

Toward a Theory of Journalistic Objectivity

by George Friedman - November 4, 2019

Last Sunday, I received an email from a close friend telling me and others that after 60 years he was canceling his subscription to The New York Times because he was tired of its bias against U.S. President Donald Trump and, even more, its failure to cover the world except through the prism of Trump. A few weeks ago, another friend of mine said that he was no longer able to write about the world without making clear the harm that Trump was doing and the disgraceful sort of man he was.

The interesting point is that one believed that The New York Times was falsifying reality with its hostility to Trump, while the other said that describing Trump in any way other than vile was falsifying reality. Few of us hold opinions we know to be false, and therefore few of us see ourselves as falsifying reality. We think of ourselves as clarifying reality and as being the victims of others. That makes each of us a spokesperson for truth and those who disagree with us as in error. The political question is how should we treat those we think are in error? One way is to think of them as reasonable people, to be respected even in disagreement. The other is to regard them as either too stupid to realize they are in error or deliberately corrupt. If you follow the latter approach, they are unreasonable people and unworthy of respect.

Both are very intelligent, reasonable men, and in other circumstances they would like each other. The issue here is not the intellectual, moral or emotional differences between the two, but how the media should present a president about whom they disagree. This debate transcends the current national frenzy over the president. We have had many such times in American history. Rather it is a question of what is the intellectually appropriate manner for a newspaper or other media to deal with the frenzy.

Opinion vs. Fact

The New York Times is clearly hostile to Trump. The Times would argue that it is not hostile but faithfully reporting the news, which in the case of Trump happens to paint him in a bad light. Its critics say that the paper deliberately interprets Trump's actions in the worst possible way and, even worse, spends so much time disparaging him that it either has no space for other vital global news or views all world events as affected by Trump's actions, no matter how marginal they might be.

This raises the question of what a newspaper ought to be. Benjamin Franklin published the

Pennsylvania Gazette in the 19th century. It mixed news and opinion without shame. Early newspapers were not committed to neutrality. Franklin believed he was committing himself to truth, and achieving it by stating his opinion. The difference between The New York Times and Franklin rests in the fact that Franklin did not believe providing thoughtful opinion was unethical whereas modern journalism thinks that it should be presented on editorial pages, separate from the news pages. More precisely, modern journalism draws an ethical line between opinion and fact. But in practice it is hard to distinguish what is, from what ought to be. More important, the vision of what ought to be seems to define what is important. The hidden sphere of opinion rests not in how the story is being told, but in the choice of the story that should be told. In making decisions over what is and what isn't important, the newspaper is already painted over by opinion.

The problem is not with approaching your life's work as a journalist with a vision of the world. It is impossible not to. The problem is pretending, particularly to yourself and then to your readers, that your selections are devoid of prior choice, that the editor and reporter are blank slates, reflecting reality without prejudice. The presentation of facts without framework is impossible.

Ben Bradlee was the editor-in-chief of The Washington Post. He was a close friend of the Kennedys and he hated Richard Nixon. It was the Post that transmitted the information provided by Deep Throat, a senior FBI official, to the public. The fact that the Post didn't reveal for decades that its secret source was an FBI official left out a critical dimension of the story. It was not that Nixon was not guilty, but it was also true that the source and Bradlee wanted Nixon to fall. The Post wanted to get Nixon, and Nixon committed a crime. Both statements can be true. But the Post pretended to be neutral and hid the fact that its source was in the FBI. The framework of motives was hidden from the public and dismissed when Nixon supporters charged the Post with burying important details.

An Evolution

According to contemporary journalism, approaching a newsworthy subject with a personal agenda is unethical. The difference between Franklin and Bradlee is that Franklin made no claims about journalistic ethics. Bradlee did. For Franklin, having a view on fishing or justice is not incompatible with being a good journalist. The only caveat must be that the view is openly stated and held to be true by the author. Indeed, Franklin reveled in using his paper as a platform. His ethical principle, if there was one, was that he stood responsible for what he wrote.

After World War II, there was an evolution in newspaper publishing toward the idea of journalistic objectivity. Most newspapers had political leanings before the war, and while these persisted after the war, the major newspapers sought increasingly to draw a sharp distinction between the editorial

and news pages. Part of this had to do with the increased power of journalism schools and the rise of technocracy. Before the war, the local news beat was frequently covered by high school graduates with street smarts and little formal journalistic education. Over time, these reporters could be promoted to covering national and even international news. H.L. Mencken, one of the great reporters in the first half of the 20th century, symbolized this. He was a high school graduate who mixed reporting with his own pungent views liberally.

With the rise of journalism schools, journalism was seen through a technocratic lens paralleling the other professions. It possessed a method taught in journalism schools that required expertise. But more importantly, and less consciously, the journalism schools taught not only how to cover the news, but what constituted the news. It is hard to encapsulate what their vision of the news was, but we can get a sense by recalling what was covered by what used to be called the “mainstream press.” The mainstream press reflected the dominant ideology following World War II. It focused on the Cold War, on the American economy and on the politics of the two political parties and the framework in which they thought. The John Birch Society and the Communist Party were observed as oddities, not as valid movements.

Writing and editing without a framework is impossible. As I have said, the mere selection and rejection of what is to be published shapes the newspaper. One of the tasks of an editor is to decide what stories make it to print. There is only so much space in a newspaper or time on television, and there are many things happening in the world. The decision on how much space to devote to a subject derives from some concept of what is important and what is not. This is the foundation of journalism and almost any field. And that decision has its roots in some model of reality, whether it's conscious or not.

The Problem With Modern Journalism

The problem is that modern journalistic ethics insist that simplistic objectivity is possible, and it compels journalists and newspapers to pretend that their political beliefs, or support for the Redskins, does not shape the way in which the news is presented. Franklin would never hide his personal views, nor would he ever see them as prejudices. Rather, in his mind they were well-honed reflections that he provided the world as a gift, without prejudice. In this sense, reporters at Fox and CNN are better journalists and more honest than those at The New York Times or The Washington Post. They make no bones about who they are, nor do they hide how they shape the news. They don't have what used to be called the mainstream press's objectivity and don't pretend to have it.

Objectivity is not impossible. But the first step of objectivity is to know yourself and to be aware of

what you are doing and why. Knowing your own motive and not being ashamed of it allows your readers to choose whether to read your publication and allows you to impose the discipline of your own intentions. At any case, it can't be hidden and, over time, becomes readily apparent to your readers, who may approve or disapprove but will read your publication nonetheless to hear another view. But without that objective evaluation of your purpose, all other objectivity is lost.

True objectivity is enormously difficult, as all great things must be. I face this dilemma every day. I solve it not by pretending not to have a view, but by practicing an idiosyncratic method, geopolitics as I understand it, that allows me – I believe – to understand the world more deeply. To use geopolitics well, you must force yourself to separate your superficial political views from your work. That is not easy; I and my staff are human. But we believe that only by abandoning the politics of our time can we actually understand the deeper structure of things. We are less interested in whether Trump is right or wrong than in the underlying forces that created his presidency, and all other presidencies.

There is the objectivity of knowing your politics and the objectivity in caring for something other than the daily political discourse. But objectivity is more than simple neutrality. It is being conscious of your ends and the methods that help you to reach those ends, and freely admitting what those ends are. Objectivity is enormously difficult, as is rigidly separating belief in method from beliefs on current affairs. The objectivity I am speaking of has more in common with Benjamin Franklin than with contemporary journalism.

True Objectivity

It is impossible to be perfectly objective, even in my terms. But then it is difficult to love, to be courageous and to be just. The difficulty of each of these things does not excuse anyone from trying. The shallow claim to objectivity of contemporary journalism is transparent. That does not mean that objectivity is impossible, as imperfect as all things human might be. But clinging to an objectivity that is both simplistic and transparent undermines the Republic. Objectivity is not pretending not to have an agenda, but showing clearly what that agenda is. You cannot live without an agenda and you cannot free yourself from the responsibility of having it. And then the world can see the degree to which your agenda is profound or trivial. The agenda does not have to be a political goal, although if it is, then that is legitimate. For me, it is a consistent method of understanding how the world works and what things are more important than others. I try to make it clear that I am working from this model, geopolitics, and that the breadth and emphasis of what my organization, Geopolitical Futures, addresses comes from there.

Franklin made no bones about the reasons he chose to write as much as he did on what he did. This I think is true objectivity. Newspapers in the United States used to be unabashedly political, and that meant they covered some topics obsessively and ignored others. But we knew who they were. Defining objectivity as possessing no preconceptions works if you really have no preconceptions, but what human is a blank slate, and what human has the discipline not to care? Journalism, like all crafts, requires a structure that defines the proportions of their craft and then the content, and that structure must be visible to those who care to understand it. The mere assertion of objectivity is not such a structure. It is merely a principle that neither constrains nor compels.

Donald Trump will pass into history, and so too will the passions of the moment. But the problem of objectivity will live on. Anyone can claim to be objective. It is not a structure that guides or constrains. It is just an intent that does not impose order. The irony and intentions of Franklin can be understood and seen in his writing. The problem is not the writing of The New York Times or the selection of stories; it is the assertion of objectivity without definition or rigor.

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