Objectivity, Impartiality and the Governance of Journalism

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This paper is concerned to outline a research agenda for a comparative empirical study investigating journalistic objectivity and impartiality as a variable and contested field of professional norms, regulatory frameworks, production practices and generic cultural forms. In doing so, we acknowledge the existence of a long history of research that has investigated journalistic objectivity and impartiality from various disciplinary perspectives and approaches. Indeed, we argue that the critical lenses this work provides reveal something of the complexity of objectivity and impartiality, as a research object that encompasses a plurality of elements and aspects. Nevertheless, we are also concerned to highlight a need for research that moves beyond dominant paradigms of research in this area, in order to gain a more detailed and historically sensitive understanding of these terms as a heading for variable modes of knowledge, practice and governance. To this end, this paper ultimately argues for an 'interactional' model for investigating objectivity and impartiality as modes of cultural production and reception that emerge as an outcome of the interactions of various actors (e.g. journalists, editors, regulators, audiences) engaged in various forms of 'situated practice' in particular historical, cultural, regulatory, institutional and political contexts.
In media sociology and journalism studies research, journalistic objectivity has long provided an important area of debate and discussion, a tradition that continues unabated today. From a starting premise that ‘[t]he objectivity norm guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts’ (Schudson 2001: 150), a range of theoretical and analytical approaches have emerged which seek to explain the social character of objectivity, while recent prominent studies have also addressed the question of what normative model of journalistic objectivity, if any, is justifiable (Hackett and Zhao 1998; Ward 2004). Despite the significant insights of such contributions, which we explore in this paper, we argue that a more nuanced understanding of objectivity and impartiality, and how it operates, both within and across different socio-political, regulatory, institutional and professional contexts, provides a necessary starting point for further consideration of its social character and social implications, as well as for the question of the desirability and possibility of its reform. In particular, we argue for an approach that recognises the plurality of forms and multiple aspects of objectivity and impartiality, and seeks to investigate it in terms of the interaction of its macro, meso and micro dimensions. Such an approach also promises to provide significant insights into understandings of journalistic practice and governance.

Objectivities

The existing field of work into objectivity and impartiality can be loosely categorised in terms of four sets of approaches, which each serve to highlight different aspects of its social character: philosophical-ethical; social-organisational; political-economic and cultural-historical. Philosophical-ethical approaches to journalism highlight an important aspect of objectivity and impartiality: its status as, in part, a simultaneously pluralistic and delimited range of epistemological positions that serve as a discursive influence on journalistic practice, governance and reception. It is in this light that attempts to critically defend and/or re-articulate models of objectivity on philosophical grounds remain an important site of analysis (Dunlevy 1998; Lichtenberg 1991). These range from common-sense assertions regarding the need to separate fact from opinion, and to avoid tendentious statements, to alignments of professional practice with social-scientific models of critical realism (Lau 2004), to more negotiated positions that view these concepts as aspirations rather than
possibilities (Kovach and Rosenthal 2001), or as primarily referring to pragmatic modes of ethical practice that can be philosophically and professionally justified (Ward 2004). At the same time, ethnographic work reveals that journalists are frequently sceptical about the possibility of impartiality (even where, as in the case of the BBC, they are subject to statutory requirements to uphold it), and adopt representational strategies informed by an epistemological stance that is better characterised as knowing than naïve (Born 2004: 373-430). Collectively, what such work reveals is that, while concepts of objectivity continue to provide a paradigmatic set of discourses that impact on journalistic production and reception, these are far from untouched by broader epistemological debates occurring in other fields, particularly the social sciences.

The limits of such philosophical-ethical debates around objectivity, however, rest on their usually unstated assumption that practices of objectivity emerge as a mere reflection of a philosophical position or, conversely, that philosophical discourses are themselves untouched by the concerns and characteristics of news production. Social-organisational perspectives, by contrast, have tended to view objectivity as practice, as strategies that are used to address the pragmatic challenges of newsmaking itself. In its key formulation, objectivity is positioned as a ‘strategic ritual’, where procedural elements of newswork exist as means to address the organizational challenges of news production, such that ‘deadlines will be met and libel suits avoided’ (Tuchman 1972: 664). Such elements include: the gathering of facts that can be verified by reference to reliable and/or legitimate sources; the use of ‘neutral’, non-emotive language; the presentation of conflicting possibilities; the presentation of supporting evidence; the use of quotations to ensure that potentially contentious or unverifiable claims are attributed to others; and the explicit demarcation between reporting, analytical and opinion genres. The ‘ritualistic’ aspect of this definition asserts that, as such practices come to be viewed as the embodiment of a key legitimating discourse of journalistic professionalism, the strategic concerns that motivated their adoption disappear from view. Such a reading may also provide some basis for explaining the persistence of such legitimating discourses in the face of epistemological critique (Allan 1999).

One limitation of perspectives that view such journalistic norms merely as strategic practice, however, is that these can too readily lead to an overly linear functionalism.
For example, they tend to ignore the degree to which judgements may be inflected by values gained through processes of professional training outside a given organisation, and work that has suggested that norms of journalistic professionalism may to some extent exist in uneasy tension with organisational and regulatory imperatives (Author 2004; Soloski 1989). Furthermore, a focus on organisations alone can too easily tend toward a view of occupations that pays insufficient attention to the manner in which these are shaped by, as well as reciprocally shape, a broader field of socio-political relations. Here, political-economic approaches have provided valuable insights, by suggesting how professional standards of objectivity and impartiality can be read as both product and facilitator of economic and state power. Thus, political-economic analyses of objectivity have positioned it as: both underpinned by and reproductive of liberal-democratic ideology; as a mechanism that enables, via its claim to apolitical status, access to broad range of markets; and as underpinned by forms of state power that delimit the performance of journalism via mechanisms of regulatory constraint.

In terms of its impacts, such critical approaches have pointed to the manner in which norms of objectivity and impartiality underpin a reliance on and re-presentation of the limited frameworks of debate produced by elite institutions and hegemonic ‘common sense’, their facilitation of processes of news management, and the masking of such effects via its claims to transparency, ‘fairness’ and the adoption of representational techniques of realism (Bennett 1982; Gitlin 1980; Hackett and Zhao 1998; Hall et al 1978).

In terms of contributing to an understanding of objectivity, such approaches offer several useful elements. Primarily, they raise the question of how political-economic interests might work to define practices of objectivity, and the contributions such practices make to socio-political relations. In addition, by calling attention to the political-economic underpinnings of journalistic practice, they focus attention on how different external influences may work to produce different models of objectivity in different contexts. Such a perspective is supported by other work that has paid attention to variations in models and practices of objectivity in different national contexts (Chalaby 1996; Donsbach and Klett 1993), as well as national variations in legislation and regulation applying to concepts such as ‘fairness’ and ‘impartiality’ (Harvey 1998; Jones 2003). However, political-economic approaches also have their shortcomings. The first of these relates to the rather all-encompassing critical...
character of such work, which leaves little room for understanding how countervailing forces and struggles, both within and outside the newsroom, might also have served to shape formations of objectivity, such that these may, on occasion, produce effects that do not entirely coincide with the interests of hegemonic elites (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994). This may also tend to shift focus away from the manner in which definitions of objectivity may provide a basis for resisting the political attempts to shape practices of journalism. Furthermore, the tendency of such approaches to focus on large-scale, ‘macro’ forces shaping the profession from ‘outside’ may lead to a neglect of the role journalists themselves play in defining objectivity. In short, if philosophical-ethical approaches to journalistic objectivity tend to underplay the material forces shaping it, such macro-analysis pays insufficient attention to the role the field of journalism itself plays in defining one of its major occupational norms.

This is a point that Michael Schudson has stressed in his cultural histories of the emergence of journalistic objectivity in US journalism (Schudson 2001, 1995, 1978). Criticising determinist accounts that explain objectivity’s emergence as a product of a commercial need to appeal to wide readership, or as the influence of telegraphic communications, Schudson argues that such explanations provide no basis for understanding why objectivity should take on the status of a moral obligation and marker of journalistic professionalism (2001: 150). Schudson is also sceptical of the suggestion that objectivity simply developed as a defensive, pragmatic 'ritual' as this, he argues, similarly fails to explain why such rules should attain the status of a moral norm that journalists express allegiance to, and that is widely deployed as a basis for defending and/or questioning journalistic professionalism (2001: 163). Instead, he traces the emergence of objectivity through an analysis of the interaction of factors both internal and external to journalism. For example, while Schudson’s analysis of the emergence of objectivity recognises the significance of the struggles of journalists as an occupational community to publicly define the grounds of their professional identity, he also explores the ways in which these internal processes intersect with external cultural and political processes, including the political emergence of progressivism, with its dual emphasis on technocratic expertise and mechanisms of accountability (Schudson 1978, 1995). It is only through an analysis of the intersection of such processes, Schudson suggests, that objectivity and impartiality's
simultaneous existence as headings for contested professional norms, standards of editorial and regulatory control, practices of cultural production, and recognisable generic forms can be properly understood.

**An Agenda for Research**

Schudson's ‘interactional’ analysis of objectivity’s emergence in the US context is suggestive of useful directions for an analysis of contemporary formations of objectivity and impartiality, the historical factors and forces which shape these, and their concrete implications for processes of public communication and their regulation. Schudson’s approach suggests that operative norms of objectivity are not shaped solely by the professional culture of journalism itself, nor solely by factors and forces external to the profession, but rather by their interaction. His approach also suggests that objectivity does not exist as a pre-given standard of judgement, but rather is given specific definition by various parties in specific social, political and economic contexts as they mobilise to criticise, defend and govern practices of journalism. Such an approach enables an analysis that is not only attentive to the multiple dimensions of objectivity and impartiality highlighted by previous work, but also provides an analysis of how these different dimensions serve to ‘mediate’ one another in ways which cannot be adequately accounted for through predominant liberal-pluralist and political-economic approaches to media systems.

Such an approach is consistent with Rodney Benson's argument, grounded in Bourdieu’s field analysis and new institutionalism, for analysis that pays attention to how micro-, meso- and macro-level influences work together to shape media performance (Benson 2004a). At the same time, Benson’s explicit identification of the significance of analysing the interaction of these three dimensions suggests a means of extending Schudson’s approach. At the micro-level, Benson’s approach supports an analysis of how the epistemological worldviews of actors are applied in the social and institutional contexts in which they situated, and how this informs the way in which they negotiate and reflect upon of the specific problems and dilemmas they are faced with in their everyday work. This would necessarily also include a consideration of the relationship between ideals and standards of objectivity held by media professionals themselves, and their regulation via mechanisms for addressing institutional standards and quality control. However, rather than merely understanding journalistic agency through the opposition of choice versus constraint,
a fuller analysis must involve a consideration of the manner in which actors' worldviews are themselves constituted. Here, for example, the question of how the education and training of media professionals has been impacted by developments in the sociology of knowledge, on one hand, and the relations between academic and media sectors on the other is of relevance. Equally, the manner in which debates surrounding standards and ethics operate across, rather than merely within, institutional domains, as well as the degree to which journalists themselves move between different workplace environments suggests that it is important to consider how conceptions of professionalism are also defined at the meso-level of the ‘journalistic field’ (Benson and Neveu 2004; Sedorkin and Schirato 1998), where ‘field’ is defined as ‘the interorganizational, professional, social, and indeed cultural space within which journalists situate or orient their action and interaction’ (Benson 2004b: 311).

An important aspect of approaches to journalism as a field is that these seek to understand how the specific practical concerns and occupational worldviews of the field serve as a mediating force on external influences, but do not exist in an autonomous relationship to them. In this respect, such approaches open a space for analyses of how the different macro-level influences, including commercial, political, legal, regulatory, and technological practices, interact with the activities and characteristic of the field itself, and the actual and potential outcomes of such interactions. As Benson (2004a) has argued, such an approach necessarily involves both a disaggregation of such influences and an appreciation of how organizational practices of newsmaking are not defined in isolation from them.

Understanding this relationship also requires modes of analysis that are adequate to the relations of power within which journalistic objectivity and impartiality are implicated. Indeed, it is here that the limits of Benson's approach become apparent, in its inadequate conception of power itself:

To the extent that culture can even be distinguished from social structure, it is as a sort of 'sediment' of past struggles over the hierarchical organization of power and the allocation of resources, in other words, the state and the market, which return us to political economy. (Benson 2004a: 279)
While one might accept the general point that culture does not exist in isolation or ‘relative autonomy’ from social structures and struggles, the idea that these are simply determined by the state and the market necessarily sidelines the manner in which fields themselves are constituted by the exertion of different forms of power. For example if, as previous work has suggested, it is the case that practices and models of journalistic professionalism emerge from ‘boundary contests’ between the worldviews and concerns of journalists, management and legal advisors (Author 2004), then one might suggest that different influences and concerns also serve to mediate the interactions of these different players. The question that arises is not whether, in each case, such influences and concerns emerge in isolation from state and market influences (they clearly do not), but rather why analysis should assume a priori this alleged point of origin, and what purpose this serves in the context of analysis? A contrasting framework, which one of us has recently applied in an analysis of contests around standards of objectivity at the ABC, has drawn on a Foucauldian framework to suggest that these emerge from the interaction of players (journalists, managers, regulators) exercising different forms of authority that emerge from the social position they occupy, and the particular technical capacities and values they bring to the exercise of that authority (Author 2006). The major point here is to suggest that an analysis of objectivity and impartiality as outcomes of interactional relationships at micro-, meso- and macro- levels has a clearer purposive value if it is also recognised that these relationships involve continual political struggle. It is in this light that an analysis of such relationships might not only facilitate an understanding of how they might be structured differently through specific interventions. It also provides a basis for considering the extent to which such reform may (or may not) be desirable in terms of their effects.

Conclusion

This paper reveals the significance of analysing objectivity and impartiality if we are to understand contemporary modes of journalistic practice and governance. At the same time, however, we have shown that while existing dominant approaches raise critical issues around the philosophical, ethical, organisational and political–economic dimensions of objectivity and impartiality, such approaches are ultimately limited. We argue that if analysis of objectivity and impartiality is to be furthered, and possibilities for reform to be considered, then an interactional model should be
developed. Such a model allows for a more nuanced approach to the complexity of objectivity and impartiality, in particular by investigating them as modes of cultural production and reception that emerge as an outcome of the interactions of various actors (e.g. journalists, editors, regulators, audiences) engaged in various forms of ‘situated practice’ in particular historical, cultural, regulatory, institutional and political contexts.

References


