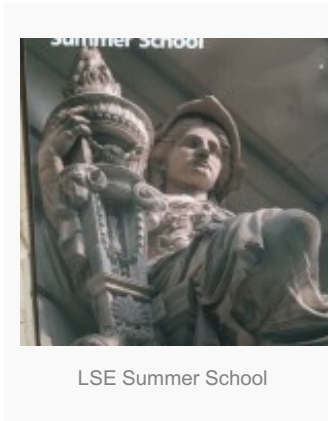


From objectivity to transparency? The idea of objectivity in the age of New Media (guest post)

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This post is an essay from [Polis Summer School](#) student Steffen Horstmannshoff on the idea of objectivity in the age of new media.

Introduction

“If you use social networks for both professional and private activity then use separate accounts.”(1) Such can be read in a manual by the international news agency Reuters that was published on the 10th of March 2010. For the ones asking “And why exactly should I do that?” Reuters has got an answer as well: “Put simply, we’re expecting you to apply standards to your professional use of social media that will probably differ to those you would use for your personal activity.” (2)

The authors of the manual aren’t clear about what standards exactly they are referring to but implicitly it is quite obvious: They are referring to impartiality and objectivity – two concepts of journalism that are getting increasingly contested in the New Media Environment. This case study sheds light to a rather heated discussion between “old” and “new” media. A discussion that centers around questions like:

Why is this notion of the “objective” so important to journalism? What exactly do we mean by calling someone objective? Can you really divide between what someone writes as a journalist and what he thinks as a private citizen as Reuters seems to suggest? Are objectivity and impartiality in the New Media as relevant as in the “Old Media”?

Transparency

To answer these questions I will start out with a brief overview about the idea of objectivity. I will then turn to the importance of objectivity in normative theories of journalism. Finally I will assess the relevance of the concept of objectivity in the New Media environment and – drawing on the writings of David Weinberger – introduce a new category that becomes increasingly relevant: transparency.

When we talk about something being objective – what do we mean by that? We think of an objective statement as something that is close to the truth of the matter. Objective to us means “out there in the world” while subjective means “in the mind”. (3) This is why we think of an “objective” statement as being truer than a subjective statement: Someone who makes an objective judgment has approached a subject from different angles and has come to a conclusion that transcends that what is “only” in his mind. Objective knowledge therefore – at least on a first glance – can be defined as “knowledge that bears no trace of the knower.” (4) These days this seems quite natural to us. However one should not forget that the word objective has a history. As much as this may sound trivial – it is not.

History of Objectivity

To say that objectivity has a history is to say that it is not a transcendent self-generating and eternal intellectual virtue. (5) It is rather an idea that finds its origins in the ideas of utilitarianism and the enlightenment beginning in the 19th century. It is an idea that stems from essentialist thought because it is based on the assumption, that the world can be understood by gathering facts and bringing them in the right order. It is also a concept that tries to deal with two difficulties: On the one hand a lack of resources to document all the knowledge that is out there (There simply isn’t just enough paper to publish each and every thought).

On the other hand a lack of time to go through all the knowledge which is out there in the world. As much there would be left to say about objectivity – this is the bottom line to bear in mind within the context of this essay: Objectivity has a history and is a way of coping with a lack of timely and material resources.

Information Filters

The lack of timely and material resources gives journalists an assignment: To filter all the information that's out there and to give them an order that is as "objective" as possible, so that the "everyman" can digest that information. As Bart Cammaerts has argued in his lecture, the assignment to deliver the information to the public which is "objectively" true is an assumption that you find in many of the normative theories of the press that were outlined by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm. (6)

This holds true for the liberal model of the media as a "watchdog" that has the task to inform, to control and to provide a forum. It also holds true for the social responsibility model where it is the media's task "to give meaning and contextualize the day's events" (7). From the viewpoint of normative theories objectivity of the press becomes central in a democracy because an objective coverage is necessary to inform the public in a fair and balanced way so that they can participate as democratic citizen. The media conclusively becomes what Burke has called the "Fourth Estate". (8) This understanding of journalists of themselves lays the groundwork (as Cammaerts argued in his lecture) for the hegemonic Identity constructions of the journalistic profession itself.

Facing the complexity of information that is contrasted with a lack of resources, society used objectivity as a means to decide what to believe and delegated the process of going through the facts to an impartial (or at least we thought of him that way) observer: The journalist. In the age of New Media two assumptions of this concept are getting increasingly problematic.

Dishonest Compromise

The first problem arises out of the idea that there is such a thing as "being objective". As David Weinberger argues the idea of objectivity always was a fake way of getting to certainty. (9) This starts with the selection process. When a newspaper says: "We are giving you a selection of the most important news stories" it applies a selection process that pretends to be value free but is actually based on quite a valuated judgment. In addition to that journalists are not just professionals (as Reuters seems to suggest) but citizens who are embedded in a certain cultural setting and a system of values. The idea of objectivity for Weinberger appears therefore to be a flawed and in a way even a dishonest compromise.

The second problem that Weinberger has with objectivity is that it functions as a stopping point to the forming of opinion. What was an asset in past times becomes a flaw in the face of alternatives. Today the linking structure of the internet offers the recipient a way of going back to the origins of an argument or of participating in the production process whereas the old structure of print worked as an endpoint to an argument. Conclusively the idea of objectivity becomes "a trust mechanism you rely on when your medium can't do links." (10)

What's the alternative to objectivity than in the age of New Media? To Weinberger the answer is quite obvious: Transparency.

Personal And Factual

Within the framework of journalism what Weinberger means when he talks about transparency is a publication whose origin can be traced back and which doesn't function as an end of a discussion but rather as a platform for further debate. This change in approach for him has two dimensions: A personal and a factual one. It addresses the problems with objectivity that were laid out above.

The first shift in approach concerns the journalist himself. When there isn't such a thing as objectivity then the only thing journalists can do is show what beliefs they hold and why we hold them. For Weinberger a personal standpoint

isn't a problem as long as you are honest about it.

The second shift in approach concerns the process of information gathering and research. For him it is not sufficient to go through material all by yourself, select the information you find to be the most valuable and then cover up how you have reached your conclusion. Instead in the New Media environment collaboration and dialogue becomes increasingly more important. As Beckett has put it: In the New Media Environment the journalist is "becoming the facilitator rather than the gatekeeper". (11)

It's About Trust

The case study of Reuters Social Media-policy I referred to in the beginning is just one small example that points to a greater debate in journalism: A debate that centers around the question whether the media should or even can be objective. It is about the question whether the journalist as a professional and the journalist as a citizen can be separated. And last but not least it even is about the trustworthiness of the media.

As always in debates between old and new media the debate is pretty polarized. But it seems to me that is not so much about objectivity vs. transparency. It is rather about how the one can profit from the other. As Charlie Beckett has lined out, "Networked Journalism" can benefit from openness through interactivity and from transparency through connectivity. It doesn't disempower journalist but rather helps to solve pressing problems in journalism. Therefore Transparency does not replace objectivity but it rather adds to it. A selection process that tries to be fair as far as this is possible is still important for it makes information easy to handle. It's not about objectivity vs. transparency. It's about the question how we can develop journalism by using the opportunities of New Media. To introduce another word to the debate – it is about credibility.

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