

Taking Pythagoras to Dinner, or, The Ethics of Journalistic Objectivity

Chris Larson, University of Central Florida

Abstract: In this paper, I argue that journalistic objectivity is an unethical epistemic approach to the realities that journalists report. Working from Carolyn Kitch's definition of objectivity and Edmund Lambeth's approach to journalism ethics, I argue that objectivity dehumanizes the deeply human objects that journalists seek to know and report, and is thus unethical. I then outline a potential alternative where the journalist seeks to create empathy in the reader for the life-experiences of other groups.

Examining the *telos*, or history, and practical function of major American institutions is not one of Twitter's strengths. Yet in the wake of an election season where the Press Secretary started his tenure debating the size of inauguration crowds and the media strung along a near-conspiracy regarding Kremlin collusion with the President of the United States, even simple social media sites like Twitter have taken up philosophical discussions of journalism ethics. One of the recurring questions within these discussions is this: is journalistic objectivity ethically desirable? In this paper, I examine this question and argue that journalistic objectivity is not ethically desirable. To prove this position, I will define journalistic objectivity, determine journalism's *telos*, and then examine whether objectivity moves journalism toward its *telos*.¹

Defining objectivity is a tricky task. Journalistic objectivity only came into vogue in the early twentieth century, and curiously arose as a tool to stand up for the socio-economically disadvantaged.² What, then, does journalistic objectivity involve? Carolyn Kitch defines the typical conception of journalistic objectivity as "unbiased, neutral, impartial, detached, balanced and invisible."³ Obviously not all of these qualities are wrong, but, as Hackett and Zhao point out, detachment is the key idea.

¹ For a defense of this ethical approach, please see Edmund B. Lambeth, "Waiting for a New St. Benedict: Alasdair MacIntyre & the Theory and Practice of Journalism," *Business & Professional Ethics Journal* 9, no. 1/2 (1990): 97-108.

² "Denouncing the partisan orientations of the established newspapers, the labour press proclaimed its own non-partisan, non-sectarian character...the labour press thus distinguished itself from the partisan and sectarian papers of religious, ethnic, and political factions by its adoption of the democratic discourse of the Enlightenment and its universalizing language. *This universalizing perspective can be seen as a precursor, indeed, an early version, of objectivity in journalism.* In their critique of the established press, labour journalists held up the ideal of *disinterested* – in other words, *objective* – knowledge as the only solid foundation for social reform." See Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, *Sustaining Democracy? Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity*, (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1998), 23.

³ Carolyn Kitch, "Rethinking Objectivity in Journalism and History," *American Journalism* 16, no. 2 (1999): 114.

“...In [this flawed] view, journalism’s ethical obligation is to reflect the real world, with accuracy, fairness, and balance. Journalists can separate facts from opinion or value judgments. Journalists, as detached observers, can stand apart from the real-world events and transfer the truth or meaning of those events to the news audience by employing neutral language and professionally competent reporting techniques, such as the standardized story format. Truth or knowledge depends upon the observer’s (journalist’s) neutrality in relation to the object of study. The news medium, when ‘properly used,’ is neutral and value-free and can thus guarantee the truthfulness of the message. The news can therefore potentially transmit an unbiased, transparent, neutral translation of external reality.”⁴

In this view, semi-scientific detachment is the approach and unfiltered transmittance of external reality is the goal. Objectivity is not just another way of saying accuracy or truthfulness—if it was, I would have no concerns with it. Objectivity is rather an epistemic method, an approach to reality that takes as its model some sort of impartial scientific observer, recording data as it comes in, without interpretation or comment.

With objectivity defined, we can now determine the *telos* of journalism, a task that, unfortunately, is much harder. To simplify, we can begin with Christopher Tollefsen who outlines the standard vision of journalism’s *telos*. For him, journalism is supposed to support “the autonomous participation of citizens in deliberation about the common good.”⁵ Yet even this may be too broad because it fails to account for journalism’s rather unique approach to supporting this deliberation.⁶ Journalism supports this deliberation not primarily by providing a forum for the exchange of viewpoints (like Facebook) or a way to communicate with elected officials (like the ACLU) but by supplying news and opinions. This uniqueness must be incorporated in an understanding of journalism’s *telos*.

Sandra L. Borden, recognizing these difficulties, proposes a different approach: “Journalism’s immediate goal is to create a special type of knowledge necessary for community members to flourish; journalists produce and disseminate this knowledge in the form of ‘news.’ The ultimate goal, or *telos* is to help citizens know well in the public sphere.”⁷ This *telos* takes into account the unique methods and products of journalism, as well as the current form of the profession. Of course, it raises an obvious question: what does it mean to “know well”? While a full-blown epistemology is impossible here, a short explanation may help.

Knowing well presupposes that the process of knowing is not ethically neutral. The realm of relationships best illuminates this. Knowing a person cannot and ought not be approached the way one might approach knowing quantum physics. If I were to begin

⁴ Hackett and Zhao, *Sustaining Democracy? Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity*, 111.

⁵ Christopher Tollefsen, “Journalism and the Social Good,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (2000): 296.

⁶ To be precise, the press provides a simplified and interpreted digest of what they deem to be relevant events in the world. Even this raises questions about the possibility of objectivity.

⁷ Sandra L. Borden, *Journalism as Practice: MacIntyre, Virtue Ethics and the Press*, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 50.

filling out binders, reports, papers, and tables with all the information I have about my girlfriend, it would be strange. If I then tried to run experiments by placing her in different situations or making certain comments just to generate her reaction (and therefore more data) that would be immoral. To approach her as an object, capable of being deconstructed into various facts, is not only epistemically ineffective but also inherently dehumanizing. Conversely, if I were to study the Pythagorean theorem by trying to have a conversation about its childhood, I would be violating the nature of the thing itself. Knowing is not graded pass/fail, as if each object is either known or not known, full stop.⁸ Knowing admits of degrees and proper epistemic approaches. The fact that these two examples represent two different kinds of knowledge is precisely the point. Because there are different kinds of knowledge, one must take the proper epistemic approach. Taking the wrong approach is not only ineffective but dehumanizing (treating my girlfriend like a scientific object, for example). Thus, an ethical epistemic approach is necessary. To use the wrong epistemic approach is unethical (again, see the examples in this paragraph).

At this point it seems we have traveled far from journalistic objectivity but we have actually established the key premises that will give us our conclusion. To recap: we are examining the ethics of journalistic objectivity in contrast to journalistic embeddedness and subjectivity. Thus, we first defined objectivity as primarily neutral, semi-scientific detachment. Then, we determined that journalism's *telos* is to help the public know well which includes, in part, using an ethical epistemic approach. Now we must determine whether journalistic objectivity is an ethical epistemic method for the things journalists write about.

What objects do journalists seek to know and report? Journalists report on complex events that are an irreducible confluence of social, scientific, and historical factors. Any given newsworthy situation is impossible to fully parse because it is deeply human. There is a "cognitive opacity"⁹ to these situations whereby our best explanations are but heuristics of a reality that one must experience to understand. This last point is crucial. These situations are complex not primarily because they involve lots of facts (the way special relativity does) but because they are deeply human. To recall our two examples above, journalists write about things much more like my girlfriend than like the Pythagorean theorem. They write about subjects that involve, affect, are interpreted, shaped, moved, defined, and presented by humans. Think of foreign policy as an obvious example. Foreign policy decisions are presented by government agencies, interpreted by generals, implemented by soldiers, and harm or help combatants. Journalists rely on front-line reports, statements, anonymous leaks, and third-party analysis to write stories about these decisions. Certainly journalists can (and should) fact-check, but how does a journalist fact-check? Almost always by relying on another person to interpret or confirm an interpretation of the situation. There are no discreet propositions floating around in external reality waiting for journalists to grab and condense them into a story. There are, instead, deeply human, personal interactions built on relationships of trust, suspicion, and authority.

⁸ The fact that knowing is not an all-or-nothing endeavor is key to this argument. One might say that I actually can know something about my girlfriend by filling out tables about her, but at the very least such an approach would render deeply misconstrued and incomplete knowledge. I am skeptical that it would render any real knowledge at all.

⁹ Stephen J. A. Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics: The Path to Objectivity and Beyond*, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2004), 273.

Journalism's source is these relationships and interactions. One does not know Near Eastern foreign policy the way one knows the Pythagorean theorem. One knows Near Eastern foreign policy in a way far similar to the way one knows another person. One relies on the experiences of another person and their own experiences to know foreign policy, just like they do when trying to know another person. This is crucial—the key to knowing well in these cases is experiencing the situation being reported.

Given that these are the subjects journalists report on, is objectivity an ethical epistemic method? I believe it is not. Objectivity fails to recognize the inherent humanity and complexity of these situations. It does this by supposing that one can simply look into these situations, determine the relevant facts, causes, and contexts, and record this in a detached way. But how does one record the relative trustworthiness of a source? Is Sarah Huckabee Sanders trustworthy on healthcare policy? Ask a room full of journalists that and you will get a deeply divided group. How does a journalist in a detached and neutral way reach out to her inside source? How does a front-line journalist determine, in a detached way, whether the child maimed in the drone strike is a relevant part of the story? Objectivity is a mismatched and unethical epistemic method that treats deeply human situations in a dehumanizing, semi-scientific way.

What about truth? What about knowledge? Are these impossible? Far from it. In fact, my argument here stems from a deep commitment to truth, but not truth conceived in a pseudo-Enlightenment fashion, as a series of discreet propositions waiting to be detachedly recorded. Some truths are like that, but as I argued above, not the truths journalists seek to help the public know. Jim Willis summarizes my argument well:

“in the strictest sense of the term...objectivity is an extreme that can never be realized in the telling of a story unless the object—and not the reporter—tells it itself. And if the object is a human, then the same subjectivity enters in.”¹⁰

My argument is that journalists seek to tell stories about humans or deeply human phenomena. Thus, just like scientific detachment is the wrong epistemic approach to knowing my girlfriend, it is an unethical epistemic approach here. I am, in a sense, biting the bullet this question presents. Much of the discussion surrounding journalistic objectivity assumes the dangers of journalistic subjectivity and embeddedness. And, certainly, these methods have not been perfected and will not be. But the dangers of journalistic objectivity are far greater, for the danger is dehumanization—treating human subjects in a scientifically detached way. Objectivity is not an ethically desirable journalistic method. Avoiding objectivity and embracing subjectivity does not jettison truth or abandon the quest for reality. Rosalind Coward actually argues the opposite, and uses the example of wartime journalism: “What actually conveys the true horror [of war] is not impartial description but how it affects the person who observes it. Arguably, this is a more truthful account than a record of events delivered by a detached individual.”¹¹ What she writes

¹⁰ Jim Willis, *The Human Journalist: Reporters, Perspectives, and Emotions*, (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 45-46.

¹¹ Rosalind Coward, *Speaking Personally: The Rise of Subjective and Confessional Journalism*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 31.

about wartime journalism I would extend to journalism generally. It is possible that journalistic objectivity may, unwittingly, render a less truthful account of reality than a competing subjective report.

What is the alternative to journalistic objectivity? In short, it is a form of subjective—perhaps even Gonzo—journalism. While more work needs to be done here, the answer has already been suggested. The journalist should seek to help us understand groups and individuals whose lives we do not lead. The journalist should put us in the shoes of another community or another person. They should lead us outside of ourselves and the narrow confines of our experience to recognize other dimensions and to empathize with those experiencing reality in a different way. Tom Hallman Jr., a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, typified this approach:

“There are certain core elements about the way we live and the way we are as humans that I try to get at, too, in my stories, and that’s about how you live and how you feel and how you move through the world... it’s not necessarily the factual kind of truth as much as the emotional truth.”¹²

Pursuing objectivity in journalism is well-intentioned, but it ultimately misses the point. Just as I could be motivated by genuine care yet dehumanize my girlfriend by my epistemic approach, I can honestly want to help society yet harm it by seeking objectivity. To reject journalistic objectivity is not to reject truthfulness as a virtue, or commit oneself to a radical philosophical skepticism. It is merely to recognize that reality is far more deeply human, complex, and intricate than we could ever understand with scientific detachment. It is to act in accordance with the real difference between scientific facts and newsworthy situations. It is to realize our responsibility to know well, to engage with reality in an ethical epistemic way, and to pursue the truth even when that truth seems irrelevant or unimportant. It is an invitation to know my girlfriend in a different way than I know the Pythagorean theorem. It is an invitation to use proper epistemic methods that recognize the often-messy human realities of newsworthy situations. Or, to put it with some snark, it is an invitation to take your girlfriend to dinner and leave Pythagoras at home.

References

- Borden, Sandra L. *Journalism as Practice: MacIntyre, Virtue Ethics and the Press*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007.
- Craig, David. *The Ethics of the Story: Using Narrative Techniques Responsibly in Journalism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.
- Coward, Rosalind. *Speaking Personally: The Rise of Subjective and Confessional Journalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Dorfman, Ron. “The Puzzle of Objectivity: The Objective Posture.” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 44, no. 3 (1987): 312-15
- Hackett, Robert A., and Yuezhi Zhao. *Sustaining Democracy? Journalism and the Politics of*

¹² David Craig, *The Ethics of the Story: Using Narrative Techniques Responsibly in Journalism*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 36.

Objectivity. Toronto: Garamond Press, 1998.

Kitch, Carolyn. "Rethinking Objectivity in Journalism and History." *American Journalism* 16, no. 2 (1999): 113-20.

Lambeth, Edmund B. "Waiting for a New St. Benedict: Alasdair MacIntyre & the Theory and Practice of Journalism." *Business & Professional Ethics Journal* 9, no. 1/2 (1990): 97-108.

Stephens, Mitchell. "The Case for Wisdom Journalism — and for Journalists Surrendering the Pursuit of News." *Daedalus* 139, no. 2 (2010): 76-88.

Tollefsen, Christopher. "Journalism and the Social Good." *Public Affairs Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (2000): 293-308.

Ward, Stephen J. A. *The Invention of Journalism Ethics: The Path to Objectivity and Beyond*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2004.

Willis, Jim. *The Human Journalist: Reporters, Perspectives, and Emotions*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003.