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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Varieties of Journalistic Objectivity

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Abstract: Journalistic media plays an important role in society especially a democratic one. The public cannot reach out and acquire knowledge about each and everything that may bear upon their executing their democratic rights. Journalistic media bridges this epistemic gap. Journalistic media, often called the fourth pillar of democracy, also performs a “checking function” on the other three pillars namely executive, judiciary and legislature. The understanding of journalistic media's role in society can be refined further with the addition of, or resolution of already stated goals into, further goals. Yet, it should be clear that all of these roles ultimately depend on journalistic media playing the epistemic role of bridging the epistemic gap between the public and facts. Playing this epistemic role properly requires objectivity which, in simple terms, may be understood as consisting in allowing the facts to be conveyed to the public *as is*, without any modifications or *colouring* so to speak. But, this simplistic and readily accessible definition of objectivity papers over many differences between distinct kinds of objectivity. Given the significance of the notion for journalism it is required that we understand exactly what objectivity is, whether and what its different varieties are, and how they figure in journalistic practice. In this paper I will discuss three varieties of objectivity and how they pertain to journalism's ability to fulfil its role in democracy.

Keywords: News, Journalism, Democratic Society, Role of Journalism, Objectivity, Neutrality

1 Introduction

Journalism is just one aspect of mass communication. It wouldn't be wrong to say that mass communication covers the broader area or field of media than journalism. It deals with various

fields of communication like news, advertising, entertainment etc. Journalism on the other hand deals with giving information, or its goal is to inform what is going on. Such information could be about anything like sports, politics, entertainment, etc. There are many events happening around the country and the world as well which are important to know for the public but are not in the immediate vicinity of most of the individual members of the public or close enough to be grasped directly. Journalism is a mode of communication which connects people to such events in the outside world. Journalists work here as an epistemic bridge who fills the gaps between important worldly events and the people to whom those events are important but who may not be in the position to grasp them directly. American Press Institute (n. d.) sees it as “the activity of gathering, assessing, creating and presenting news and information” and also “the product of these activities”. It is a process through which news is generated and distributed to the consumers.

It is not possible for us to go everywhere and collect the information to analyse the growth and development of the society but if these issues are not brought to the public's notice then political authorities and the elite society may misuse their power which can affect the rights of the people and countries well being. If it is not known what the governing authority is doing or whether they are keeping the promises that they made, electoral or otherwise, then it becomes difficult for the responsible citizens to take further decisions. Journalism is on the duty of highlighting what cannot be seen about our socioeconomic or political environment directly. Journalism has been called the fourth pillar of democracy after executive, judiciary, and legislature. It keeps its eyes on other three pillars and helps citizens execute their democratic rights informatively.

Thus, journalistic media plays here an important epistemic role in the society. Playing this role of bridging the epistemic gap between the public and the events, occurrences, happenings etc. it needs to be informed of requires that the information or knowledge about these events is passed on to the public without any alterations or modifications. The aim is to have a well informed public but it is so only when it is correctly informed not lied to or misled, informed of the facts as they stand and not how the entity passing on the information wants, wills, or interprets it to be. For journalistic media to play this epistemic role as it is warranted to be played journalists have to be objective. The thesis of objectivity holds that one should convey a fact as it is without misshaping and colouring it with one's own biases. Journalistic objectivity is important to play those epistemic roles.

The notion of objectivity, given its significance for journalism, has received a lot of attention from journalism scholars and there is a substantial debate regarding its possibility or viability as a journalistic ideal. I believe that before we can get a fast grip on the debate regarding the possibility of objectivity in journalism, we must first understand what objectivity really is and in what shape and form it comes to be of significance in journalism. This is what I shall attempt to chart out in this paper.

2 The Role of Journalism in Democratic Society

Traditional models trying to express the relation between media and democracy stress the importance of journalists' role in order to distribute information through which people can exercise control directly or indirectly over the state. There are two larger questions: one is a question of principle and the second one of practice. These two notions are very much different from each other. Norms can be made and set as an ideal philosophically but when those norms turn out as the subject of practice then the scenario becomes quite different from the theoretical notion. All societies are not the same; every single society has its own faith, culture, interests and religious beliefs. Thus, how journalists' carry on their duties in these societies also varies. Somewhere they work as a passive mirror, in the other they take participation more actively by raising question, conducting debate, eyeing the authority. Requirements are different and so journalists' roles are also different in each environment. Means may vary but the object of exercise of these duties are same which is providing the public with information about the events which the public must be aware of in order to take decision, gather knowledge, ask questions etc.

As diverse ways in which journalists may be called upon to play their role, the roles they play can still be classified along some specific lines. Christian et al. (2009) discuss the different kinds of roles journalism plays in a democratic political system:

- **Monitorial Role:** Journalistic media works as a watching post and gives a broader view of any particular event to the people. News is selected according to the public's interest, so their feedback helps journalists and the media organization regarding news priorities. Journalists play the role of observing and systematically monitoring events. So the receiver can get precise information about those events. Media works here as an instrument for improving the system. Media operates as a mediator between events and the seekers of knowledge; a journalist's role is to scan the natural world and events, inform the receivers, and evaluate and interpret the events for the public, giving a more precise understanding.
- **Facilitative Role:** In this notion, by actively participating the reader and the viewers, media promotes communication among the citizens where they connect and share common goals and interests. In this facilitative role, media shows the diverse culture and different opinions about any affair that helps shape thoughts and decisions. Media here reports on civil societies association and dialogues simultaneously, and they try to improve them. Here, citizens are at the centre; public problems can be resolved through their interactive discussion. Their discussions are taken seriously to resolve general problems. It is difficult to conclude what is right or wrong about such general affairs. So the debate on these issues should be open, and the public must negotiate when it is difficult to find a solution which requires room for interaction and exchanging thoughts regarding this situation so that a probable solution can emerge. Media here creates that platform and motivates citizens to put their opinion about the given circumstances.
- **Radical role:** This notion of journalistic role is one where journalistic media enables

people to participate actively in society's decision-making. Often we can see the hegemony or the elite class try to negotiate the information according to their own interests so that the general public gets a distorted view of the facts. The tension here is that most underprivileged are unaware of this issue. Social activists must come forth to awaken people intellectually. In this case, the media helps them spread awareness and participate in democracy with intense concern.

- **Collaborative Role:** Here, the media collaborates with the state to meet the need of the nation. The other three roles media plays in a democratic country are where citizens are at the centre, and importance is given to their needs and interests. However, sometimes the public's own interest lies in allowing the government to reach the public and inform them of some situations as required. Such an engagement of media with government organs is advocated mainly in emergency cases like natural disasters, terrorist attacks, wars etc.

Varied as these roles may seem to be all of them, in some way or another, consist in creating a bridge between the public and events, happenings, etc that the public needs to know about though which information about these matters of public interest may reach the public: in other words in all of these roles journalism's main task remains to provide the public with epistemic access to the matters that concern them.

In as much as these roles all require bridging an epistemic gap between the public and matters of their concern by passing on the information regarding the latter to the former, the key requirement in performing these roles well is to pass on the *correct* information about these matters of concern. Incorrectly informed public is no better placed to enact their democratic rights and duties, to stand for their interest, than a public which is uninformed. As such, to play the roles highlighted above honestly and truthfully, journalists must obey a few norms, on in specific; they must practice their craft in line with the ideal of journalistic objectivity.

4 Journalistic Objectivity: A Preliminary Grasp

Journalism plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and providing a platform for democratic discourse. At the core of responsible journalism lies the principle of objectivity, where journalists strive to present facts, as they are untouched by what the journalist or somebody else for that matter may want them to be like. The need for journalistic objectivity is the need for unbiased reporting without the influence of personal prejudice.

Patterson, Wilkins, and Painter (2019, p 26-7) say:

Objectivity has many definitions, minimally it is the requirement that journalists divorce fact from opinion. Objectivity is a way of knowing that connects human perception with facts and then knowledge. Objectivity is also a process of information collection. Journalists view objectivity as refusing to allow individual bias to influence what they report or how they cover. It is in journalism that all facts and people are regarded as equal and equally worthy of coverage.

Journalists committed to the ethical codes of objectivity never get bothered by external pressure and fear and ensure the news is distributed fairly and accurately. Objective reporting is a moral imperative for journalists: an ideal that should be the goal of every journalist. The primary goal is to endeavor to know the facts by keeping one's perspectives aside to achieve an understanding of the outer world as clearly as possible. Thus journalistic objectivity deals with the truthfulness, honesty and credibility of journalists and their norms.

It is often thought that objectivity requires that journalists do not support any political or cultural claim. They should not defend any political party and their ideologies in a partisan manner. It may not be possible to search for a point as it is, but it is possible to take a comparatively closer picture of reality. Shaw, McCombs, and Keir (1997; as quoted in Wien 2005, p 9) think that journalists balance the opposing side of a specific issue because they want to be objective, or if it looks impossible, they at least try to be fair and balanced.

5 Classifications of objectivity

On the face of it, it may seem that the notion of journalistic objectivity is amply clear. However, as there are different definitions of objectivity as Wilkins noted, there are also many different notions of objectivity which have been used in the discussion of the duties of journalists or the problems faced by them in carrying out these duties. It is worthwhile then to pry apart these different notions of objectivity from each other and to see how and to what extent these notions figure prominently in the exercise of journalistic practice or the challenges that face it. The journalistic process is an epistemic process, a process of accessing knowledge or information on facts. In any epistemic process of gaining knowledge there are three components: that which is being known, the knower, and the means of accessing knowledge of the thing to be known. While the public is the end user which is accessing information on events of note through the journalist, the journalist is an intermediate knower who must first acquire information on the events to be reported and assimilate this information and then repackage it in a form fit for the consumption of the public to disseminate it effectively. Here, the journalist is a knower who has some means (sources) to get to the facts, the facts being what are to be known, with the journalist's sources constituting the means of knowledge. Alternatively, we may think of the journalistic process as an epistemic process where it is the public which as the end knower and the journalist and the journalist's sources both constitute the means of knowledge, with the facts still taking the role of that which is to be known. In one way of looking at the journalistic process as an epistemic one the journalist is a knower. In the other the journalist is a source of knowledge, a means for the public to acquire information. The point of talking about the components of the journalistic process qua an epistemic one is because some notion of objectivity attaches itself to each of these components.

- **Metaphysical Objectivity:** This notion of objectivity pertains to that which is to be known – the facts. It seems only platitudinous to say that journalists report facts, or at least that it is their duty to do so. This suggests a picture where facts are objective and not constrained by journalists' subjective attempts to capture and convey them. This notion of objectivity is metaphysical in nature. In taking facts regarding events, happenings, and occurrences of

public concern to be objective we are taking their existence to be independent and metaphysically unconstrained by journalists' attempts to capture them. This notion of metaphysical objectivity can itself be further analyzed into two related but yet distinct components: mind-independence and universality. (See Boghossian 2006, Ch 2) If something is mind-independent, then that exists irrespective of human perception, opinion, belief, cognition, social practices, customs etc. It has an existence outside the human mind and independent of its operations and independent also of the macro level products of human mind such as human social and cultural practices. Universality on the other hand concerns the idea that what is objective is the same for all. It concerns the notion that facts do not differ depending on who is trying to grasp, access, or convey them. To give a simplistic example if grass is green it is green irrespective of who is describing grass or who the description is addressed to. If Newton's laws correctly describe the world that does not change depending on who is trying to work his equations out to make some predictions. The laws of physics apply universally.

The notions of mind-independence and universality are clearly related in as much as if something is not mind-independent but rather is a product of the mind then presumably different minds may create it differently thus violating universality as well. Yet, the notions are different and the applicability of one may perfectly well stand independently of that of the other. For example, very few people today believe that moral facts stand independently of human mind; that just as even before humans or any life whatsoever existed the world still was governed by scientific laws similarly it was also governed by moral laws. Moral laws, even if not conscious a creation of human mind may be still seen to arise out of its operation. But, this need not mean that all minds, human or otherwise, in giving rise to moral laws must yield distinct ones. Even if the uniformity, in case there is uniformity, is due to some mind-independent cause underlying or affecting the operations of the mind that give rise to moral laws the moral laws themselves would be arising out of the operations of the mind and thus not mind-dependent. But, in case of such uniformity they will be universal.

While usually it may be safely assumed that the facts being reported are metaphysically objective this has been seriously questioned. The pursuit of objectivity in journalism has on occasion been derided on precisely the count that there are no objective facts to report. Metaphysical objectivity has undergone a serious assault in the social sciences in the past century or so, especially in the last 60-70 years, and the effects have already long percolated to journalism scholarship as well. Even if an overarching scepticism about the objectivity of facts is set aside there is a growing recognition that many social and cultural categories such as gender are creations of the human mind and not facts of nature. Even so, it seems that the practice of journalism is predicated upon their being important metaphysically objective facts that need to be conveyed to the public. To the extent that it may truly be thought that all so called objective facts are just wanton creations of the human mind it wouldn't just make sense to give up on the pursuit of objectivity while maintaining the journalistic endeavour but to give up on the latter altogether. For the most part journalists like all inhabitants of the world are content in assuming that the world as given to us is metaphysically objective. In the background of such commonly held naive realist beliefs in

the metaphysical reality of the world contending with this notion of objectivity seems superfluous. It can be left for the philosophers to ponder, one may say. The rest including journalists and their patrons must contend with more practical concerns. This does not mean that the journalist turns a blind eye to the fact that many categories we employ to understand the world, like gender and race, may be nothing more than social constructs. But, even contending with such facts requires taking a naive realist attitude towards facts (of taking them to be metaphysically objective) in general.

- **Epistemic Objectivity:** In historical studies one faces an acute problem of objectivity. Basically, even if we grant that historical facts are metaphysically objective – they are both mind-independent and universal – there is a problem of objective epistemic access to historical facts. The facts themselves are gone forever; all that may be now accessed is retellings of those facts and reconstructions of historical reality based on such retellings. But, both the retellings and reconstructions thereon of historical facts are unlikely to be entirely or even majorly accurate. Retellings are colored often by the biases of the historian's source, reconstructions by those of the historian. (See Novick 1988 and Haskell 1998 for informative discussions on objectivity in the discipline of History.) A similar situation characterizes the practice of journalism as well, for a journalist also for the most part has no direct access to the event to be reported but must reconstruct it on the basis of the information received from the source or from multiple sources. Here what is coming under question is a notion of objectivity best labeled epistemic objectivity since it concerns the transparency (understood as the truth preserving nature) of the epistemic processes involved in accessing events to be reported, even if the events themselves are deemed to be completely metaphysically objective in nature.

In the journalistic process seen as one where the public is the final knower any the notion of epistemic objectivity concerns the transparency, i.e. the truth preserving nature, of all the processes that constitute the journey of information from the facts to the public. This consists of the epistemic transparency of the journalist's sources but also of that of the journalists themselves. A part of that we have already alluded to in talking about the journalist having to reconstruct what happened on the basis of multiple possibly disparate reports. For any agent who is tasked with passing on information there are three stages or processes that must be executed. Information must be acquired, it must be assimilated to yield (or reconstruct) a coherent picture of the facts, and this picture must then be repackaged in a suitable shape, size, and form to be disseminated further to the next knower, so to speak.

Focusing on the journalist, but the parallel goes for someone acting as a source to the journalist as well, the journalist has to acquire the facts for which often multiple sources must be relied on. The journalist must then assimilate the information received from the sources: the journalist must grasp a coherent whole out of multiple distinct pieces of information often riddled with mutual inconsistencies. The information so assimilated must then be packaged in an easy to consume form to be disseminated it to the public. Any of these sub-processes of acquisition, assimilation and dissemination may be where there is a loss of transparency and failure to preserve the truth due to the information getting

corrupted the journalists' or some source's implicit biases and prejudices or simply incompetence, carelessness, and/or lack of due diligence.

Epistemic objectivity is of imminent significance for journalistic practice. A journalist who cares about passing on correct and accurate information representative of the facts, a journalist who care about being objective, would do well to pay heed to possible deviations from epistemic objectivity. And this brings us to the final notion of objectivity, the notion of being objective.

- **Character Objectivity:** Character objectivity pertains to the objectivity of the journalist as a knower and also a further source of information. But, the special characteristic most definitive of the notion is that it concerns what it is for an epistemic agent to be objective, i.e. it concerns the notion of objectivity as it pertains to epistemic agency. While epistemic objectivity also has something to do with the objectivity of an epistemic agent as a knower and source of information for further knowers there the concern is with whether the agent (and related aspects of the journalistic process) are epistemically transparent or not; whether they preserve the truth in acquiring, assimilating, and disseminating knowledge and information. Here however the concern is not with the fact of their preserving the truth or not but being motivated to do so, wanting to do so, and overall being dispositioned to act in ways that are conducive to the preservation of truth.

The notion of character objectivity, the journalist's being objective in the sense of being motivated and dispositioned to preserve truth, is of the most central significance for journalism. For, while it is possible for the distinct components of the journalistic process to be epistemically objective, truth-preserving, this would most often not be the case until and unless their epistemic transparency is actively ensured by the journalist. The journalist must scan the facts with clarity and a detached manner; here, the agent needs to practice, as Haskell (1998, p 148) puts it, "ascetic self-discipline" by keeping one's own opinions and emotions aside. The journalist must rely upon concrete evidence rather than own feelings and beliefs. There may be many references that exist around us, such as books, articles, and historical events, but the journalist must wade through all the sources. Searching for sound sources and representing that to the public honestly needs an honest intention.

To take an example, if we want to know the cause of the very recent Russia-Ukraine war and its consequences, we must depend on different sources. That may be shaped in a certain way for preferable results. That is why we should go through various sources which can be considered very close to facts. Then by those sources, data should be chosen for what reasons are responsible for this war, what kind of decisions has been made to solve the issues, what are the social and economic conditions of those countries, how NATO is responding regarding this invasion etc. Then those chosen facts should be assimilated so reporters or editors can better understand the entire event. Finally, reporters should not be driven by emotion when delivering news and should not use terms that can create a sensation among the masses. So, here the dissemination process is also essential action towards being objective. The agent's honest participation is needed, from collecting data to

delivering news here. Ensuring epistemic objectivity of the journalistic process is a hard and meticulous task which only a journalist desirous of and motivated to ensure transparency, and dispositioned to act in ways conducive to transparency, would take up.

All in all, the notions of objectivity that are of central concern to journalism are the notions of epistemic objectivity, which must be ensured by agents such as journalists, and character objectivity which journalists must exemplify in order to care about ensuring epistemic objectivity. Good journalists care about epistemic objectivity, but possessing an objective character is what in part makes them good as journalists in the first place.

5 Objectivity and Neutrality

I believe that getting a proper understanding of journalistic objectivity is important in understanding the role journalists must play but it also helps in allaying some of the doubts that have been raised against the notion of objectivity. I cannot attempt a full resolution of the matter here but I shall like to take a specific case and see how some of the clarifications about journalistic objectivity offered above can be useful. The case is of the issue of neutrality and its relation to objectivity.

It becomes tricky to generate authentic news when bias is seen in the acts of journalists and editors. Patterson (1997, p 451) holds that "facts and interpretation are freely intermixed in news reporting. Interpretation provides the theme, and the facts illuminate it". Journalists are interpreting the fact more than they provide news. This bias is sometimes very obvious but sometimes tricky and subtle. Kuypers uses the word 'sandwiching' to describe one way subtly discrediting a view the press opposes: "Sandwiching refers to placing something between two things of a very different character. The press places whatever side of the issue it does not support between complementary points of view, which invariably agree with the position espoused by the press". (Kuypers 2002, p 210; as quoted in Kuypers 2014, p 187) As a consequence, people lose faith in the media. How does one correct that? People in journalistic media understand the need to be objective. But, it is believed that objectivity requires detachment from one's own views and judgments even if based on solid epistemic grounds and instead maintaining a middle ground between opposing views.

In the quest for epistemic objectivity what journalists go for is neutrality. But this is a mistake. Epistemic objectivity does not consist in neutrality. Neutral reporting shows all the standard sides of a story and related opinions and is not bothered with the question of 'truth' and accuracy. As Haskell (1998, p 150) puts it: "The tendency of past generations to associate objectivity with "selflessness" and to think of truth-seeking as a matter of emptying oneself of passion and perception, to become a perfectly passive and receptive reality, has, for good reasons, become notorious." For him, objectivity does not value detachment as an end but "only as an indispensable prelude or preparation for achieving higher levels of understanding. Higher in the sense of being more complete". Neutrality entails treating all perspectives as equally valid. Epistemic objectivity, on the other hand, entails a quest for preserving the truth

after critical analysis. If there are two opposing sides at least one must be wrong and the other will often be right (of course, it may be that both sides miss the mark). There is nothing wrong with siding with a party if one concludes the fact or truth lies on that side after scrutiny. In short, objectivity consists in a commitment to truth wherever that may lie on one side or the other, but neutrality insists on abstaining from any such commitment.

An understanding of epistemic objectivity in terms of epistemic transparency and truth-preservingness, demonstrates a commitment to truth, and helps differentiate epistemic objectivity from neutrality which only demonstrates a fear of being wrong but instead of truth leads to burying it under the veneer of impartiality.

6 Conclusion

Objectivity seems important for journalism to fulfil its role in a democratic society of enabling the citizens to execute their democratic rights in accordance with the best understanding of facts. Undoubtedly there are many works that clarify the notion of journalistic objectivity but a comprehensive grasp of journalistic objectivity, what it consists in, and what it entails is still needed. This has probably been partially causative in objectivity getting a bad rap in the field of journalism scholarship. In this paper I tried to take a small step in the direction of achieving a better understanding of the situation. I tried to show that there are at least two distinct though related notions of objectivity important in journalism: epistemic objectivity and character objectivity. I believe that fuller understanding of these notions and how they play out in the journalistic process would go a long way in a proper understanding of journalistic objectivity and perhaps also lead to it recovering lost faith. Here it was not possible to make much headway in that direction. But, I hope in showing how an understanding of epistemic objectivity in terms of epistemic transparency and truth-preservingness that underlie its commitment to truth helps us differentiate it from neutrality I have at least demonstrated the promise of such an approach.

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