

OBJECTIVITY AND THE NEWS

By Gabriel Moran

A common way to discuss the accuracy of the news media is with the term objectivity. The question of whether news media are objective or not presupposes the question: Should news media be objective? The answer that is given in this essay is: Sometimes. There is ambiguity these days on what constitutes “the media” and what “news” means. And that is before getting to the more complex question of what constitutes “objectivity.”

Some historical perspective is helpful in understanding the question of accuracy in reporting the news. The short period between wars, 1945-1950, is instructive for struggles of today. During the Second World War there had been one subject which excluded nearly everything else. The news consisted of how the United States was doing in the wars in Europe and the Pacific. There was only one side to the news, our side, and the news was censored by the war department of the government and self-censorship by the press.

In addition to newspapers, *Life* magazine was an important news source for people each Saturday and the weekly newsreel in movie theaters brought the war home to people in a vivid way. *Life* magazine had brave reporters and photographers on the front lines of the war who no doubt reported the war as they saw it. But *Life*, similar to the newspapers, emphasized only success. *Life* did not include a picture of a dead U.S. soldier until two years into the war. And facts such as that one third of the marines who landed at Iwo Jima were killed or wounded, and that the navy suffered the worst destruction of its history during the battle of Okinawa were not the kind of thing brought up in the press.

World War II changed the country but afterward, similar to the 1920s, there was a widespread desire to return to “normalcy.” Unlike the decade of the 20s which ended with a bang, the normalcy of the 40s and 50s was a thin covering of what exploded in the 1960s, especially among women and “negroes.” During World War II when all the healthy young men marched off to war and the women were left to run the country, the feminist movement of the 1920s picked up steam. And negro soldiers who got a taste of the whole world while bravely fighting next to white soldiers (though segregation in the military lasted until Truman’s time) recognized an obvious claim to civil rights at home.

The war was barely over when Winston Churchill announced in a speech on March 15, 1946 that an “iron curtain” had fallen on half the world. It was a powerful even if an inaccurate metaphor which divided the world into two spheres: America and Communism. The actual governments and policies of the United States and the Soviet Union were overshadowed by the total opposition between the “free world” and the threat of world domination by godless communism.

Fortunately, U.S. policy was profoundly affected by the “long telegram” in February 1946 sent from Moscow by George Kennan of the State Department. He argued that the Soviet Union had to be contained by the United States using every force – except military force. This principle of “containment” became U.S. policy for the next four decades, although there was never agreement about what containment meant. General Curtis Lemay, who had supervised the firebombing of fifty-seven Japanese cities in which hundreds of thousands of civilians were

killed and who then became head of the Strategic Air Command, was overruled. Lemay advocated a preemptive nuclear attack on the Soviet Union in the late 1940s.

It quickly became apparent between 1945-1950 that there were two sides in the country. There were people who were staunchly anti-communist and other people who were “soft” on communism and therefore suspected of being un-American. One of the big questions of the time was “Who lost China?” That might sound like a joke today but it was a career-ending accusation directed at politicians and their advisers. The period reached its culmination in the person of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Obscure until a 1950 speech in which he claimed to have the names of hundreds of communists in the state department, he became the most famous and infamous politician in the U.S. for three and a half years.

The case of Joseph McCarthy has been revisited recently by the press and other “media” in search of the fair and proper way to cover some politicians. Some newspapers became instant and ardent supporters of McCarthy. As a fifteen-year-old, I enthusiastically read and was completely convinced by his book, “McCarthyism: The Fight for America.” Many newspapers were forced to work out new rules for covering a prominent person who was crude in speech, was surrounded by a small circle of equally crude characters, and was obviously lying about his list of communists in the State Departments and lying about numerous other matters. The press itself (including the conservative New York Times) was accused of harboring communist sympathizers. The phenomenon of McCarthyism rather suddenly collapsed thanks in large part to television which for the first time played a prominent role in shining a camera “live” on a court trial. It was a simpler time when a lawyer named Joseph Welch could be credited with bringing down one of the most powerful men in the country by simply asking: “Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last? Have you no sense of decency?”

The division continued to exist between anti-communists and people who by self-description were trying to view the plurality of viewpoints in the world but who were suspected of being un-American. Adlai Stevenson, who was badly beaten twice by Eisenhower in presidential elections, embodied the intellectual type that has always generated suspicion in the U.S. and never more so than in the 1950s. John Kennedy presented a glamorous surface but was firmly on the anti-communist side of the country. Even when communism died as a threat, the division continued and it remains in the present. What is now the main dividing line is anyone’s guess; it can be race, gender, sex, wealth, age, region, educational level, religion or some combination of these factors.

When network television began in the late 1940s it was seen as a threat to movies not newspapers. Television news mainly consisted of John Cameron Swayze reading before a camera from 7:30 to 7:45 EST. When it was suggested that the news be extended to a half hour, local stations protested and many people doubted there was enough news to fill a whole half hour. Television became a force in news via the Republican and Democratic conventions. CBS stood out with its reporters who were seasoned by their reporting during the war. Its dominance was threatened when NBC teamed Chet Huntley and David Brinkley at the 1952 conventions. The idea of news coming from a conversation between people undermined the god-like anchor who could say in Walter Cronkite’s sign-off line: “That’s the way it is.”

During the 1950s television had begun to threaten the existence of newspapers. By the time I arrived in New York in the 1960s, there were only 5 or 6 newspapers left. I read the Times and the Herald Tribune in the morning, the Post and the Daily News in the afternoon. All were serious papers; the description “tabloid” simply meant it was shaped for reading on the subway. Television, however, was forcing an imitation of itself. Speed became all important and sensational headlines took over from detailed reporting. When USA Today began publication in 1973 it explicitly imitated the look of a tv screen.

CBS and NBC were the voices of television news (ABC was sometimes called the Almost Broadcasting Company). The pictures were assumed to be incontrovertible evidence of the truth of what the reporters and the anchor said. Television played a major role in the Vietnam War but that role is still disputed. It brought war into the living room of every home but the repeated war scenes tucked in between advertisements for cars and beer, might also have had a deadening effect.

The 21st century brought the greatest change in the dissemination of news since television’s entrance. There has been an almost unimaginable increase in sources. More news is available at any minute of the day than at any previous time. Accurate news is still dependent on reporters who are out covering the stories. At the same time, many of these actual news sources are strapped for cash. Only the Associated Press remains of what use to be competitive news services. The New York Times is one of the few newspapers that has reporters on the scene nationally and internationally. Television has foreign correspondents but they do not usually have the time and resources to do in-depth investigations. Jeff Bezos’ Amazon money has given new life to the Washington Post but the economic situation of every newspaper in the country remains precarious. A shift to digital for newspapers is still in the process.

What constitutes a medium of news is now unclear. Outlets in print, on television or online that repeat third-hand what others have said or just make up stories should not be dignified with the name news medium. There are many small-town newspapers that do a good job covering the news of their town despite their having little money to do their work. Of national news media, it seems obvious that the major t.v. networks and some newspapers of big cities do their best to report national and international news accurately. The “social media” (a ridiculous name since all media are social) widely purvey news though they seldom have their own reporters digging up news or doing research for a story. Sixty percent of people have said that their main source of news is Facebook which was not intended to be or designed to be a news source. And it is not.

The bright line that newspapers used to have between reporting facts on the front page and offering opinion on the editorial page has blurred. Television also used to distinguish between its evening news program and commentary on the news. The news should be objective; the commentaries by definition are not. The phrase “mainstream media” might have been a helpful way to indicate the most trustworthy sources. Unfortunately, the phrase was invented and continues to be used as a slur on journalistic professionals who do their best to provide accurate news (Sarah Palin was one of the main popularizers of the phrase).

Objective is a complex idea. In the physical sciences objective as the standard of truth means that no human emotion has compromised the mathematical accuracy of the data. Nineteenth-century

thinkers realized that in studies of human beings, that is, studies of subjects not objects, one has to take account of human thought and feelings as part of the data. The most common method for trying to reach the (inter-subjective) truth is to have a conversation of opposing viewpoints. Television programs attempt to have debates though both parties often simply try to score points for their side. Responsible newspapers try to present both sides of an issue and to have some diversity of columnists on their op-ed page.

The 2016 presidential campaign was an especially difficult problem for responsible t.v. and print coverage. The problem continued throughout 2017. Most news media thought that Hilary Clinton would win the election by a comfortable margin. Ninety-eight of the hundred largest newspapers in the country supported Clinton. Was that bias or a simple reckoning of who was better prepared to be president? After the election, many papers did some agonized soul-searching. In one discussion by editors of leading newspapers, Dean Baquet, editor of the *New York Times*, said he had learned that Manhattan is not the real world. If he really believed that, he should have immediately resigned. What he presumably meant was that the *Times* had given insufficient coverage to people who voted for Trump.

The irony is that the news media in trying to be objective by being even-handed were easily trapped into not calling out bombast, self-contradictory promises, and obvious lies. As a result, Trump was given implicit support by the *Times* which he constantly attacks though he is obsessed with having its approval. The *Times*, in its attempt to be fair, was harsh on Clinton to match the negative coverage of Trump. But to say, for example, that both of them told lies obscured the fact that he is an inveterate liar and she is not. A non-partisan group in 2016 found that Clinton told the fewest lies of the twenty people who campaigned for the presidency. Trump told by far the most lies. The *Times* with the strictest definition of lying counted 103 lies in Trump's first 300 days.

During 2017 the *Times* sometimes made itself look ridiculous by repeatedly providing portraits of Trump voters, including one on Thanksgiving weekend of a man proud to be a Nazi. Unbiased reporting does not exclude a judgment by intelligent professionals that a claim is not true or is morally reprehensible. An editor, while acknowledging his or her fallibility, has the indispensable job of separating truth from falsity. To say that no one knows the truth about an issue can be true in some cases and true to a degree in others. But to say that truth is no longer important is simply stupid and untrue.