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Objectivity and the Role of Journalism in Democratic Societies

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Abstract

In this essay, I argue that the institution of journalism plays a vital role in informing citizens of a deliberative democratic society, and that to effectively fulfill this role, journalists must report the news objectively. I first examine the historical evolution of objectivity as it pertains to journalism. Then, I elaborate on some of the philosophical concepts that provide the foundation for objectivity. Next, I introduce John Rawls' idea of public reason, which provides an improved understanding of the role of journalism within a democratic society. I claim from this that journalism must re-envision its role as guardian of the public political forum. Finally, I bring these various discussions together by drawing in the requirements that Stephen Ward lays out in his theory of pragmatic objectivity, and argue that these are necessary to help journalism legitimize its authority to safeguard this forum. In doing so, journalism can ensure both that citizens are objectively informed and that the public forum offers them a sphere in which they can effectively participate in the governance of their democracy.

Table of Contents

Introduction

> Democracy falters if there is no steady supply of trustworthy and relevant news.
> – Walter Lippmann[1]

> It is a short step from misinformation to mischief, as we have seen repeatedly in recent policy debates. It is nearly impossible to have sensible public deliberation when large numbers of people are out of touch with reality. Without agreement on the facts, arguments have no foundation from which to build.
> – Thomas Patterson, *Informing The News*

The health of any democratic society depends greatly on the quality of information available to its citizens. A democracy is governed by its citizens, and when citizens are better informed, they make better decisions about how to structure their laws, government, and the various economic and cultural institutions that make their society just or unjust. Ideally, a society should be "a fair system of social cooperation between free and equal citizens,"[2] where everyone is better off than they would be fending for themselves. So, we ought to structure society in a way that benefits everyone — if some people are denied equal basic rights, liberties, and certain levels of justice, it is unreasonable for us to think that they would even want to live in this society. Therefore, we must make political decisions that we genuinely believe would benefit others, and that they would accept these decisions as well. The question that emerges from this is: how might we inform citizens in a way that helps them make political decisions that will improve our democratic society for everyone?

In this essay, I will argue that the institution of journalism plays a vital role in this process, and that to effectively fulfill this role, journalists must report the news

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1 Patterson, "The Corruption of Information," 1
2 Quong, 1.5

objectively. It is not enough to simply leave it at this, however, as many publications today have a glaring misconception of what this ethical norm requires. So, in advocating that journalists should endorse objectivity, I will first examine the historical evolution of this term as it pertains to journalism, as to learn how and why many have come to this misunderstanding. Then, in Chapter 2, I will elaborate on some of the philosophical concepts that provide the foundation for objectivity, showing which ones we should abandon and which we should keep, so that we can reach the correct notion of journalistic objectivity. In Chapter 3, I will switch gears to an explanation of John Rawls' idea of public reason, which will give us a better understanding of the role of journalism within a democratic society. Specifically, I claim that journalism must safeguard the public political forum, where citizens engage in rational, public deliberation. Finally, in Chapter 4, I will bring these various discussions together by introducing the requirements that Stephen Ward lays out in his theory of pragmatic objectivity, and argue that these are necessary to help journalism legitimize its authority to safeguard this forum. Ultimately, by buying into the idea of public reason, by endorsing a more adequate conception of objectivity, and by using standards of pragmatic objectivity in order to pursue it, I believe journalism can give the public sufficient reason to legitimize its role as the guardian of the public political forum. In doing so, journalism can ensure both that citizens are objectively informed and that the public forum offers them a sphere in which they can effectively participate in the governance of their democracy.

Chapter 1

Looking Backward at Objectivity

In order to determine whether or not objectivity is a norm that journalism should adhere to moving forward, we must look backward to its origins, considering both where it emerged from as well as what precisely emerged. Additionally, we can improve our understanding of its historical evolution by framing objectivity as it pertains to journalism.

First we must examine three philosophical senses of objectivity that are implied by the word, and which are relevant to journalism: ontological, epistemological, and procedural. The ontological sense concerns an object's correspondence with reality. It ties objectivity (*object* dependence) to reality, and subjectivity (*subject* dependence) to the subject's particular perspective — such that something is objective "if it actually exists, independent of my mind."[3] Epistemic objectivity deals with how we come to know these facts of reality, and thus draws the divide "between well-supported and not-well supported beliefs [about reality]."[4] A fact can be called epistemologically objective if it is discovered by way of unbiased methods of inquiry (i.e. without human error) and grounded in appropriately verified evidence. Finally, objectivity in the procedural sense focuses on how we make decisions in practice, specifically in the realms of public life and societal institutions such as law or government. Thus, "a decision procedure is objective if it satisfies a number of relevant criteria that reduce the influence of irrelevant

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[3] Meyers, 138
[4] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 17

considerations or bias."[5] While these three senses of the word objectivity are discrete concepts, they are interrelated. In the following chapters, my attempt to revamp an outdated model of journalistic objectivity will reveal some of this interplay. For now, it is sufficient to grasp that a claim about something's objectivity, philosophically speaking, may be directed at any of these senses of the word.

Given this understanding of the word objectivity, we can now construct at least a "working" definition of objectivity that will guide this historiography. Steven Maras, in his book *Objectivity in Journalism*, spends barely four pages and makes only a cursory swipe at actually defining the concept. He rightly observes that this is a difficult project as it is a complex and evolving notion, and as I will show later, an attempt to draw hard boundaries is more likely to lose an otherwise supportive audience. That being said, Maras identifies three key aspects — values, process, and language — which, taken together, address the essential idea of journalistic objectivity.

While there are numerous values that generally accompany objectivity, Maras points to three that seem to safely make the list, as identified by Everette Dennis:

1. Separating facts from opinion.
2. Presenting an emotionally detached view of the news.
3. Striving for fairness and balance…[6]

Process refers to the collective practices of journalists and editors that provide epistemic and procedural objectivity and "are central to the commitment to verification and truth underpinning objective methods."[7] While specific processes may not be identical across various media, publications, and forms of journalism, they all represent the application of

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[5] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 17-18
[6] Maras, 8
[7] Maras, 9

objectivity to the activities of reporting and editing. Lastly, the language of objective journalism plays a critical role in convincing the reader that "'the account can be trusted because it is *unadorned.*'"[8] This involves using a rhetorical style that clearly, concisely, and accurately retells events, facts, and details. Further, as journalists generally try to respect the "invisible frame" — that is, their work in framing a story should be unobservable to readers — the language they use must be neutral enough in its connotations that readers do not perceive the reporter as the one shaping the story, but rather feel the story unfolding as it would naturally and independently of her or him.

This is nowhere near an exhaustive definition of journalistic objectivity (I will delve further into this concept in subsequent chapters, and in several cases, show where the existing notions that Maras identifies ultimately fail us). It does, however, give us a focal point to bear in mind as we examine how the norm arose within the profession of journalism. We can envision journalistic objectivity as a metaphorical tree. Our three senses have illuminated for us the various parts or properties of trees in general (branches, leaves, roots, etc.) that we should focus on. Maras' definition has identified the trunk and some branches that, at first glance, seem sturdy. Now, we can dig beneath the surface to trace its historical roots. Later, with a better understanding of the tree's architecture and its structural integrity, my project will consist both of reorienting our tree to ensure that it grows towards the "sun," as well as showing several different branches that are in fact sturdier and more useful for the tree's growth.

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[8] Maras, 9

The History of Journalistic Objectivity

Maras, as well as Stephen Ward in his book, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, and Richard Kaplan in his chapter, “The Origins of Objectivity in American Journalism,” all offer extensive accounts of the various roots of journalistic objectivity. Rather than try to offer an all-inclusive history, I will draw out several key eras and the relevant context from each, which together will suffice for my project. It is worth mentioning that the concept of objectivity in the general sense arose not with journalism, but far earlier. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine this in depth, it is beneficial to consider the prevailing societal attitudes that laid the foundation for its emergence within journalism. Philosophers have long "debated the difference between cultural convention and nature, universal and parochial standards, reality and appearance, objective knowledge and subjective opinion.”[9] These have been topics of speculation from the earliest civilizations, to the ancient Greeks, to medieval Europe, and revolved largely around objectivity in an ontological sense (“*what* is true?”). Then, with the advent of the scientific revolution and the enlightenment, the focus shifted more toward an epistemic sense (“*how* do we know this to be true?”), with the emphasis being on proper methods of inquiry and on the use of verifiable empirical evidence (the scientific method itself was grounded in a commitment to unbiased standards of verification like those mentioned earlier).

Around this time, the press began a massive expansion as well, due to a variety of factors. With the invention of Johannes Gutenberg’s movable-type printing press,

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[9] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 37

information could be spread much more rapidly.[10] Additionally, Ward notes that “a strong demand for a constant supply of news, a sufficiently large and literate public, cheap and plentiful paper, adequate transportation, a public sphere with some measure of tolerance for freedom of expression, the prospect of publishing profits, and a network of publishers and correspondents" all allowed for the development of a periodic press in Europe.[11] It was here that the division between reports containing “just the facts” (i.e. news) and subjective commentary (i.e. opinion) first surfaced, and also where objectivity gained its first foothold within the practice of journalism. As publishers were incredibly susceptible to censure by both the state and church, they claimed adherence to standards of impartiality and fairness, and that their only intent was to inform. Yet in reality, most of what was printed was meant to persuade, enlighten, and moralize.[12] Regardless of how objective it actually was, the disjointed and primitive nature of the press at this point in history prevented it from formally codifying these norms.

In the 18th century, the jobs of reporter, journalist, and editor became recognizable. As daily publications reached wider audiences, journalism came into its role as the fourth estate, adopting a “public ethic” where it started to ground its work in protecting the public and its liberties and rights. During the 19th century, however, American journalism exhibited many symptoms of the deeply partisan politics that were afflicting the nation more generally, with publications clinging to a party's platform, endorsing its views and attempting to denigrate any opposing ones. Many outlets were openly partisan, and as Richard Kaplan observes, "viewed the world through partisan lens

[10] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 92
[11] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 96
[12] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 99

and fed its subscribers hyperbolic narratives of party conflict, triumph, and at times tragedy."[13]

Adherence to objectivity as a standard is not unique to American journalism (though it is largely an American invention),[14] but I am primarily concerned with its development within the United States political climate. This is because the journalism that emerged out of the Jacksonian Revolution and, subsequently, the Progressive Era, revealed the truly inherently political nature of journalism, and eventually produced the traditional notion of objectivity, setting the stage for my project in this essay. Not all accounts agree that political sentiment was the primary impetus for objectivity, however. Maras dedicates the start of his book to discussions of three additional factors that might have yielded a formal standard of objectivity: the professionalization of journalism (and with it, the establishment of a professional ethic); technological advancements (namely, the telegraph, and the "unadorned" style of news reporting that it favored); and commercialization of the press (as advertisers wished to reach a larger, more heterogeneous audience, adherence to strict "facts" helped publications avoid offending the various groups that made up this audience). While these had an undeniable influence on journalism and may likely have created a perfect storm from which objectivity was bred, it was the inextricable tie to the public sphere and its accompanying politics that showed objectivity to be a necessary element of journalism in America. Indeed, Kaplan's historiography contends that, "journalism's professional ethic reflects the overarching structure of the political field with all its contentions about who is a proper public speaker

[13] Kaplan, 30
[14] Maras, 5-6

and what is proper public rhetoric."[15] As political institutions and our ideas about them shift, these shifts are evidenced in the press as well.

Ward opens his fifth chapter, "Anticipating Objectivity: The Nineteenth Century," with a quote from Clarence Darrow that aptly describes the waning sentiment of the nation, saying, "'the world has grown tired of preachers and sermons, today it asks for facts.'"[16] In reaction to the unabashed partisanship of the political machines, Americans pushed for more egalitarian and directly democratic governance. This was reflected in the press as well in an era of "proto-objectivity," as publications started severing ties with their increasingly unpopular political affiliates. Additionally, at the dawn of the 20th century, penny presses became the first mass commercialized form of journalism, making the news available to a much broader audience. With these two shifts, the rhetoric of journalism changed greatly as well, from an "ethics of persuasion, which sought, in a grave tone, to tell people what they ought to believe," to one "of popularity, which used a more accessible style to tell readers what they wanted to know."[17] Naturally, in seeking to increase circulation and appeal, journalism placed a premium on factuality and impartiality. Out of this atmosphere grew the notion of the press as something distinct from the messaging coming from political parties and government officials, "that journalists were independent professionals, who wrote impartially for the general public."[18]

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15 Kaplan, 1
16 Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 174
17 Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 190
18 Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 191

Traditional Objectivity

It was against this backdrop that journalistic objectivity became explicitly codified. In the early 1900s, journalistic publications began to endorse a robust doctrine of "traditional objectivity." By 1926, it had been formally adopted into the codes of ethics of both the American Society of News Editors and Sigma Delta Chi (precursor to Society of Professional Journalists).[19] By the 1940s, as Ward observes, this doctrine had enumerated six related standards:

1. *Factuality:* Reports are based on accurate, comprehensive, and verified facts.
2. *Fairness:* Reports on controversial issues balance the main rival viewpoints, representing each viewpoint fairly.
3. *Non-bias:* Prejudices, emotions, personal interest, or other subjective factors to not distort the content of reports.
4. *Independence:* Reports are the work of journalists who are free to report without fear or favour.
5. *Non-Interpretation:* Reporters do not put their interpretations or opinion into their reports.
6. *Neutrality and detachment:* Reports are neutral. They do not take sides in a dispute. Reporters do not act as advocates for groups and causes.[20]

The reporter, under this approach, was viewed as nothing more than a recording device, simply letting some event imprint itself upon him or her and then replaying the facts of the event to the audience. This austere commitment to a non-interpretive, detached presentation of the news went beyond mere empiricism. This made sense as a response to "a deepening doubt about, and disillusionment with, journalism as a source of truthful information and as an agent of democracy."[21] The rise of a commercial press (and the financial pressures it created), the increase of political spin promulgated by press agents, and an increasingly complex modern world all called into question journalists' ability to

[19] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 214-215
[20] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 19
[21] Meyers, 143

report reliable, straight accounts of the news.[22] The doctrine of traditional objectivity addressed these doubts by bolstering the factual adherence of empiricism with the five additional standards of objectivity listed above.

Despite its popularity, traditional objectivity suffered in the second half of the 20th century at the hands of various technological advances and changing societal attitudes, particularly the advent of online journalism and the personal, interpretive coverage that it favored. This new media placed a premium on things like "immediacy, interactivity, sharing, and networking, limited editorial checks, and the expression of bias or opinion in an 'edgy' manner."[23] In conjunction with these new positive values, a number of negative critiques of traditional objectivity arose as well. Ward identifies four in particular: 1) that naive realism — an underlying assumption of traditional objectivity — became increasingly challenged; 2) that as many news organizations regularly depart from it, traditional objectivity may be too demanding as a norm; 3) that readers *need* analysis and interpretation, thus objectivity is too restrictive in rendering journalists unable to provide either; and 4) that democracy benefits more from a diverse, opinionated, interactive press.[24]

Faced with these criticisms, journalistic ethicists have either abandoned the norm in favor of an alternative, more palatable one, or attempted to redefine our conception of objectivity such that it makes sense in today's vast media landscape. Whichever road they have taken, we see that the old model has come to a fork. As Ward remarks, "traditional

[22] Meyers, *Journalism Ethics*, 143
[23] Meyers, *Journalism Ethics*, 144
[24] Meyers, *Journalism Ethics*, 144-145

objectivity is a spent ethical force, doubted by journalist and academic."[25] In the following chapters, I will provide some philosophical motivation for the possibility of objectivity in the first place, and how we should think of this concept. I will then look to John Rawls' idea of public reason as a way to better situate the role of journalism within a democratic society, and by doing this, show how journalists must take a similar approach in justifying how they report the news.

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[25] Meyers, 145

Chapter 2

The Possibility and Practicability of Journalistic Objectivity

As I mentioned at the end of Chapter 1, several serious critiques arose in response to traditional objectivity, and I admit that they present a dilemma for journalism: either drop the norm as a cornerstone of its practice, or somehow rebrand its notion of objectivity in a way that is compatible with modern times, attitudes, and technologies. While each objection poses a unique issue for journalistic objectivity, we can reduce the most problematic of these down to three "tiers." The first is more or less a question about whether or not there are actually objective truths about the world to be discovered at all. While there are two types of responses that would rule out objectivity entirely, I will show here that these fail us, and that a third more plausible type opens the door for at least some notion of objectivity. Criticisms falling into the second tier typically involve some doubt about its practicability. They ask what kinds of truths might be objective, and whether or not journalists can, practically speaking, be objective in deciding which pieces of information to include or to omit in their reports (or in deciding how to present them). I argue that criticisms in this vein all stem from a faulty epistemology, and as such, most of this chapter is meant to reconfigure it in a way that is compatible with objectivity. Lastly, some simply question if objectivity is even desirable as a journalistic ethic. Given its obligation to inform the (incredibly diverse) public, I think journalism should simply ignore claims of this nature. Nevertheless I will introduce the idea of Rawlsian public reason in Chapter 3, which will give us more than enough reason to dismiss these objections.

External World Skepticism

Concerning the first tier of objections, which take a skeptical position on the possibility of objective truths, there seem to be three categories of possible replies: external world skepticism, relativism, or any reply that acknowledges the possibility of at least *some* objective truths. The first doubts or denies the mere existence of an external world. This is an extreme form of skepticism that essentially says: we have no ways (or at least not reliable enough ones) by which to confirm that anything we perceive actually exists outside and independent of our own minds, and thus we should not posit that a material world exists independent of our minds at all. The implication here is that there would be no objective truths at all, as every truth would be "subject-dependent" rather than "object-dependent."

This is best illustrated in the film *The Matrix*, where people perceive the world around them to be the "real" world — it looks, feels, smells, sounds, and tastes like it's real — but in fact it turns out to merely be a computer simulation. This raises an incredibly perplexing philosophical question that we may not ever be able to answer, though we need not worry about it here. As noted, the characters in the movie — prior to being "unplugged" from the simulation — all *genuinely believe* that this external world exists, and that they are bound by its various constraints (i.e. the laws of nature), and as such, they act accordingly. It is only after the main character, Neo, learns that the simulation isn't real that he attempts to defy these laws by flying and dodging bullets. Similarly, it would be absurd for us — prior to any compelling evidence that these laws don't exist in our perceived world — to try to defy (or deny) them either. Until I am presented with substantial evidence that says I should believe otherwise, I will (and I presume others will) take it that an external material world exists. While few people actually practice this version of skepticism, it is important to reject this concept in order to pave the way for objectivity.

Cognitive Absolutism and Relativism

Having granted that there exists an external material world, our next questions (which begin to reveal where the second tier of objections enter) should naturally be: what things about this world are true, and are they objectively, or merely subjectively, true? The first question is strictly about ontological truth, or how well a statement corresponds with reality. For example, the statement, "Venus is closer to the Sun than the Earth is," is ontologically true, as Venus *in reality* is closer. While journalists definitely emphasize ontological accuracy, this is not where disagreements about objectivity typically arise — no one disagrees about the truth or objectiveness of statements like the one above. The second question, however, begins to draw out the divide between those who endorse objectivity and those who reject it. Here we must answer what things are true *regardless of the subject's particular perspective*, and what things may be true *only for certain subjects*.

We can frame the debate on this question in terms of the two camps on the extremes, cognitive absolutism and cognitive relativism.[26] The former wish to say that

[26] I include the term "cognitive" here to distinguish from moral absolutism and relativism, which address the universality of moral and ethical theories. Here, I am concerned primarily with cognition and perception, and how universal our knowledge of the world is.

truth is absolute — that it holds regardless of the cognitive perspective of the subject.[27] Under this view, claims can only state objective truths or subjective opinions, and nothing in between. This depicts the reporter in a similar way as traditional objectivity, as an emotionless and detached reporter of *the* true facts. Absolutism aims for an incoherent "perspectiveless perspective,"[28] a paradox identified by Thomas Nagel, which Julian Baggini draws on in his article, "The Philosophy of Journalism." Baggini notes that, by definition, a view must be *from* somewhere, and thus there cannot be one true view. It makes intuitive sense why one would raise issue with this approach: if a journalist were to claim that their account of an event was the single, indisputably true account, we would rightfully be skeptical, doubting their claim to the omniscient perspective necessary for observing every detail of that event, and further, for selecting the "correct" details to present and to leave out. This is clearly not the type of objectivity we wish to endorse, though it helps constrain the discussion from one side.

On the other side, cognitive relativists wish to say that everything depends on your particular perspective and so there is no objective truth at all — quite literally, they believe it's all relative.[29] This is also an inadequate view, first because it seems contradictory, but even if one can look past this, it yields wildly undesirable results. Baggini points to the contradiction in a quote from David Loyn, who says, "'there cannot of course be a single absolute truth,'" to which Baggini responds, "note the 'of course.' This is surely what any sophisticated person believes. But it must simply be a *belief* – of course – because to claim to *know* would surely suggest there is an objective truth to be

[27] Westacott, 1
[28] Baggini, 1
[29] Westacott, 1

known."[30] Even if we find a way around this problem, relativism says as well that what I hold to be objective need not be objective for you. For example, let's say you claim that it's true that the Earth revolves around the Sun. With relativism, I can now infallibly claim that — for me — the Sun revolves around the Earth, as neither of us have a more legitimate claim on the objective truth than the other. This seems to regress back to the very subjectivism that we tried to avoid by positing an external world. As Ward notes, "the idea of an external world is a sort of regulatory ideal — it sets up as a cognitive norm the pursuit of better and better knowledge of the world."[31] According to Ward, we cannot simply believe *whatever* we wish to believe, but are constrained in some way by objective truths of the external world. From this framing of the debate about truth, we can reasonably affirm that, while truth is neither *entirely* objective nor *entirely* subjective, there are at least *some* objectively true claims about the world, and in comparison to our other two alternatives (skepticism and relativism), we should favor this more palatable answer to our first question. Turning now to the question of practicability, we must ask whether or not it is necessary to draw a line in the sand — objective truths on one side, subjective ones on the other — as our answer will reveal why objections in the second tier appear at first glance to carry some force.

Objectivity as a Matter of Degrees

As do many contemporary objectivists, I argue that drawing a line like this creates a false distinction between fact and opinion. The epistemological assumption that the two

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[30] Baggini, 1
[31] Meyers, 146

are categorically different was also a large motivator for traditional objectivity, and by getting rid of this assumption, we can rethink how these two concepts related to one another. Baggini takes cues from Nagel to show that there are other ways to understand objectivity than merely as a binary. Nagel does this by juxtaposing objectivity with subjectivity, noting that we can move from a purely subjective viewpoint, "which is entirely determined by the particular perspective of the individual," up the spectrum towards a more objective one, and in doing so, "we expand our frames of reference and thus gain dimensions of understanding that go beyond our own perceptions of the world."[32]

Viewed this way, journalists attempt to *maximize* objectivity, not discover *the* objective truth. Thus, the goal of objectivity in reporting should be "minimising the extent to which our beliefs and accounts depend upon our particular localised and subjective viewpoints."[33] Indeed, our intuitive worry eventually becomes negligible as a reporter moves further up the spectrum: as the account includes more frames of reference outside of his or her own, the more truthfulness we are usually inclined to grant it. Of course, accounts that do a shoddy job of minimizing subjectivity may be only slightly different from those based on purely subjective perspectives. However, this also means there can be accounts that do a far superior job, and as such, objectivity is a matter of degrees.

In thinking of this objectivity-subjectivity spectrum, we must remember that it does not span endlessly in either direction. On one end, we can reject entirely any claims

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[32] Baggini, 1
[33] Baggini, 1

of truth that directly contradict objective, empirically verifiable facts about the external world. For example, “a water molecule is composed of two hydrogen atoms and one helium atom,” is untenable. Water is *actually* composed of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom, and we have myriad scientific methods by which to confirm that this is how hydrogen is composed in reality. Thus, the former statement has no claim on truthfulness at all. On the other end, human fallibility and our limited knowledge prevents us from saying something like “the law of gravity is, has, and will always be a constant force in the universe.” But within this range is a multitude of facts, theories, opinions, and even values that we place on the spectrum *according to the degree with which we can objectively verify their truth*. As I will show to some extent in the remainder of this chapter, and more extensively in Chapters 3 and 4, there are certain criteria that journalists ought to rely on in order to accomplish this. The crucial point here is that, while no one denies the importance of ontological accuracy (how well does a fact actually correspond with reality), the emphasis is on identifying objective *methods* by which to verify their reliability. Determining a statement’s objective truth is a process of inquiry — by ensuring the integrity of this *process*, we ensure that the *outcome* of our inquiry (our various ontological claims about the world), are as reliable as possible.[34] But before we can determine the methods and criteria that should guide this process, we need an understanding of how our cognition exposes us to the world.

[34] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 264

An Interpretive Epistemology

By tossing out the underlying epistemological assumption (of a hard divide between facts and opinions) that traditional objectivity was grounded in, we also abandon "a misleading metaphor of the journalist as a recording instrument who passively observes and transmits facts."[35] Recall from last chapter that one of the tenets of traditional objectivity explicitly prohibits journalists from injecting interpretation or opinion into the news. However, journalism is an inherently active practice, though the gulf between fact and opinion has prevented us from acknowledging that banality thus far. To help us reconcile these competing notions, we must to turn to what Ward calls "conceptual schemes."

Ward starts from a premise that I find compelling (as do other modern objectivists, such as Figdor[36]) that we do not ever *directly* encounter reality, but perceive it and come to know things about it *indirectly* through our internal representations of the various things that exist in the external world. From here, he introduces the idea of conceptual schemes:

> Truth is plural and fallible because incomplete modes of thinking inhibit our attempts to know. We base our beliefs and actions on our representations of what the world is like. The medium of representation is not the isolated concept but the conceptual scheme. A conceptual scheme is a mental grid of intelligibility — a set of ideas that helps us to interpret experience. Causal, logical, and hierarchical relationships link concepts to each other.[37]

To say that we interpret the world via conceptual schemes is not simply to say that we use concepts when we think — it would be trivial to assert that when I see a car driving

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[35] Meyers, 145-146
[36] Figdor, 4-17
[37] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 272

by that I think of it in terms of the "concept" of a car. Rather, this claims first that interpretations are ubiquitous (all statements about the world are the result of us interpreting our perceptions according to past knowledge), and second, that we come to know the world (and verify this knowledge) "holistically" — not by an individual fact in isolation, but by many facts simultaneously, which we comprehend according to our existing conceptual schemes.[38] To help say some more about this, we can continue to imagine how we might interpret our perceptions of a car driving by. Of course, not all conceptual schemes are equal: they vary in complexity (we have the scheme of "car," but also just of "metal" and "glass," or of "color" and "shape,"), scope ("cars" as well as "modes of transportation"), precision ("the acceleration of cars" is more precise than "the motion of bodies"), etc. Further, some schemes are merely positive, while others are normative — that is, some result in an interpretation that describes how something *is* ("the car is silver," "it is an Audi"), while others cause us to interpret how we believe something *ought to be* (the car should be driving faster, Audis should be more affordable). Here is where we begin to see the separation of fact and opinion: every statement (including those above) is an interpretation, but we find some more reliable than others based on the amount of perceptual evidence that backs them up. Ward helps us differentiate these categories of statements, saying that "we tend to label a statement an 'interpretation' (as opposed to fact) when we are sceptical about its evidence. We tend to call a statement an interpretation if it is highly theoretical or when we are cognizant of rival interpretations."[39] Contrarily, facts like "the car has four wheels" are well supported

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[38] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 273
[39] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 273

by our visual stimuli, and involve no competing interpretations that would give us reason to believe otherwise.

With this epistemology, journalism is far from passive — rather, it involves the active interpretation of events according to the reporter's various conceptual schemes. But it should be apparent from the above examples that nothing about this approach inherently prevents journalists from being objective in their methods of inquiry. The task now becomes figuring out how to evaluate these interpretations as to determine how reliable they are, and thus where they fall on the objective-subjective spectrum. By using the standards I will discuss in Chapter 4, journalists can do precisely that, and in doing so, they provide objective reasons that properly justify their interpretation of an event. This notion of cognition has substantial implications for our process of objective inquiry, though I believe that this model is ultimately far more consistent with how we actually engage in this process.

I won't spend much time justifying this move to an "interpretive epistemology," as both Ward and Figdor cite findings in cognitive science that seem to support it fairly well, and heading further down that road would only derail my project here. I will say, however, that I take this to be somewhat of a practical necessity for journalism in today's digital environment. Not only has the Information Age revealed how formidably complex and uncertain our knowledge of the world is, but also how much — through various technologies and media — we manipulate the information we communicate to others. Tools like digital photo editing and political fact-checking websites have both helped make us increasingly wary of how much disinformation there is, and how active humans are in facilitating this process. As such, I argue that it does an incredible disservice to the acuity of news consumers to ask them to believe that a reporter has been passive and respected the “invisible frame” in her or his reporting.

Rather, I think journalism will be in a far better position to recuperate the public trust that it has lost in recent years by beginning from the idea that knowledge is an interpretive activity, and therefore making its process one of objectively verifying interpretations in a way that the public can find both reasonable and reliable, and therefore justified. After a discussion of Rawlsian public reason in Chapter 3, my recommendation for the pursuit of journalistic objectivity will come together fully in Chapter 4, and will rely heavily on this interpretive epistemology.

Chapter 3

Public Reason and the Role of Journalism

One of the most fundamental obstacles for objective journalism is simply that people have an incredibly wide range of worldviews, and thus have an equally wide range of reasons which they appeal to when evaluating whether or not interpretations are justified. This aspect of human nature is not unique to journalism — it creates significant problems for societies in general. A society, which should aim to be "a fair system of social cooperation between free and equal citizens,"[40] can only establish *one* law and *one* government (that creates new laws and enforces and evaluates existing ones). Further, this law and government will govern all citizens of that society — that is, the government has *coercive political power* over its entire citizenry.[41] Because there is a plurality of worldviews in any given society, this brings up two issues that must be resolved:

1. Legitimacy**:** "In a democracy political power is always the power of the people as a collective body. How can it be legitimate for a democratic people to coerce all citizens to follow just one law, given that citizens will inevitably hold to different worldviews?"[42]
2. Stability: "Why would a citizen willingly obey the law if it is imposed on her by a collective body many of whose members have beliefs and values quite dissimilar to her own? Yet unless most citizens willingly obey the law, no social order can be stable for long."[43]

These are two questions that John Rawls addresses in his work, *Political Liberalism*. To answer each, he establishes, respectively, his "liberal principle of legitimacy" and the notion of an "overlapping consensus." While these responses are related, I will focus here

[40] Quong, 1.5
[41] Wenar, 3
[42] Wenar, 3
[43] Wenar, 3

primarily on the issue of legitimacy, as it is instrumental in leading Rawls to develop his idea of public reason, and will help us re-envision the role of journalism in a way that prioritizes objectivity.

Rawls answers the first question by way of his liberal principle of legitimacy, which states:

> Our exercise of political power is proper and hence justifiable only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to them as reasonable and rational.[44]

Because all citizens have political autonomy (that is, they are free), we cannot expect a legitimate government emerge from a constitution to which some reasonably object, as such a society would undermine that very autonomy. As Rawls scholar Leif Wenar puts it, “those coerced by law must be able to endorse the society's fundamental political arrangements freely, not because they are dominated or manipulated or kept uninformed.”[45]

Since citizens must find a society’s basic principles to be reasonably acceptable, yet they have diverse and often conflicting values, citizens must appeal to reasons that they have in common, or else no agreement will ever be reached. Thus, Rawls claims that this imposes a moral “duty of civility” on citizens where the political decisions they endorse must be ones that are justifiable by shared reasons.[46] This helps him establish his “criterion of reciprocity,” such that “citizens believe in good faith that the fair terms of

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[44] Freeman, 372
[45] Wenar, 3.1
[46] Freeman, 468

social cooperation that they propose and expect all to abide by are *reasonably acceptable to everyone* in their capacity as free and equal citizens."[47]

Given this criterion, Rawls rules out reasons that are limited to a specific "comprehensive doctrine." A comprehensive doctrine is "one that includes conceptions of what is of value in life and gives life its meaning"[48] — essentially, a worldview. Though such a doctrine may indeed be reasonable, it includes values that are unique only to it, such as a belief in Allah for the doctrine of Islam, which are unlikely to be held by citizens who don't endorse the same doctrine. Those citizens will not find its principles reasonable or rational, and thus legitimate governments cannot be based on these types of values. Further, the issues that comprehensive doctrines address (religion, philosophy, morality, etc.) involve incredibly difficult questions that lead us to our plurality of worldviews in the first place. However, "reasonable citizens understand that these deep issues are ones on which people of good will can disagree, and so will be unwilling to impose their own worldviews on those who have reached different conclusions."[49] Thus, we need a set of reasons that are freestanding of comprehensive doctrines, so that citizens can offer terms for social cooperation that they can expect others (even those who endorse different doctrines) to find reasonably acceptable. This is where Rawls gets the idea of public reason.

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[47] Freeman, 374
[48] Freeman, 332
[49] Wenar, 3.2

Applying Public Reason

The aim of public reason, given the above understanding of social cooperation, is to provide citizens with a way to publicly justify their political decisions, and thus determine "in front of each other" whether or not the institutions that govern their society are just. What then, is the scope of public reason? Rawls specifies that only decisions about basic matters of justice, equality, and liberty must be explainable in these ways. Further, he believes that public reason is required only within the "public political forum" — which includes judges, government officials, and anyone campaigning for public office — and not the nonpublic, "background culture" of society (an important distinction, though one which I will discuss later).[50]

With its boundaries defined, Rawls proceeds to describe what types of reasons are considered public reasons. These fall into two categories: reasons that guide public inquiry and political values that provide such reasons. Those of the former are meant to ensure that public inquiry is free, fair, and public. They include standards for the acceptable types of evidence, argumentation, reasoning and judgment allowed in public inquiry, such that all reasonable citizens can publically deliberate on the same terms as one another. The latter category is a collection of values that Rawls believes would be shared by all reasonable views in a democratic society, and thus could be relied on as justification for political decisions. He assumes that all democratic citizens, differences aside, would reasonably accept certain democratic ideals. Samuel Freeman identifies many that Rawls endorses, which include both values of justice as well as political virtues. Some that relate to justice are: "equal political and civil liberties, equality of

[50] Quong, 6

opportunity, social equality and economic reciprocity, the common good, the social bases of self-respect, and the necessary conditions for these values."[51] Political virtues, on the other hand, include ideas like those mentioned in the U.S. Constitution (such as domestic tranquility and general welfare), economic productivity and efficiency, and also things like "promoting biological and medical knowledge" and preserving the natural environment for future generations.[52] Certainly, there are additional values that democratic citizens might all endorse, but this list will suffice for us to imagine how reasonable citizens could engage in public inquiry — that is, under mutually acceptable guidelines and by invoking only public reasons — in order to reach an agreement on how society should be structured.

To help illustrate a public justification that would not be in accordance with public reason, we can an example offered by Wenar:

> A Supreme Court justice deciding on a gay marriage law would violate public reason were she to base her opinion on God's forbidding gay sex in the book of Leviticus, or on a presentiment that upholding such a law would hasten the end of days. Not all members of society can reasonably be expected to accept Leviticus as stating an authoritative set of political values, nor can a religious premonition be a common standard for evaluating public policy. These values and standards are not public.[53]

Conversely, that justice would be able to endorse gay marriage on the grounds that as free and equal citizens, people ought to have both the freedom to associate with whomever they choose as well as social equality. This purpose of this example is not to say that the right to marry someone of the same sex should or shouldn't be established in a society

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[51] Freeman, 388
[52] Freeman, 388-389
[53] Wenar, 3.6

(though as articulated here, it seems as if it would be), but rather to point out which reasons would be acceptable under public reason.

Conceived in this way, Rawls thinks that through the process of public inquiry, reasonable, free, equal citizens will naturally do three things: 1) ensure all citizens' equal basic rights, 2) prioritize these rights over other values (such as greater national wealth or cultural flourishing[54]), and 3) provide all citizens with means to effectively exercise their rights. Not only will public reasoning secure these rights as the most important ones, but it will also guarantee that citizens have *effective* means to actually take advantage of their rights. This third result is particularly noteworthy for our purposes here — in order to guarantee these means, Rawls thinks five institutions must be established:

1. Public financing of political campaigns and ways of assuring the availability of information on matters of public policy, to prevent the distortion or manipulation of public reasoning;
2. '[A] certain fair equality of opportunity' especially in education and training;
3. A decent distribution of income and wealth;
4. Society as an employer of last resort… so citizens can maintain their self-respect; and
5. 'Basic health care assured to all citizens'[55]

As for why Rawls assumes these five, Freeman notes that he thinks these same institutions are essential for public reason to be possible in the first place, as public reasoning cannot occur without a deliberative democracy. Absent these institutions — especially the first three — citizens would be unable to effectively participate in a deliberative democracy. Specifically, Rawls gives the condition that "if the political forum and the free flow of public information are corrupted by monied interests or by other concentrations of power… all parts of society cannot take part in the debates of

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[54] Wenar, 3.4
[55] Freeman, 402

public reason or contribute to social and economic policies."[56] In order to ensure this, there must be institutions that, among other things, establish a deliberative, public, political forum and ensure that this forum does not become corrupted by concentrations of wealth or power.

Journalism as Guardian of the Public Political Forum

The question that remains, of course, is who should be responsible for this task. I argue that this is precisely how we should envision the role of journalism within a democratic society. If we examine who else might take this up as their aim, we see that no other societal institution is properly positioned to accomplish it. Public officials are obviously ruled out — by virtue of their holding the positions of power in society, citizens would constantly worry that those officials were censoring any deliberation that threatened their power. We see this frequently even today with authoritarian regimes that implement laws, fines, or other sanctions aimed at quieting the press. While it may seem that an effective division of power within a government could sidestep this worry, this only dilutes the power any one group of officials possesses, it doesn't provide citizens — who are subject to the authority of these officials and the laws they enact — any confidence that the political forum isn't merely subservient to the interests of those in power. Similarly, we can not look to commercial institutions — Rawls thinks concentrations of wealth can just as easily taint the public forum, and as businesses in a capitalist society have profit as their primary aim, it would be just as implausible to entrust protection of the political forum, for fear that they would constrain deliberation

[56] Freeman, 404

just to that which served their financial interests. This poses a potential worry for news enterprises that have become massively commercialized in the last century, but this ultimately is not damning for journalism.

From the shortcomings of these two themes emerges a common theme: citizens will always worry whether or not the institution responsible for ensuring that the political forum is free, fair, and public is in fact manipulating it to serve their own interests. For politicians, that interest is political power, for businesses, wealth. Every institution imaginable will have its own set of interests — that is not the issue. The problem arises as those interests diverge from citizens' collective private interests, leaving them under the impression that the institution is corrupting the political forum such that it no longer furthers their private interests. The solution, therefore, is to try to align the institution's interests with those of citizens, something we can only reasonably ask of journalism, whose "first loyalty is to citizens…" and as such, "must strive to put the public interest – and the truth – above their own self-interest or assumptions."[57] By imparting truth in its mission as well, journalism can even help citizens evaluate and refine their interests, especially in complex or remote areas of life which they've had few prior insights into or encounters with. James Carey eloquently explains the relationship between the press and the public, saying:

> The god term of journalism — the be-all and end-all, the term without which the entire enterprise fails to make sense — is the public. Insofar as journalism is grounded, it is grounded in the public. Insofar as journalism has a client, the client is the public The press justifies itself in the name of the public: it exists — or so it is regularly said — to inform the public, to serve as the extended eyes and ears of the public, to protect the public's right to know, to serve the public. The canons of

[57] Dean, 1

> journalism originate in and flow from the relationship of the press to the public. The public is totem and talisman, and an object of ritual homage.[58]

We should not draw from this that journalism has carte blanche in its oversight of the political forum. It is only by its dedication to public interest that journalism derives the legitimate authority by which to fulfill this role.

Recall from Rawls' liberal principle of legitimacy why it is so crucial to legitimize political authority: if an institution is to govern people's behaviors within a specific domain, those people must reasonably agree on the collective interests it should aim to secure (and the means by which they will decide these), else they would have no reason to support its authority at all. Similarly, in order to give journalism legitimate authority to "govern" the political forum, citizens (the public) must genuinely believe that they will be better off by allowing journalists to take this up as their purpose. And as is the case with political authority, citizens of any comprehensive doctrine must find journalists' decisions and methodologies to be reasonably acceptable as well, else the integrity of the institution of journalism is undermined severely. From this, I propose that we rebrand the institution of journalism as the "guardian of the public political forum" (or "forum guardian," for short), which states:

> *Journalism should seek to be an institution with the legitimate authority to assure the public of the free flow of trustworthy and relevant information concerning matters of public policy, thus preventing "the distortion or manipulation of public reasoning,"[59] which in turn allows citizens the means by which to effectively exercise their rights in a deliberative democracy.*

So, how does this definition stack up against our current notions of the press?

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[58] Meyers, *Journalism Ethics*, 203

[59] Freeman, 402

Within democratic societies, we have typically understood the press to serve three related but distinct roles:

1. Electorate informer: first, the press is charged with gathering and disseminating information to the public, enabling citizens to effectively participate in self-governance. Given the nature of the news it reports, it functions as "the primary source of information for an electorate which requires it to discharge even the most basic of its constitutive and legitimating roles."[60]
2. Public watchdog: with the rights conferred by the establishment of a free press comes the responsibility for it to "serve as an independent monitor of power,"[61] safeguarding members of society from abuses of power by the few who wield it. Journalists operate without "fear or favor" of those they report on, and thus are in a position to report critically on any abuses of power.
3. Fourth estate: in the United States, the three branches of government, with their separate powers, are analogous to the three estates of English parliament referred to by Edmund Burke when he originally coined this phrase.[62] As the fourth estate, the press acts as another check on the three branches of government by way of giving voice to the opinions of the public.

Our new conception of the role of journalism is actually able to encapsulate all three of these functions. Thus, this is not as much a *redefinition* as it is a re-envisioning of the ultimate aim of journalistic endeavors. In fact, as forum guardians, journalists are frequently tasked with all three jobs. The significance of forum guardianship, however,

[60] Fox, 259
[61] Dean, 1
[62] Norris, 4

comes from adding the requirement that journalism derive its authority in a legitimate way from the public. In my last chapter, I will connect the concepts discussed so far by showing that, by adopting the criteria for objective inquiry that Ward lays out in his theory of pragmatic objectivity, journalists can justify their interpretations in a way that allows the public to legitimize their authority, much in the same way reasonable Rawlsian citizens legitimize political authority.

Chapter 4

Using Pragmatic Objectivity to Safeguard Public Reason

Now that we have a more accurate conception of the role of journalism as far as its contribution to a democratic society, we can reintroduce the norm of objectivity as a means for journalists to achieve this end in their reporting. The purpose of Chapter 1 was to give a historical point of origin for journalistic objectivity and from that, a jumping off point for its redefinition. Chapter 2, by proposing a new epistemology, showed that we should actually think of being objective as the process of justifying one's interpretations. While still desiring pure ontological objectivity (i.e. factuality), this approach emphasized epistemic standards (i.e. interpretations are ubiquitous: this is how we perceive the world generally, and thus they underlie journalistic activities as well). Finally, by introducing Rawlsian public reason, Chapter 3 showed us that in order to help citizens solve problems of political legitimacy and stability, journalism must also earn its legitimacy by appealing to reasons that any citizen could find acceptable.

The main idea to bear in mind from the forum guardian definition is that, in order for journalism to differentiate itself from other institutions as the entity that ought to fulfill this role, it must practice its craft in a way that properly legitimizes its authority to do so. In the Rawlsian context, this requires that the public find it reasonable to endorse both the standards of inquiry as well as the political values journalism relies on. I argue in this chapter that, given our conclusions so far, journalists should adopt both the "objective stance" and the three criteria of objectivity that Ward lays out in his theory of "pragmatic objectivity." These will ensure that journalists offer the most objective reasons for "why they interpreted the news the way they did," such that the public can legitimize their reportorial authority. While the political values that Rawls suggests undoubtedly influence their practice as well, I will focus here mostly on the standards of inquiry that the journalistic method ought to abide by. Ultimately, I will show that, to practice objective guardian journalism is to first assume a certain attitude towards objectivity, and then to test the interpretations one makes in reporting against objective standards — and make those publicly available — such that the public (regardless of which comprehensive doctrine they subscribe to) has reasons to find the account reliable, thus legitimizing the authority of the journalistic voice.

The Objective Stance

Before journalists can adopt Ward's standards for pragmatic objectivity, they must first take what he calls the "objective stance" — that is, a general attitude or set of dispositions one adopts in their pursuits of objectivity — which help guide their thinking as they evaluate whether or not they're meeting these criteria. He says that "there are at least four: dispositions towards open rationality, towards partial transcendence, towards disinterested truth, and towards intellectual integrity."[63]

In being disposed to towards open rationality, one accepts the burdens of proceeding objectively, such as using logically valid arguments and not making contradictory statements. Ward draws from Nicholas Rescher, who phrases it this way: "'To proceed objectively is, in sum, to render oneself perspicuous to others by doing what any reasonable and normally constituted person would do in one's place, thereby

[63] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 281

rendering one's proceedings intelligible to anyone.'"[64] We see this idea at work in the scientific process all the time — scientists design their experiments such that anyone could replicate their process and reach the same conclusion. Open rationality helps journalists in a similar way, only it's a reader who must be able to start from the same premises (i.e. the facts of an event) as the journalist and see how they reached their conclusion (i.e. the interpretation of those facts).

Partial transcendence essentially means broadening one's own epistemic perspective. We build on our own experiences by looking to those of others, and in doing so, we can rise slightly above our own limited (and purely subjective) knowledge of the world. To offer a crude analogy, imagine standing in a massive crowd of people at a concert, where you are only able to see those immediately around you. However, you can use others you to get a better view of the performers (by climbing on the shoulders of your friend, or watching the jumbotron next to the stage, for example), thus partially transcending your particular perspective. You won't be able to gain a perfect "god's eye view,"[65] though your new view will be far less limited than one relying only on your own perspective. Journalists do this as well by relying on (preferably firsthand) sources, studies, and other types of evidence produced by others.

Disinterestedness towards the truth is trickier as it is often misinterpreted as a *lack* of interest — as emotionally detached or not caring about the truth — which leads to our perspectiveless perspective from Chapter 2. Rather, we should understand this as having the discipline to step back and reflect upon the beliefs we hold, as to not let them

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[64] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 281
[65] Baggini, 1

misguide our pursuit of the truth. Being disinterested means not letting our own personal interests cloud the truth, regardless of what that truth ends up consisting of, or as Ward puts it, "caring so much for the honest truth that one does not allow personal interests to subvert inquiry or to prejudge the issue."[66] A perfect example of a failure to adopt this attitude is with confirmation bias, which involves "the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand."[67] Readers are often guilty of this in choosing which news outlets to read and consider, but journalists can be equally susceptible to confirmation bias by selecting only sources or studies that reaffirm something they already thought was true, rather than considering all the available evidence. Political journalist Paul Taylor, who wrote for the Washington Post for 14 years, used a "before and after" test to check for this:

> When assigned a story that involves some substantial reporting, Taylor used to write the lead at the outset, before he had done any reporting. Then he would test that lead against the one he had written for real at the end of the reporting. If the final lead was too similar to the one he wrote before doing the reporting, he would know he hadn't learned very much. That's a sign the reporter may have only pursued information that confirms his biases, rather than overcoming preconceptions to find new information.[68]

Lastly, intellectual integrity is simply to accept the fallibility of human knowledge and not claim omniscience in one's reasoning, "to admit wishful thinking, to face up to the toughest questions, and, where necessary, to admit that one's ideas are flawed."[69] Not only must journalists own up to their limited perspective, but they also must tell the readers if their reports aren't conclusive, where there is a lack of information, and more

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[66] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 283
[67] Nickerson, 175
[68] Dean, 1
[69] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 283

importantly, when they err. The truth is somewhat of a moving target: as new evidence becomes available, what we hold to be true evolves alongside it. So, journalists must tell the readers when new information suggests that the target has moved, and where we missed the mark with our previous shots. While there may be other tendencies an objective actor might adopt, the essentials of the objective stance are embodied in these four.

Similarly, for Rawls, it is of vital importance for public reason that citizens are *reasonable*. To this, he says:

> Reasonable citizens want to live in a society in which they can cooperate with their fellow citizens on terms that are acceptable to all. They are willing to propose and abide by mutually acceptable rules, given the assurance that others will also do so; and they will honor these rules even when this means some sacrifice to their own interests… Reasonable citizens accept the burdens of judgment.[70]

It is this idea of mutually acceptable terms that motivates objectivity as well. We accept our fallible knowledge of the world and the difficulties that arise in trying to answer deep philosophical questions. So, we agree to terms that others can reasonably abide by as to have a mutual agreement on how to proceed in our inquiry. Both the Rawlsian reasonable citizen and the journalist adopting Ward's objective stance do this.

This disposition is grounded in the same epistemology discussed in Chapter 2, which accepts that humans engage with the world by way of interpreting it according to our various, interdependent conceptual schemes. Thus for Ward, "objectivity is a fallible, context-bound, holistic method of testing interpretations."[71] This method consists of three distinct types of standards by which we test our interpretations about the world. Not

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[70] Wenar, 3.2
[71] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 280

coincidentally, these correspond directly with standards we ought to employ in journalistic endeavors as well. One can definitely conceive of other possible criteria, and though I won't consider those here, my discussion here will show that the idea of journalism as forum guardian seems to emphasize the need for these three in particular.

Empirical Standards

Empirical standards concern the ontological accuracy of statements, that is, how well do they correspond with the external world. For journalism, this means a strong emphasis on factuality in reporting, which involves grounding accounts in claims that are supported by substantial empirical evidence. It is easiest to illustrate this by showing a blatant lack of factuality.

In a recent segment on her show "The Kelly File," political commentator Megyn Kelly discussed the implications of a voter law — House Bill 1303 — enacted by Colorado in 2013. The law, she said, "'literally allows residents to print ballots from their home computers, then encourages them to turn ballots over to 'collectors' in what appears to be an effort to do away with traditional polling places.'"[72] The fact she asserted — that Colorado residents could print ballots out from their home computers — did not correspond well with the actual text of the bill. PunditFact, a branch of the fact-checking site PolitiFact, looked into the claim and ultimately debunked its accuracy, stating:

> In 2013, Colorado enacted a law (HB 1303) that moved the state to an "all-mail" absentee voting system, among other changes. Every active voter gets a ballot sent to his or her residence, and they can choose to mail it in by Election Day or

[72] PunditFact, 1

> turn it into a county clerk's office. They can also still vote in person at a voting service and polling center… The ballot is mailed to them -- they don't print it out.[73]

This claim, in contrast to Kelly's, was supported by empirical evidence (in this case, the text of the bill as officially published by the state legislature), and thus factually accurate.

While it may seem biased on my part to cite a Fox News show as my sole example of empirical inaccuracy, I could (almost) equally have chosen a misstatement from MSNBC or CNN. However, as only one example was needed here, I opted for one from Fox News as t non-partisan groups frequently rank them as the most factually inaccurate of the major cable news networks. The Poynter Institute looked at a survey conducted by Fairleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind, which found that:

> People who watch MSNBC and CNN exclusively can answer more questions about domestic events than people who watch no news at all. People who only watch Fox did much worse. NPR listeners answered more questions correctly than people in any other category.[74]

Additionally, AMERICAblog cited a survey by PunditFact examining the veracity of news networks, stating:

> According to PunditFact, Fox News' on-air talent were mostly false, false, or "pants on fire" 60% of the time. MSNBC ranked second in falsehoods, at 46% of the time. And CNN ranked a lowly (or uply) 18% level of falsehoods – meaning, CNN did a pretty good job getting it right.[75]

Again, this is merely *an* example intended to illustrate the consequences of *not* adhering to empirical standards — one of the most basic responsibilities of journalism — and we should be deeply concerned that the most prominent news organizations in America are this consistently failing to do so. Almost by definition, news reports are

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[73] PunditFact, 1
[74] Beaujon, 1
[75] Aravosis, 1

meant to be accurate accounts of reality. Therefore, accounts that report the opposite are useless in informing citizens — in actuality, they *misinform* people. Empirical accuracy, however, is not a unique requirement either of public reason or of pragmatic objectivity, but is something required of any coherent definition of objectivity. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the idea is that statements are object-dependent (as opposed to subject-dependent), so correspondence with the object in reality is one of its most basic aims, without with the entire endeavor makes no sense.

Standards of Coherence

Standards of coherence offer us a way to test the consistency of new information with our existing knowledge — they are epistemic standards. When we encounter a fact that seems to go against prior experience, we must decide if the fact is an anomaly, produced through human error or by incorrect methods. If it is not, we must revise our conceptual schemes to accommodate this new empirical data.

Scientific discovery is rife with examples of this process, such as the abandonment of Newtonian gravity. For over 200 years, Newton's laws of gravity were how the scientific community understood gravitational forces. Then, Einstein came along and devised his theories of relativity, which at first appeared as anomalous claims that went against everything physicists knew about gravity. So, scientists tested those claims against previous knowledge, and, upon discovering that Einstein's calculations were accurate and his methods free of human error, they revised the obsolete Newtonian model.

These scenarios occur often in journalism: politicians make claims (about the economy, proposed laws, research findings, other politicians, etc.) that seem wildly counterintuitive, and journalists must verify those claims against prior knowledge about the topic. They can do this through a number of means, such as reviewing studies or seeking expert opinions (e.g. consulting an analyst from the World Bank on the validity of a claim about the potential impact on the global economy of a proposed tariff). The importance of having standards of coherence is to verify how — by what methods of inquiry — a statement came to be known, and thus whether including that statement in a news report helps or hinders the reader's understanding of the event, and whether or not a journalist would be justified in including it.

While this standard comes in part from our interpretive epistemology, which requires that we verify the reliability of claims about the world, it is also necessary for public reason. Standards of coherence help us filter out claims that rely on inadequate methods of verification. Often, the means of evaluation leading to incoherent or inconsistent statements are unique to comprehensive doctrines, such as "divination, or… complex and disputed economic or psychological theories."[76] Recall from Chapter 3 that our doctrines are diverse and often conflict, so ruling out standards of verification that are not exclusive to a single worldview, but instead are available to all reasonable citizens, goes a long way in helping journalists publicly justify their interpretations.

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[76] Wenar, 3.6

Standards of Rational Doctrine

Standards that focus on rationality are typically procedural in nature — that is, they offer criteria that promote being fair, impartial, and open in the process of evaluating our beliefs. As Ward notes:

> For the attainment of objective beliefs, it is important that all rational voices receive fair and respectful treatment, that the process of debate be inclusive, and the hierarchies of power do not distort deliberation. The process of deliberation should not "block the paths of inquiry" by preventing formulation of hypotheses or criticisms.[77]

Thinking back to the objective stance, not only must we take on the burdens of rationality, but we must also be charitable in reconstructing others' points such that we can partially transcend our own perspective, and further we must do so disinterestedly, not giving our own viewpoints preference over others *simply because they are ours*.

Standards of rationality translate to journalism as well, providing guidelines for making editorial judgments and framing stories. We see journalists wrestle with this frequently in a process called "he said, she said" journalism. A residual consequence of traditional objectivity, journalists often frame debates between politicians in a dialogical format: a Republican senator A said X, to which Democratic senator B responded with Y; after hearing Y, senator A said Z, and so on. Journalists do this out of a noble intention and indeed to obey a criterion of rationality, that is, to represent diverse viewpoints. However, this often results in them becoming complicit in spreading misleading information, and as such, standards of rational doctrine cannot be taken in isolation from empirical or coherence standards. Instead, taking statements from authority figures and testing them for factuality and consistency can ensure that a diversity of *rational* voices

[77] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 285

are heard in the political forum, and that from those, we legitimately arrive at objective beliefs.

Standards of rational doctrine also help journalists practice public reasoning. Ward directly references Rawls in this section of his book, saying, "public reason is the means by which a society fairly and openly discusses fundamental political issues. Rawls argues that citizens in a pluralistic democracy must agree on the sort of reasons that they will give each other."[78] As the press helps set the tone for deliberation in the public political forum, these standards allow it to favor rational voices over irrational ones, but in a way that does not distort them or give preference to one over the other for irrelevant reasons.

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[78] Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 286

Concluding Remarks

Collectively, Ward's objective stance and his three types of standards provide journalists with a way to justify their practice, to give the public acceptable reasons for endorsing the interpretations made in their reporting. Why do these reasons provide *legitimate* justification? Ward's standards of pragmatic objectivity function in an analogous way to Rawls' public reasons: they offer standards that any citizen (regardless of their comprehensive moral, religious, or philosophical doctrine) would find reasonable to endorse. Put another way, were any member of society to place themselves in the shoes of the journalist and attempt to replicate the interpretive process, they too would find the process reasonable. By objectively verifying his or her interpretations, they journalist gives justification for those reasons that do not just depend on his or her own conceptual schemes, but on standards of factuality, coherence, and rationality, which are available to any reasonable person. Phrased like this, we see resemblances as well to the scientific method (it is no coincidence that scientific inquiry is referenced several times in this paper).

In general, there is a strong correlation between the believability of claims about the world and the quality and quantity of reasons provided for supporting those claims. If only one person is able to conclude something about the world and can only offer purely subjective reasons for how they came to believe that, others would be unlikely to believe his or her claim. This is not to say that the majority opinion is always indicative of the most objective or reasonable beliefs — in fact, it is often a very poor indicator of them — but simply that by providing publicly available and accepted justifications for our interpretations (whether they pertain to matters of political justice, scientific phenomena, or newsworthy events), we give others better reason to endorse them as well.

Further, our interpretations are ubiquitous — all human knowledge consists of interpreting things through our various conceptual schemes. Thus, our knowledge of the world runs a wide spectrum. On one end, we have a barrier of "minimum correspondence" with the external world; statements that lie beyond this point we dub "false" insofar as they run counter to, or contradict everything we know. On the other, we have cold, hard facts that we take to be incorrigible; yet, these too are factual as far as we know — the external world far outpaces our understanding of it, and thus there is always room to revise our beliefs. But in between these extremes is a gradient of interpretations that include not just facts, but also theories, analyses, political values, moral values, religious values, and infinitely more subsets between each of those. What places them in their proper order on the spectrum is not some categorical difference, but the degree to which others may reasonably come to believe or value them as well.

Thus, the aim of journalism is to give people reasons to believe its accounts of events in the external world — public reasons that all reasonable citizens can look to in order to determine whether or not the account accurately depicts reality. This lets citizens come to new understandings of the parts of the world that lie beyond their immediate horizons, lets them use that new knowledge to better participate in the public political forum of a deliberative democracy, and it lets journalism safeguard that forum from distortion or manipulation in ways that prevent citizens from exercising their rights.

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