affects the character of reporting and regulates the professional performance. But the ideal of objectivity is concretized in different ways. The traditional focal point of impartiality in journalism is the narration of facts; this focus assumes a given perspective on the world and a truthful approach to the representation and communication of facts. This perspective has been fragmented by online platforms, and the multiplicity of forms that it engenders. News blogs and citizen journalism have brought about a reassessment of objectivity as an approach to managing facts, and even as a norm for truthfulness, in an ever-changing setting of variegated usage and consumption (Maras 2013). The question is, then, whether there can or should be generally accepted means of control and, if so, according to which criteria?

The goal of objectivity functions as a mechanism of rational self-control within journalism understood as a pragmatic enterprise. The duties tied to the virtue of neutrality emerge out of agreements. Thus, to identify the responsibilities of journalism is to seek agreement on the appropriate standards for regulating the social routine of journalism. The social contract between the public and the publicist requires journalists to be neutral and autonomous in their work. Traditional journalism is the systematized, socially established undertaking of communicating to the audience, from the detached view of the public good. The newsperson's function is to endeavor to differentiate, amid the dispute of opinions and positions (Lăzăroiu 2010a), what is consistent and accurate and how such pieces of information may impact the public good. Journalism is then the distribution and evaluation of the most relevant facts for an independent polity. Trust, integrity, and consistency are the foundation of this connection (Ward 2015).

By its very nature, the news aims at the novel or extraordinary. In that respect, the news is inherently relative to the status quo. When retelling the course of events, the journalist recreates that course on the basis of subsequent conversations, observations, and/or retrieval of documents. Best practice requires that quotations or secondhand information are corroborated according to standard source criticism. Thus, the further disconnected the reporter is from the occurrence reported, the

greater the responsibility for him to follow assiduously the norms constituting “objective reporting”. Proper acknowledgment must be granted to opposing perspectives. Fact-checking is a precondition, especially for the numerous narratives that do not constitute breaking news. The perceived legitimacy of established media outlets would be considerably enhanced if, when sifting through the evidence in their reporting, journalists standardized their selection of authorities and made sure that their sources are not only perceived as reliable sources of information but also see to it that they convey what makes their testimony authoritative (Goldstein 2007).

Journalism is in the end a matter of how journalists reconcile, conceive, and interpolate events and issues, i.e., in how they constitute an intelligible order, on the basis of which the public understands the occurrences in question. In this sense, journalists have a role in establishing apprehensions, propensities, and objectives in the minds of the public. One could say that in clarifying the world in terms of the agenda they set and the order they make, they tell the public who it is. Journalists serve as an elucidatory community (Lăzăroiu 2011a), supplying information and explanations, within particular routines and established practices, which then become integral to the public's interpretation of events. Thus, the public is indirectly but powerfully influenced by the nature of the norms and routines that journalists follow. As targets of attempts to shape news on the basis of particular interests, agendas on the part of media organizations to generate material according of a certain length and in given subject categories stipulated by the owners, etc., the work of journalists is mired in potential conflicts of interest and values. The need for a scoop may lead to a disregard of the requirement to check sources, for instance. Decisions regarding reliability of sources, consistency of information, and news values may have to be made swiftly (Sanders 2003).

Journalism has an underexploited capacity to shore up the status of seeking the truth as a starting point for political discussion (Lăzăroiu 2017). The best way of doing this would be to look for stories that are relevant for the public without merely following the dictates of novelty, economic, or political interests. Rather, the goal would be to turn the tables on established truisms, by bringing to the public eye perspectives and situations that force people to question what they take for granted. The ideal here is to give the audience occasion not merely to scrutinize “power”, but also to scrutinize themselves, and their own position. Importantly, this approach may at times require that the journalist himself detach himself from his own self-understanding. It may require, for instance, that he reconfigure his own assumptions about what is important, significant, interesting, or relevant in pursuit of the truth. In the relentless quest for truth, objectivity may require new practices, especially given the new media landscape (Blank-Libra 2017).

## The Quest for Truthfulness and the Vagueness of Factual Accuracy

The core question regarding ethics in journalism concerns both production, i.e., approaches to the collection of information, and the manner in which news is shaped for use. To address this question seriously means looking closely at the system of duties and privileges involved in the task. Media ethics is a field developed to address the decline of criteria and the adverse of impact that an unregulated commercial market may have on the press. Journalists need to be made aware of their setting, position, and challenges in the production of news (Lăzăroiu 2011b). Market-driven journalism is grounded on commercial priority rather than professional norms like consequence neutrality, or ethical considerations, such as fairness. Hence, there is a personal moral issue at stake for the journalist, who is at one and the same time engaged in an effort to do well by his paper or journal, and, at the same time, follow the ethics of journalism as a calling (Berry 2016).

Journalism ethics deals with how criteria and values actually affect the complex routine of the press. Journalism produces factual material and establishes views that become components of a social debate that affects public policy. News is used as evidence by various interests and as information by individuals. Journalists are both investigators struggling to find out the truth regarding events, and communicators involved in the discussion. Thus, the journalist is both agent and effect of the system of dissemination of information; his work both influences and is influenced by it. The role of the individual journalist, his professional ethos, demands that he assist in making the dispute on public matters as sound, comprehensive, and impartial as possible, i.e., his role is to elucidate what the issues are, account for different perspectives, and investigate questionable assertions (Nica 2017). He should unmask and combat the forces that stage-manage public discussion, and be a useful instrument in a society's examination of its disorders. Finally, he should expedite the delayed arrival of crucial insights and valuable information. But, as was noted, investigation and assessment in journalism take place in the framework of an economic reality and a media-imbued infosphere, where self-interest, unwarranted beliefs, and group advocacy are the context in which these high aims are to be achieved (Ward 2015).

Journalists have always depended greatly on gossip. If unfettered, the abuse of unsubstantiated information deprives the audience of the means to form well-founded opinions. The public may not be able to identify the source or judge the veracity of his testimony. It is often assumed that the initial answers to journalists' inquiries are more accurate than ones formulated after the interviewee has had the chance to reconsider his answers. For this reason, journalists often will not allow interview subjects to amend their opinions after the fact. At the same time, while this rule of thumb has its virtues, it also has its limitations. While the job of a journalist is to gather and double-check material to ensure credibility, the Internet has created public pressure to disseminate information before it is corroborated, since the latter is a time-consuming task and the social media incline toward

immediacy (Goldstein 2007). So while truth and accuracy are at the center of the journalistic undertaking, it is not clear that they can remain untouched by current demands. One way of dealing with this paradox is to acknowledge that numerous narratives may be constructed from the same information, assimilating a variable degree of truth. Thus, a journalist's activity entails a persistent conflict between cultivating trust (Mihăilă 2017) and preserving skepticism. While trust is the entire foundation upon which the reporting structure is established and legitimated, it can be allowed that a certain degree of suspicion is in order "as the story develops", in real time. But such reporting is only acceptable, again, where it is not invalidated by the goals of impartiality and exactness (Sanders 2003).

## **The Shifting Nature of Journalism and the Notion of Objectivity**

Ordering truthful accounts may involve levels and dissimilarities of representation. Inaccurate representations may be the outcome of (i) value judgments, assumptions, and stereotypes that deform messages intentionally or inadvertently; (ii) conscious efforts to establish an unsubstantiated public agenda and to influence public opinion; and (iii) failure to follow professional standards and procedures for investigation and reporting. In each case, the truth as the primary purpose of investigation and reporting is not undermined in principle, even if it is in fact. Objectivity remains the paragon value in an ethical attitude toward journalism: to be impartial is to satisfy ethical criteria that constitute the starting point of the profession (Berry 2016).

The classical ideal of journalism as a steady gathering of facts that commences as a clutter of unsubstantiated narratives or persuasive claims by unreliable sources is still alive. All first-rate journalism and reporting entail dynamic analysis, inspecting and construing, checking and questioning, comparing and assessing, and portraying and discerning. This may also be said of science and scholarship, but in the case of journalism, the preferred method of verification is a non-systematic *mélange* of good judgment, disbelief, and off-the-record rules that newsrooms adhere to with unsteady coherence. The ideal of professional journalism is thus a synthesis of an idealistic inclination, a fascination for stimulating narratives and meaningful disclosures (Lăzăroiu 2014), and a disposition toward unbiased thinking, i.e., the carefulness to double-check what the idealistic inclination discovers and to prove that it is impartial. The mechanism of truth-seeking in journalism, ideally, progressively removes incorrectness or misrepresentation from the preliminary accounts of events. The mechanism of truth-seeking works to separate fact from insinuation, detect bias, and focus on what is factual and relevant for the audience. But that means that journalists begin by assembling, combining, and reassessing facts, opinions, probabilities, conjectures, and background knowledge. Pragmatic

impartiality in journalism is nothing more than the attempt at a comprehensive, unreliable, balanced assessment of reports.

Nearly all journalists wish to achieve balance, even when the basic facts obviously point clearly in one direction. But harmonizing conflicting statements may not generate veracity. One does not come closer to the truth of the matter by reiterating falsehoods and inaccuracies as a matter of “opinion”. In the infosphere, among bloggers and on social media, likelihood is produced jointly (Peters 2016), not via a pecking order of fact-seekers and verifiers. The material may not be investigated before it is distributed, but it is dispersed through manifold perspectives. The blogging movement has persistently called into question the established values of journalism, which places the highest premium on objectivity. Blogging is determined considerably by the public’s appetite to cooperate, a craving that mainstream journalism was slow to realize (Goldstein 2007). Yet again, one might consider that this development is just an extension of practices that have been in place for years. Journalists integrate events into a narrative that is concluded and consolidated. This totality is assembled out of disorganized events. Pictures are frequently truncated, and television reports and documentaries employ reconstructions in which digital technology assists in stage-managing text and image. Staged shots and reconstructions constitute an established component of televisual language. The convenient utilization of televisual reconstruction (or falsification) is as much a part of traditional journalism (Lăzăroiu 2010b) as is unequivocal responsibility to truthfulness. The practices that have been developed around news reporting have the consequence that the pictures accompanying the material are not intended to be visual examples or samples of events. But what are they, then? Where distortion is unreservedly used and not indicated, visual messages lose their role of conveying facts or reliable information (Sanders 2003).

An objective journalist, responsible to the principle of truth (Popescu 2017), would be self-aware and self-critical about his use of word and image. In doing so, he could achieve a higher degree of impartiality by disproving conventions, performing crafty investigations to achieve contextual precision, and concentrating meticulously on the imbalances that disarrange society and the lives of individuals in it. An ethic of responsiveness tied to responsibility could be a facilitator of strong probity.

## Conclusions

Debating on the link between journalism and news necessitates a grasp of what signifies news and why it is significant for society’s democratic demands. Journalism is a social mechanism of conveying news and moderating their reporting through professional standards. In some cases, the focus on cool detachment actually leads to exaggeration, distortion, and even bias (Peters 2017b), as is witnessed by the critique of “old media” on the Internet for the latter’s lack of trustworthiness. The chief justification offered for fact-based news reporting is still and

always the notion that truth is the fundamental goal of journalism. News should perform a particular purpose: to supply the audience with trustworthy content on which informed appraisals concerning events may be formulated. The standard of objectivity is synonymous with the integrity of news organizations. Accomplishing balance is an ethical issue for the reporter, and intimately bound up with the quest for truth. But the news has an exchange value as well as a use value (Lăzăroiu 2012), for the consumer as well as for the producer. Half-truths based on uncorroborated gossip has less value on both scores (Berry 2016). Journalists participate in public life both as individuals with private agendas and as representatives for autonomous investigation of public matters. Journalism, as a profession, is a truth-directed kind of investigation. Objectivity is the gold standard for determining how satisfactorily the inquiry, and the narratives that it generates, conform to shared criteria for epistemic legitimacy. Fairness is an indispensable norm for trustworthy journalistic reporting (Lăzăroiu 2011c) in the public interest. But fairness is an ethical category, although in this case one tied to impartiality as the epitome of communicating knowledge without bias from a global position. Objective accounts, to be precise and unprejudiced, should comprise all significant sources and views. Global neutrality requires that the news media be more attentive and responsive to a global standpoint, and bring these considerations to the fore in their reporting decisions within a truly global news agenda (Ward 2015).

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