Instability of Journalistic Objectivity: 
The Future of The Code Is In Asking How Not How Much

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Abstract. American press both praises and stumbles upon objectivity. This study tries to close this gap by providing communication professionals and academia with a definition that understands objectivity, not as a set of stable standards, but as a collection of flexible practices journalists used to maintain their power in society. Additionally, its findings also offer guidelines for a training of the future journalists. Development of objectivity in American journalism identifies three elements of the phenomena: balanced representation of all sides, fairness of the representation, and factuality. History confirms that none of those elements were applied consistently. This study asks in what ways today’s mainstream journalists practice objectivity? The research used content analysis of 123 articles from the Wichita Eagle that covered gubernatorial elections from 1994 to 2006. The codebook tested all three practices: balance, fairness, and factuality. The analysis attempts to show that journalists are inconsistent in applying objectivity, usually don’t separate their opinion from facts, and still try to proportionally represent all sides of an issue.

Introduction

Three years ago Columbia Journalism Review published “Brits vs. Yanks: Who does journalism right?” an interview with two journalists who represented two traditions: American and European. More than just a catchy question for the readers, this headline points out significant discussion over one of the core codes of American journalism: objectivity.

What makes this code an interesting research subject is the controversy surrounding the code’s application. On one side, professionals such as Brent Cunningham (2003), managing editor of the CJR, and scholars including Geneva Overholser (2003), and Michel Schudson propose changes ranging from abandonment to modification of objectivity. On contrary, scholars such as Gauthier Gilles, and Stephen J. Berry believe that needs to retain its status of a professional code. The ongoing discussion is causing confusion in both academic and professional world, as there is no uniformly accepted definition of journalistic objectivity. This study’s motivation is, as Cunningham says, re-thinking of objectivity in a way that would bridge the gap between theoretical and practical understanding of this journalistic code.

Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Extensive literature review indicated two significant characteristics of journalistic objectivity. The first implies changes in the meaning of this professional code: Penny press emphasized nonpartisanship, 1920s to 1950s proposed strict separation of opinions and facts, political instability in the late 20th century introduced representation of all sides, and current international wars and the rise of the Internet have brought loose application of objectivity.

Second characteristic follows from the first. It indicates three practices repeatedly used as indicators of objectivity: balanced representation of all sides, fairness of the representation, and factuality. Both characteristics combined with above mentioned debates lead to conclusion that journalistic objectivity should not be defined as a static concept, but as a dynamic set of three commonly used practices that journalists utilize to maintain their power in society. A test for this definition could be in answering a question: In what ways today’s mainstream journalists practice objectivity?

Method

Specially designed codebook was applied for 123 articles from the Wichita Eagle that covered gubernatorial elections from 1994 to 2006 between the primaries and the Election Day. Each story was separate in two categories: type (hard news, news analysis, feature, editorial and other) and content (whether it is about the candidates and election issues). As a unit of analysis I have chosen every paragraph that referred to at least one of the
candidates (their names or course of action). Each unit of analysis was coded for three major categories: First one was representation of the candidates (positive, negative or neutral quotes and paraphrases from either the candidates or about them), fairness (direct attacks on the candidates and presence of the response to the attack), and factuality (presence of the author’s opinion). Data for each year was tabulated and compared. The author was the only coder.

Results
Analysis of the results showed that, in most of the cases, that newspaper stories which reported over an event or issues that involves both candidates tend to have an equal number of references to both sides (the difference was two or less). These findings were especially relevant for the different type of the stories. As expected, hard news stories that were reporting on both candidates were the most balanced: the highest score was in 2006 (100% of all hard news stories in a year) and the lowest in 2002 (61%). Additionally, articles in the group of news analysis always scored lower in a corresponding year.

Besides looking at the number of references, measurement of balance also included the analysis of the value of those references. The data showed that each year had more articles that predominantly had either positive or negative comment about a candidate. Of all the stories in 2006, 70.83% were “evaluative” which was the highest percentage of all other years. In 1998, the same number was the lowest (64.29%). In the samples for each year, for the stories with evaluative comments, hard news had the lowest percentages compared to other types of articles.

Under the section examining fairness, the calculations showed that in 2002 the articles with attacks had the highest percentage of answers (every 5th attack did not have reply). This is followed with samples from 1994 which had a ratio 9-7 (answered to unanswered attacks), 2006 with 9-8 and 1998 with 20 attacks of which 13 were not answered.

Presence of the opinions varied from year to year. I have first calculated total number of stories that had at least one instance where information was not supported by confirmable evidence or source (descriptive words, author’s conclusions and opinions). After comparing that number with total number of stories it was evident that for all years more than half of all stories had at least one opinion that was not labeled as such. However, the individual data for each year was significantly different with the highest percentage of “opinioned” stories appearing in 1994 (94.11%). The last data worth mentioning is the percentage of opinions that favor/disfavor one side in the sample. Despite high percentage of “opinioned” articles, those opinions in 2006 favored/disfavored one side only 14.46% of the time.

On the other hand, in 1998, one forth of all instances was distinctively evaluative.

All data shows that each group of samples had different scores in all three areas that established to measure journalistic objectivity. Additionally, those differences were significant on several occasions. Although, certain aspects of balance such as number of references to each candidate remain steady. However, balance usually stops there because the data confirms that every year majority of articles was favoring/disfavoring one side.

Conclusion
As these research findings indicate, the application of journalistic objectivity is not consistent even in a single publication over the period of 12 years. Few practices such as balanced number of references to both sides in a story are consistently present through time, while many more, including fairness and presence of the authors’ neutral opinion, can significantly be different. This study proposes an integrated definition of objectivity that includes all possible forms through which journalists tried to be objective. The study’s conclusions are not proposing rejection of objectivity, but better understanding of the phenomena. Additionally, the study can enhance future professional training. Instead of teaching students only one aspect of objectivity such as separation of facts and opinions or ignoring existing trends in the mainstream journalism, academic curriculums should closely follow and adjust current trends and changes in the profession without forgetting historical developments of journalistic objectivity.

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