

Resurrecting the notion of journalistic objectivity: A discussion of journalistic objectivity in one-on-one interviews

Abstract

A number of recent books on ethics (Hirst and Patching, 2005, Tanner et al, 2005, Richards, 2005, Ward, 2006) have indicated that traditional understandings of journalism “objectivity” are in need of renovation if they are to sustain the claim as a guide to ethical action.

Ward, argues for the recasting of the notions of traditional objectivity to offer a “pragmatic objectivity” as an alternative and plausible underpinning to ethical journalism practice. He argues that a recast or “pragmatic objectivity” should respond to the changing rhetorical relationship between journalists and their audiences; and, in so doing, should take inspiration from attempts to be objective in other practical domains---professions such as law and public administration in seeking models.

This paper seeks to take a step in that direction through illustrating how journalism interviewers do “objectivity” through the adaptation of the principles of the “Fourth Estate to political interviews. It turns such analysis to the ends of establishing the particular “pragmatic ethic” underpinning such practices and how journalism interviewing technique has allowed for proactive journalists to strike a workable balance between pursuing the public interest and observing the restraining protocols of modern journalistic practice.

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Introduction:

In his book *They Only Look Dead* (1996), American journalist and political commentator Eugene Joseph Dionne argues the complex mandate of the news media, where journalists operate under a number of conflicting professional diktats “be neutral yet investigative; be disengaged but have an impact; be fair-minded but have an edge. Therein lies the nut of our tortured relationship with objectivity. Few would argue that complete objectivity is possible, yet we bristle when someone suggests we aren't being objective — or fair, or balanced — as if everyone agrees on what they all mean”. Here in lies the difficulty of defining objective reporting, let alone its practice. Brent Cunningham (2003) argues “we all learned about objectivity in school or at our first job. Along with its twin sentries ‘fairness’ and ‘balance,’ it defined journalistic standards,” but journalists struggle to reach a consensus on what the notion of objectivity *really* means. Jeff Jarvis, one of *the Guardian* newspapers bloggers, argue (US) “journalistic organisations continue to tie their knickers in knots over their quixotic efforts to be objective.” Jarvis claims National Public Radio had forbidden its staff to attend Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert’s left-leaning Rally to Restore Sanity. “The New York Times similarly forbade its journalists to attend the rally. The Washington Post said they could simply observe,” Jarvis wrote. The American media’s sanction’s are reminiscent of a screenplay dialogue between Sir Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell in Fred Zinnemann’s *‘a man for all seasons’* (1966), where the two men dispute the meaning of silence – the legal maxim *‘qui tacet consentiret’* meaning “silence gives consent”. Jarvis’ anecdote, spells out a dangerous culture in contemporary journalism, a policing of thought, for the sake of perceived objectivity, where journalists are not only expected to be objective in their writing but also in life in general, a tall order from any profession. In this context a distinction should be made between the journalists’ professional and personal objectivity, where the journalists’ professional objectivity has a direct impact on the *journalism* they produce.

Stephen Ward argues the twin concept of truth and objectivity has ‘long roots’ in journalism running back to the advent of the periodic news press. Ward claims “Modern journalism ethics was built upon the twin pillars of truth and objectivity...today; the pillars of truth and objectivity show serious wear and tear.” He further argues the notion of journalists objectivity has taken a serious battering from a post-modern scepticism of the objective truth, a cynicism of ethics in profit-seeking journalism, and a suggestion of the merits of non-objective writing in a ‘interactive’ media landscape populated by ‘citizen journalists’ and bloggers (Ward, 2009).

The French philosopher and journalist Jean-François Revel famously said “among all the clichés that clutter up human minds, there is one which gives rise to a stir of approval in its audience each time it is sententiously pronounced: ‘Objectivity does not exist--in reporting’.” He writes “In politics, labour unions, diplomacy, business, culture, and justice its existence is not questioned. But in the very profession that tries to establish a truthful report objectivity is considered a theoretical impossibility. Reporting, due to some mysterious law of nature, is thought to spring from pure relativism. Journalists should therefore limit themselves to juxtaposing a number of points of view, leaving the public to choose between them”.

In this context it must be noted that Western philosophy notes three types of objectivity: ontological, epistemological and procedural¹ (Megill, 1994, pp.1-20; Roberts, 2002; Ward, 2005 pp.14-18; Ward, 2010, pp.138-139). Kovach and Rosenstiel argue “objectivity called for journalists to develop a consistent method of testing information – transparent approach to evidence – precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermined the accuracy of their work,” (2001, p.72). In this context it is perhaps worth noting the notion of objectivity has largely remained a principle that is implied within the numerous codes of ethics and not explicitly defined. The notions of balanced, honest and fair reportage or as the April 28, 1923 American Society of Newspaper Editors’ *Canons of Journalism* suggests “sincerity, truthfulness, accuracy”; the distinction between reportage and opinion; and reportage of essential facts without suppress relevant available relevant facts all fall under the rubric of journalistic ‘objectivity’.

The notion of journalistic objectivity is intrinsically tied up with the purported journalistic quest for ‘truth.’ Kovach and Rosenstiel argue “there is little doubt journalists believe themselves to be engaged in pursuing truth.

¹ Ontological objectivity deals with independently existing objects or facts – explanation and distinction between what is subjective and objective; epistemological objectivity deals with methods and standards derived from logic – ‘methods of inquiry’, perception and other canons of inquiry; procedural objectivity deals with the use of objective criteria to make fair judgments – fair and reasonable decision making (Ward, 2010, pp.138-139; Berry, 2008).

Renowned historian Simon Schama (In Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001, p40) argues “the certainty of an ultimately observable, empirical truth” is no longer valid. But what must be understood is that journalists are aware of this elusive nature of truth, and it is not a Kantian transcendental absolute truth they seek but a practical or functional truth.

In a statement echoing that of Jean-François Revel *New York Times*’ managing editor Bill Keller states “We don’t think it’s unreasonable to expect jurors to render fair verdicts ...so why should we set any lower goals for poor journalists,” – if police can arrest people based on available evidence, and trials held to assess the voracity of allegations, and judges and juries make decisions based on available facts (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001 p42) then it is not unreasonable to assume that society is already accepting of practical or functional truth derived through a procedural objectivity of a legal justice system. While the law is far from infallible it is also hardly inept. The same argument is true in the case of journalism, where journalists are able apply journalistic processes to reach a ‘practical or functional truth’, what Ward calls a ‘pragmatic objectivity’ (2009, p80).

Gilles Gauthier maintains “the end of objectivity in journalism would spell the end of journalism itself”. In his defence of objectivity, Gauthier suggest detractors of journalistic objectivity fail to understand the nuances between different types of journalism and commit ‘category mistakes’ when discussing the inability to achieve objectivism in certain types of journalism, such as advocacy journalism. Category mistake is analysing an attribute in relation to an area where it is illogical to do so – the literary and academic equivalent of criticising the lack of warmth in ones Gazpacho.

He then argues the notion of “objectivity can (only) be legitimately raised with respect to ... straight news reporting. This proposition is intended primarily to exclude such disparate types of journalism as advocacy journalism, editorials, the New Journalism, muckraking, and service or marketing journalism, as well as certain types of investigative reporting, from the area of application of objectivity” (1993). Gauthier’s definition of objectivity is based on John Rawl’s (1971) notion of ‘central range of application’, re-cast by Gauthier to suggest an ‘area of application.’ This argument suggest the notion of objectivity can only be discussed within an

‘‘area of application’ and that any such discussions outside this specific genre of journalism would result to ‘category mistakes.’

However this paper attempts to expand this view of objectivity to include journalistic interviews, and discuss how journalist’s attempt to pursue the ‘truth’ with out compromising ‘objectivity’ in journalistic interviews, through the use of professional judgement and method.

Putting together the puzzle

The work of Rosenblum (1987) shows that journalists can invoke a form of relative autonomy in interviews conducted at formally convened press conferences. Rosenblum (1987) shows that journalists who are seeking news from political, business, and other powerful sources often mount challenges to the ‘‘authorities’’ position on the topic. Rosenblum’s studies focused on the last three presidential press conferences of Richard Nixon, prior to his impeachment, and she uncovered journalism challenges to accounts, and recounted occasions when journalists pursued contradictions between and/or within accounts. Rosenblum (1987) argues that these questioning approaches are bolstered by press conference norms that both ensure nominal responsiveness from the convenor of the press conference and prohibit an immediate punitive mobilisation of social control.

Thus, she states, in press conferences, the real disparity of power between those involved is temporarily circumscribed allowing for a ‘‘window of opportunity’’ where accusations might be made by people normally in a subordinate position.

The findings of Clayman and Heritage (2002) show that journalists often confront interview sources with opinionated questions. In this regard, the studies of Drew (1992) and Rosenblum (1987) show how legal counsel and journalists, respectively, adapt ‘‘puzzle’’ questions to the norms and rules of their particular settings. These adaptations result in questioning constructions that are potentially damaging to the courtroom defendant and to the source, or interviewee, in the journalistic interview. Therefore, these studies show that journalists might use challenging questions to test the versions of

authoritative sources; provided they present apparent discrepancies as a puzzle that they are attempting to reconcile for their audience.

In this way, journalists can continue to challenge the source in the absence of a new construction of the facts from the source that can challenge previous understandings. The fact that journalists retreat from a challenging stance when such new information is provided allows them to distance from a personal position through accepting the source’s ‘‘superior’’ claim to knowledge on the topic. However, they are able to return to the challenge in subsequent interviews when they are in position of new information that allows for a renewed challenge to the source. These understandings are confirmed through my data analysis of a case study conducted during the ‘‘Waterfront Dispute’’ that closed Australia’s wharves for four weeks in 1998, between 7 April and 7 May.

The Waterfront Dispute Case Study

On 7 April 1998 armed security guards with dogs forcibly evicted the rostered on members of the 1400-strong Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) workforce of Patrick Stevedores at all their ports throughout Australia. It ended with the coverage of the High Court Decision which required that the MUA workforce be re-employed to move port cargo, provided that the administrators could ensure that the companies did not trade while insolvent.

During the dispute, 385 individual items about the dispute were broadcast, including packaged items consisting of journalism voice reports of events linking ‘‘actuality’’ from sources of information, to commentary and opinion, with the inserts fulfilling a similar role to quotations in a newspaper article. The second form was the interview, where the record of the interview interaction between the journalist and the source was replayed either in an edited form, or in full. The data contained 40 such interviews that ranged in length from two minutes 45 seconds to seven minutes.

This study use analysis selected from the interviews alone, because the nature of the interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer can only be deduced through the examination of the complete interviews. In this context this paper concentrates on the Chief Executive of Patrick, Chris

Corrigan, and the main Howard Government actor, Peter Reith, the Minister for Work Place Relations, because of their contentious role in the dispute.

The main area of contention was a concern that the action against the workers was pre-meditated and involved a possible conspiracy between the two men that prioritised the dismissal of the workers without consideration of whether this was economically justified, the key defence of both men when questioned on this issue. In the course of the dispute, two competing contentions as to the nature and cause of the events emerged;

The government and the company, Patrick, painted the confrontation as the “natural” consequence of an anti-competitive monopoly structure that meant labour was sourced solely from the MUA. In this view, lack of competition lead to “rorts and inefficiencies”, and anti-competitive behaviour.

In contrast, the Labor Opposition, the peak union body The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the union in the dispute itself (MUA), advocated that far from a natural move towards an economic equilibrium, precipitated through sustained industrial action, the dispute was a construction. It was the not the natural spontaneous correction that the economic argument proposed, but an action that was pre-ordained and was destined to proceed, whatever the economic or political realities. The basis of the claims made against Corrigan and Reith were that they discussed and implemented a company restructure designed to leave the MUA workforce without jobs to return to. Further, that this approach was designed to break the union for political reasons and was nothing to do with industrial and economic imperatives, as the two men continued to claim throughout the dispute.

The data analysis examined here limits itself to an examination of challenging “puzzle” questions so that the particular approaches to, the features of, and the effects of such interactions can be examined and analysed. In each case that is examined, the journalist has new information available that allows for the renewal of previous challenges to the source that have been persistently denied.

Interview data and analysis

Interview One: conducted on April 8 on the radio programme AM – interviewer was Matt Peacock and the interviewee was Patrick Stevedores Chief Executive, Chris Corrigan.

Question One (Q1): Peacock asks Corrigan: “John Coombs’ crystal ball has been pretty accurate to date, is the sacking of your workforce what you and Peter Reith planned all along?”

In Q1 the first “puzzle”, is put to Corrigan, after the MUA were removed from the docks. It used the prediction from the Secretary of the Maritime Union, John Coombs, of the date and nature of the action, to support a question asking whether the actions of sacking the workers were pre-planned. The journalist selects facts that support this unfavourable version, and constructs a puzzle that situates Corrigan as accountable for explaining this coincidence.

The question is similar to courtroom cross-examination approaches, and indicates that the journalist sees this technique as importantly buttressing otherwise hostile challenges through distancing from expressing an opinion through means that are described by Drew as follows: “Whatever inconsistency is being implied in the contrast is not one that would be resolved by simply discounting one or other of the versions. Instead, the difference between them generates a puzzle about how it is that two apparently conflicting accounts can be reconciled” (1992, p. 507).

In news terms, such a construction allows the journalist to pursue the question and to “defer” to the authority where “new” information presenting as a feasible explanation is presented by the “authoritative” source.

In this way, the journalist’s credibility as “objective” and “neutral” is maintained because the authoritative sources have the opportunity to tailor their response to obviate any apparent inconsistencies in their own versions

of events implied by the questioning. The act of skilful question construction allows the interviewer to present potentially damaging questions that are open for the source to refute but, at the same time, the response to such “challenge” questions is also open for the audience to accept, or discount, in light of their own views on the issue.

The following puzzle questions were asked of the Work Place Relations Minister, Peter Reith, the next day, and they take up a topic that relates to the perception that the Government and Patrick were concerned with the de-unionisation of the docks, rather than the efficiency and viability of Australia’s container ports.

Interview Two: conducted on April 9 on the radio programme AM. The interviewer was Raphael Epstein and the interviewee was Work Place Relations Minister Peter Reith.

Question 1 (Q1) Epstein asks Reith: “Are you liable for damages were they sacked because they were union members?”

Question 2 (Q2) Epstein asks Reith: “ So if the MUA can legally argue that the labour hire company are still part of Patrick or if Patrick divided up the company in this way as part of a plan to sack them you’d lose in court wouldn’t you?”

The live interview with Reith follows another with the MUA lawyer, Josh Bernstein, broadcast immediately before Reith’s interview. Bernstein discussed the union’s impending legal action that included claims for monetary damages against Reith personally, and against Patrick Stevedores. In particular, the claim indicated that the sacking of the Patrick workforce constituted a breach of Reith’s own act – the Workplace Relations Act.

The two questions connect the sacking of the union members to the company restructuring, and point to this connection as being central to deciding the

credibility of any case put by Reith that the sackings and company restructuring were not related. Q1 is a closed question that implies that Reith might have to accept personal liability for damages should a court decide that he acted illegally against the MUA workers. Q2 follows from Q1 in returning to the same question but through the addition of “new” information not contained in the initial challenge.

In this case, when Q1 apparently fails to satisfy the journalist that Reith is “telling all”, the journalist inserts potentially more damaging information into the next question. Q2 then introduces the possibility that the sackings were preceded by a company restructure that was carried out to facilitate and entrench the sackings, so that a plan to introduce non-union labour could go ahead virtually unimpeded.

The case then appears to hinge on a journalism judgment that the potential court action, and the nature of the company restructure, calls into question Reith’s previous claims that the sackings relate to the broader issues of economic efficiency and industrial irresponsibility. Further, the content and type of question places the interview on a footing that requires a direct answer, if the source wishes to avoid a sanction from the journalist for not answering the question. It is the structuring and delivery of these sequential questions that implies that the company restructuring was facilitated to allow for the illegal sacking of union members. It is this particular approach to the structuring and sequencing of the journalist’s questions that places such a proposition at the centre of issues that need resolution, in the quest for the reasons behind the dispute. The implicit challenge is housed in a question that allows the authoritative source to recast their answer through a means that favours their version.

However, it clearly shows that journalists exercise considerable judgement and skill in framing questions that might lead discussion in a direction where the input is potentially damaging to the credibility of the source and their position as to the “true state of affairs”. The finding shows evidence of a journalism judgment allowing interviewers to persist with challenges in the public interest and to do so according to identifiable professional guidelines. This judgment is exercised, by the ABC radio journalists studied, even in the face of opposition from a powerful source who is potentially damaged from the type of exchange that the topic pursuit engenders.

Interview Three: conducted on April 14 on the radio programme AM, and is the next interview in the programme after the Reith interview. The interviewer was Lorann Downer and the interviewee was Patrick Stevedores Chief Executive, Chris Corrigan. The interview examines a new “take” on the legitimacy of the actions of the Government and Patrick in the events leading up to and surrounding the removal of the MUA workers from the docks on 7 April 1998.

Question 1 (Q1) Downer asks Corrigan: “Corrigan, Frank Costigan the respected QC who conducted the Royal Commission, which examined organised crime and exposed bottom of the harbour tax schemes, has written of his concern of Patrick’s corporate restructuring. He says Patrick’s changes were not designed to avoid tax, as were the bottom of the harbour schemes, but their design and effect has been to avoid obligations under the Workplace Relations Act, is he right?”

Question 2 (Q2) Downer asks Corrigan: “This tactic of stripping a company’s assets and leaving the workers to the liquidator while you hide behind the corporate veil is one that you’ve advocated before when you were running Australian stevedores isn’t it?”

Lorann Downer introduces information from Frank Costigan QC who conducted a Royal Commission in the late 1970s that uncovered the criminal use of company restructures designed to avoid tax commitments through sending companies to the “bottom of the harbour”. In a newspaper article published in the Melbourne Age earlier that month, Costigan had drawn an

analogy between the company structures that facilitated these illegal corporate schemes and those that Patrick were using to facilitate the removal of their union workforce. The questions appear to reflect the journalist’s judgment that questions around the restructuring remain central to explaining the dispute, and this issue is worthy of continued pursuit despite the authoritative (Reith and the Government) position that they are largely irrelevant.

In Q1, the journalist uses the authority of Costigan QC to add weight to previous claims that the company restructuring was clearly designed to circumvent sections of the Workplace Relations Act. Corrigan denies the implicit accusation and seeks to discredit the content through a different characterisation. The denial coupled with the failure to directly address the question prompts the journalist to frame a second puzzle, in more direct and specific terms.

In Q2 the journalist clearly states what the broad allegation presented in Q1 specifically meant. She states specifically that it meant stripping assets from the relevant Patrick’s companies and leaving the MUA men to the liquidator, while the company hid behind the “corporate veil”. This analysis shows how the journalist will extend a puzzle across consecutive questions to pursue a particular line of inquiry. Such examples show that in constructing challenging interviews, journalists often firstly ask a broader question, and then proceed to ask more specific and potentially damaging questions if the source avoids the implication of the initial question.

The presence of such a strong and sustained challenge across two separate questions and the pursuit of similar questions around similar content across the series, further indicates that journalists questioning of sources is importantly directed and strategic, rather than simply a means to defer to the interview norm of “balance”. It shows that journalists can maintain such a challenging stance, in spite of the fact that the authoritative interviewees persist with a contrary line. Such a conclusion is indicative of a “pragmatic objectivity” that adapts the notion to the norms of the journalism field rather than a defensive ploy that abandons any pretence of proactive journalism.

Conclusions

Therefore, the analysis indicates the presence of a journalism judgment that where new evidence compounds the journalism/interviewers concern with the answers to the questions, the interviewers might redouble efforts to test the credibility of the source. The finding shows evidence of a journalism judgment allowing interviewers to persist with challenges in the public interest and to do so according to identifiable professional guidelines. This judgment is exercised, by the ABC radio journalists studied, even in the face of opposition from a powerful source who is potentially damaged from the type of exchange that the topic pursuit engenders.

However, the fact that such journalism challenges are used does not show that journalists will decide to pursue one approach to an issue at the expense of another. The data are replete with a host of examples where journalists conducted interviews that were more sympathetic to the authoritative sources than those outlined in the data above.

Kovach and Rosenstiel quote American news caster Nick Clooney : “ I always work for the people who turn on the television set... whenever I have a discussion with a general manager or a member of the board of directors, my bottom line was always, ‘I don’t work for you. You are paying my check, and I ma very pleased. But the truth of the matter is, I don’t work for you, and if it comes down to a question of loyalty, my loyalty will be tho the person who turns on the television set’”. Clooney’s position is shared by many journalists who believe their primary professional loyalty is to their audience, and as such they are the ‘pragmatic objectivity’ they aim to deliver is to their audience. Simply argued, good journalists attempt to deliver as much of the ‘truth’ as possible to their audience – the public. The journalist, is then expected to, if the situation arose, take an adversarial position with the authority in order to ‘cross examine’ their narratives on behalf of the journalists audience (2001, p52).

To fail to adequately canvass the “other side” of the story is seen, in the Australian context, as formally biased. An examination of the ABC radio current affairs coverage of the “Waterfront Dispute”, conducted by Professor Phillip Bell (1998a,b), concluded that no such bias existed, as roughly equal time was accorded to all the competing contentions

surrounding the dispute. Of such findings, many supporters of the line presented by the Government and Patrick Corporation concluded the media had played a significant part in their “losing” the issue (the sacked workers ultimately were re-instated, although labour levels were substantially reduced) and that the particular concentration of the journalists on certain aspects was a major contributor to the outcome. These positions further support findings based on empirical data analysis, that highlighting particular aspects of a case might play a part in turning the tide in the public understanding of a particular issue. The above analysis indicates clearly that journalists can use a principle inquiry form (the interview) to challenge the positions of powerful sources. This paper has illustrated how the “professionally objective” approach that journalists adopt in broadcast interviews allows for journalists to challenge authorities in a way that orients to a “public interest” rather than the interests of power or the personal or ideological persuasions of the journalist, or their employing organisation.

It shows that the approach allows for the exercise of a judgment and resultant persistent pursuit of topic. This approach allows for journalists to attack the consistency of a source’s position in a manner that positions the audience as the arbiter as to what conclusions can be drawn from the particular set of circumstances placed before them.

Philip Meyer, North Carolina University’s Knight Chair in Journalism claims “true objectivity is based on method, not result. Instead of implying that there is an equal amount of weight to be accorded every side, the objective investigator makes an effort to evaluate the competing viewpoints.” This method in the ‘objective’ news report involves a transparent process including attribution and right of reply. While it is not possible to use the same process when a single interview becomes a media product, it can be argued different professional processes can be set in place to achieve similar levels of “pragmatic objectivity”. In the case of the interviews, cited in this study, the journalist constructs a “puzzle”, and irrespective of the journalist’s personal views they can pursue the line of questioning until a ‘rational’ answer is provided by the authority figure. The process determines the level of pressure that can be applied, and any attempt by the journalist to pursue a question that has already been answered will be seen as a vilification and bias by the audience.

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