



The objectivity norm in American journalism*

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ABSTRACT

Why did the occupational norm of ‘objectivity’ arise in American journalism? This question has attracted the interest of many journalism historians but it has not previously been examined as an instance of a more general social phenomenon, the emergence of new cultural norms and ideals. Four conditions for the emergence of new norms are identified – two having to do with the self-conscious pursuit of internal group solidarity; and two having to do with the need to articulate the ideals of social practice in a group in order to exercise control over subordinates and to pass on group culture to the next generation. Reviewing the history of the professionalization of American journalism, this essay identifies the late 19th and early 20th century as the period when these conditions crystallized. Alternative technological and economic explanations of the emergence of objectivity are criticized and the difficulty of understanding why objectivity as a norm emerged first and most fully in the United States rather than in European journalism is discussed.

KEY WORDS ■ norm ■ objectivity ■ partisan press ■ professionalism

‘Objectivity’ is the chief occupational value of American journalism and the norm that historically and still today distinguishes US journalism from the dominant model of continental European journalism (Donsbach, 1995: 17–30).¹ ‘Objectivity’ is at once a moral ideal, a set of reporting and editing practices, and an observable pattern of news writing. Its presence can therefore be identified by several measures:

- (a) journalists’ express allegiance to the norm – in speeches, conferences, formal codes of professional ethics, textbooks in journalism education, debates and discussions in professional journals, and scientific surveys of journalists’ opinions;
- (b) ethnographers’ observations of journalists at work and the occupational routines to which they adhere;
- (c) content analysis of the texts of newspapers and news broadcasts that measure the degree of impersonality and non-partisanship in news stories; and

- (d) resistance displayed by adherents to the norm when it is openly challenged or criticized (Tuchman, 1972: 660–79).²

The objectivity norm guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts. Objective reporting is supposed to be cool, rather than emotional, in tone. Objective reporting takes pains to represent fairly each leading side in a political controversy. According to the objectivity norm, the journalist's job consists of reporting something called 'news' without commenting on it, slanting it, or shaping its formulation in any way. The value of objectivity is upheld specifically against partisan journalism in which newspapers are the declared allies or agents of political parties and their reporting of news is an element of partisan struggle. Partisan journalists, like objective journalists, typically reject inaccuracy, lying and misinformation, but partisan journalists do not hesitate to present information from the perspective of a particular party or faction.

Where did the objectivity norm come from? It was not always a norm in American journalism. It has a history. It has a point of origin. Specifying that point of origin, identifying its sources, and locating it in particular journalists or news organizations is not easy. Many matters are in dispute. Some authors would say that objectivity emerged at the point where newspaper proprietors saw opportunities for commercial success and were therefore willing to bid farewell to political party underwriters. They have stressed that the increasingly lucrative market for newspapers in the late 19th century led publishers to seek out readers across political parties and so forced them to abandon strident political partisanship. Others have argued that technological change, specifically the invention of the telegraph, placed a premium on economy of style, brought about reporting habits that stressed bare-bones factuality rather than discursive commentary, and so gave rise to an ethic of objectivity (Emery and Emery, 1996: 185).³

The 'and so' clause in these economic and technological explanations is rarely explored. In my view, the position that the wide distribution of social behavior naturally and normally gives rise to a norm prescribing that behavior and attributing moral force to its observation skips over a necessary step. *What causes the norm to be articulated?* Explaining the articulation of a norm is part of explaining the norm. If, say, incest is naturally repellent, and so the avoidance of incest is widely distributed, why should an incest taboo arise? If a behavior is already in place, what additional work does an articulated norm accomplish? If technology made objectivity an inevitable practice or if economic self-interest of newspapers made objectivity the obvious best choice, what purpose was served by moralizing a practice that would have survived regardless?

I share with most other social scientists an understanding of norms as moral prescriptions for social behavior. Norms are ‘obligations’ rather than ‘regularities,’ to borrow Robert Cooter’s distinction (Cooter, 1988: 587).⁴ ‘Norm’ can also refer to prevalent patterns of behavior (generally speaking, leading government officials in the United States, if married, *do not* have sex with their office interns), but the focus here is the emergence of morally potent prescriptions about what should be prevalent behavior (leading government officials, if married, *should not* have sex with office interns). Could it be that a prevalent pattern of behavior gives rise to moral norms? Do widely distributed social practices for some reason ooze prescriptive rules that insist on the prevalent pattern? Perhaps widespread-ness contributes to prescriptiveness. But many habits are widespread that have no prescriptive force. Most people like to eat ice cream but no one insists that those who do not like it have failed to live up to a morally important requirement. Most people watch several hours of television a day, but no one believes that they should; if anything, TV-viewing receives moral disapproval in general public discussion.

Different kinds of norms may have different kinds of explanations. Some norms apply to all people or almost all people in a society; others are specific to people of a particular class, religious group, or occupation. Some norms are supported by the state, expressed in laws, and backed by threat of force if violated, but others do not have legal-political support. Some norms have intense moral urgency and their violation is judged a crime or a sin; others are something more like rules of propriety, and their violation is taken to be impoliteness or social gracelessness. One dimension on which norms vary is how formalized they are: are the norms widely understood but implicit? Or are they spelled out and made visible in laws, codes of ethics, religious commandments, and folk counsel? These different kinds of norms may not all be explainable in the same manner, either in how they originate, how they are maintained, or how they influence individual behavior.

Any of the many factors that influence human behavior could influence the introduction of norms. Economic, technological, legal, political, social, cultural, and intellectual factors could all contribute to the emergence of prescriptive rules. One of the distinctive features of norms as prescriptive rules, rather than norms as prevalent practices, is that they are self-consciously articulated. What circumstances lead people or institutions to become self-conscious about their patterns of behavior and to articulate them in the form of moral norms?

At least four conditions encourage the articulation of norms. Two of these we might think of as Durkheimian, having to do with horizontal solidarity or group identity, two are Weberian, concerning hierarchical social control across

an organization at one point in time or across generations over time. The first Durkheimian condition is that the articulation of moral norms is encouraged by forms of ritual solidarity that call on a group or institution to celebrate itself, to honor its members, to recognize the introduction of new members of the group or the passing of old ones or the induction of fully adult or assimilated new members to higher status in the group. Thus births, confirmations, funerals, retirements, annual meetings, awards banquets, and other such events provide occasions for speech in which speakers are often called upon to state explicitly, and as moral rules, the ways of the group.

A second Durkheimian condition is more outward-looking than inward-looking: cultural contact and conflict can provoke the articulation of norms inside the group. Here the prescription that 'the way we do' things is 'the way one should do' things is a function of a kind of group egoism, a way of defining the group in relation to other groups. This may lead groups to claim independence or separation from other groups, but equally it may prod them to claim affiliation with other groups.

A Weberian condition for the articulation of norms arises in any institutional settings so large that socialization or enculturation cannot take place informally. Wherever people must be handled in batches and trained in the ways of the group, there will be a kind of pedagogical economy in saying out loud what the prescribed rules of behavior are. Where the ways of the group must be handed down from one generation to the next – where, in other words, some form of schooling is necessary, the teaching generation will benefit from formulating rules of general applicability and rules with moral force. These rules will be of great use to the learning generation, too, in providing certainty about how to behave under inherently ambiguous conditions. The pedagogical imperative for the articulation of norms often leads to an overly rigid or absolute statement of norms and the overlearning of norms on the part of the students. Thus children overlearn gender-appropriate behaviors and are sometimes unwilling to tolerate variation in behaviors that to adults seem innocuous. Bureaucrats, likewise, overlearn rules and may take their own rules too seriously.

A second Weberian condition arises less from the need to pass on organizational culture in a large institution than from the need of superiors to control subordinates in a complex organization. Superiors may wish to be free from normative constraints to act with their best discretion, but they would like their subordinates to be constrained by rules. Here political control encourages the emergence of formalized norms.

These four social conditions prompt the rhetorical formalization of norms. Each of them offers a set of reasons for speech or for the codification into speech or writing of implicit norms. Both needs for social cohesion (the

Durkheimian conditions) and needs for social control (the Weberian conditions) can generate articulate moral norms.

Let me turn now to the history of the objectivity norm in American journalism.

The business neutrality of 'meer printers'

In colonial American journalism, printers testified to a concern for fairness in order to shed responsibility for what appeared in their pages. Benjamin Franklin insisted in his 'Apology for Printers' (1731) that the printer was just that – one who prints, not one who edits, exercises judgment, or agrees with each opinion in his pages.

Printers are educated in the Belief that when Men differ in Opinion, both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick; and that when Truth and Error have fair Play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter: Hence they chearfully serve all contending Writers that pay them well, without regarding on which side they are of the Question in Dispute.

In the same passage, however, Franklin also declares that newspaper contributions must exhibit good taste and refrain from character assassination. Clearly, he exercised editorial judgments even as he denied he was doing so (Franklin, 1989: 172–3).

Franklin's 'Apology' is not only a mess of contradictions but a very rare effort of a printer to defend his behavior at all. Colonial newspaper proprietors had little theory of the press and little occasion to articulate a rationale. Printers ran their newspapers with little consistent purpose or principle. They understood themselves as small tradesmen, not learned professionals. At first, colonial printers did not imagine their newspapers to be either political instruments or professional agencies of news-gathering. None of the early papers reached out to collect news; they printed what came to them. Colonial printers, more than their London brethren, were public figures – running the post office, serving as clerks for the government, and printing the laws. But they were first of all small businessmen.

In the first half century of American journalism, little indicated that the newspaper would become a central forum for political discourse. Colonial printers avoided controversy when they could, preached the printer's neutrality when they had to, and printed primarily foreign news because it afforded local readers and local authorities no grounds for grumbling. Foreign news came primarily from the London press and looked out at the world from an English Protestant perspective; although there were colonists from Sweden, The Netherlands, Germany and elsewhere, the overwhelming majority were

from England and no doubt found London-inflected news interesting, perhaps reassuring, but rarely controversial. The preponderance of foreign news was overwhelming. Out of a sample of 1900 items that Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* printed from 1728 to 1765, only 34 touched on politics in Philadelphia or Pennsylvania (Clark and Wetherell, 1989: 292).

As conflict with England heated up after 1765, politics entered the press and printerly 'fairness' went by the board. It became more troublesome for printers to be neutral than to be partisan; nearly everyone felt compelled to take sides. The newspaper began its long career as the mouthpiece of political parties and factions. Patriots had no tolerance for the pro-British press, and the new states passed and enforced treason and sedition statutes in the 1770s and 1780s. By the time of the state-by-state debates over ratification of the Constitution in 1787–88, Federalists, those leaders who supported a strong national government, dominated the press and squeezed Antifederalists out of public debate. In Pennsylvania, leading papers tended not to report Antifederalist speeches at the ratification convention. When unusual newspapers in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston sought to report views on both sides, Federalists stopped their subscriptions and forced the papers to end their attempt at even-handedness (Main, 1961).

Some of the nation's founders believed outspoken political criticism was well justified so long as they were fighting a monarchy for their independence, but that open critique of a duly elected republican government could be legitimately curtailed. Sam Adams, the famed Boston agitator during the struggle for independence, changed his views on political action once republican government was established. This great advocate of open talk, committees of correspondence, an outspoken press, and voluntary associations of citizens now opposed all hint of public associations and public criticism that operated outside the regular channels of government (Maier, 1980). As one contemporary observed, it did no harm for writers to mislead the people when the people were powerless, but '[T]o mislead the judgement of the people, where they have *all* power, must produce the greatest possible mischief' (Buel, 1980: 86).⁵ The Sedition Act of 1798 forbade criticism of the government. As many as one in four editors of oppositional papers were brought up on charges under this law. But this went one step further than many Americans of the day could stomach. Federalist propaganda notwithstanding, Thomas Jefferson won the Presidency in 1800, the Sedition Act expired, and party opposition began to be grudgingly accepted.

In this era, no norm of objectivity appeared. The printer's neutrality was supported in a rhetorical setting where admitting partisanship or preferences would have opened a can of worms. Neutrality was perhaps prudential counsel, but not a moral norm. In any event, all of this referred only to what the

printer would print, none of it touched on what a printer might himself write. And what writing there was tended not to be 'reporting', as we would think of it today, but commentary. The occupational preconditions for a modern concept of objectivity simply did not exist. So when political partisans made demands on printers, there was no defense against them, no ideological resources to counterpose the integrity of journalists against the corruption of party, even in a day when the legitimacy of parties was much in doubt. A language of occupational virtue for journalists had not yet developed.

Partisan predictability and stenographic fairness

In 19th century journalism, editors came to take great pride in the speed and accuracy of the news they provided. With the introduction in the 1830s of the rotary press and soon the steam-powered press, amidst an expanding urban economy on the Eastern seaboard, and in the rush of enthusiasm for Jacksonian democracy, commercial competition heated up among city newspapers. A new breed of 'penny papers' hired newsboys to hawk copies on the street, and editors competed for a wider readership and increasingly sought out local news – of politics, crime, and high society. This newly aggressive commercialism in journalism was an important precondition for modern notions of objectivity or fairness, but, at first, it fostered only a narrow concept of stenographic fairness. The papers grew increasingly boastful about the speed and accuracy of their news-gathering, but editors found this perfectly consistent with political partisanship and their choosing to cover only the speeches or rallies of the party they favored. It was equally consistent, in their eyes, for reporters to go over speeches with sympathetic politicians to improve, in printed form, on the oral presentation. Into the 1870s and 1880s, Washington correspondents routinely supplemented their newspaper income by clerking for the very congressional committees they wrote about. They often lived at the same boarding houses as congressmen, and the boarding houses tended to divide along party lines (Ritchie, 1991: 60–3).⁶

As late as the 1890s, when a standard Republican paper covered a presidential election, it not only deplored and derided Democratic candidates in editorials but often just neglected to mention them in the news. In the days before public opinion polling, the size of partisan rallies was taken as a proxy for likely electoral results. Republican rallies would be described as 'monster meetings' while Democratic rallies were often not covered at all. And in the Democratic papers, of course, it was just the reverse.

Journalism as an occupational culture

Partisanship ran deep in 19th-century American journalism. Popular historians of journalism like to quote the paragraph in Adolph Ochs' statement of purpose on taking over *The New York Times* in 1896, about how the paper would give the news 'impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of any party, sect or interest involved'. They invariably fail to quote the next paragraph which laid out Ochs' commitment to sound money, tariff reform, low taxes, and limited government. Ochs took these principles seriously enough to march, along with top editors of his paper, in the parade for the 'Gold Democratic' ticket in 1896 (Davis, 1921: 218). 'Objectivity' was far from an established practice or ideal in the 1890s.

Partisanship endured, but reporters came increasingly to enjoy a culture of their own independent of political parties. They developed their own mythologies (reveling in their intimacy with the urban underworld), their own clubs and watering holes, and their own professional practices. Interviewing, for instance, had become a common activity for reporters in the 1870s and 1880s. In the antebellum years, reporters talked with public officials but did not refer to these conversations in print. Politicians and diplomats dropped by the newspaper offices but could feel secure, as one reporter recalled, that their confidences 'were regarded as inviolate'. President Lincoln often spoke with reporters informally but no reporter ever quoted him directly. No president submitted to an interview before Andrew Johnson in 1868, but by the 1880s the interview was a well accepted and institutionalized 'media event', an occasion created by journalists from which they could then craft a story. This new style of journalistic intervention did not erase partisanship but it did presage reporters' new dedication to a sense of craft, and new location in an occupational culture with its own rules, its own rewards, and its own esprit (Schudson, 1995: 72–93).⁷

Interviewing was a practice oriented more to pleasing an audience of news consumers than to parroting or promoting a party line. Newspapers had become big businesses by the 1880s, with towering downtown buildings, scores of reporters (*New York World* employed 1200 people by 1895), splashy sponsorship of civic festivals, and pages of advertising from the newly burgeoning department stores. The papers vastly expanded their readership in this growing marketplace; increasing numbers of papers counted their circulation in the hundreds of thousands. Accordingly, reporters writing news came to focus more on making stories, less on promoting parties. Newspapers were becoming highly profitable businesses. Circulation leapt forward while the cost of production plummeted with wood pulp as a new source of paper and mechanical typesetting a new labor-saving device. Advertising revenue surpassed

subscription fees as the primary source of income as the papers courted new audiences (particularly women). The increasingly commercial orientation of the newspaper certainly helped sustain the innovation of interviewing.

The idea of interviewing 'took like wildfire', wrote Atlanta reporter Henry Grady (1879). What one would like to know, of course, is just what enabled the practice of interviewing to take 'like wildfire'. One would also like to know why it took like wildfire in the United States but not in Europe – a matter to which I shall return. It would be two more generations before European reporters began to adopt what was by then widely disseminated standard practice in the United States. In Britain, journalists began to accept the interview after 1900, often through American tutelage. American correspondents by their example, taught Europeans that their own elites would submit to interviews. This education accelerated during the First World War. One American reporter recalled that his assignment to interview European heads of state in 1909 seemed 'ridiculous and impossible' (and he failed at it) but 20 years later it was easy, the interview no longer 'a shocking innovation to the rulers of Europe'.

In the late 19th century and into the 20th century, leading journalists counseled against note-taking and journalists were encouraged to rely upon their own memories. But by the 1920s journalism textbooks dared to recommend 'the discriminate and intelligent use of notes'. The growing acceptance of note-taking suggests the acceptance and naturalization of interviewing. This is not to say the interview was no longer controversial. The English writer G. K. Chesterton reported in 1922 that even before his ship touched land in New York interviewers had 'boarded the ship like pirates'. There was still a sense that an 'interview' was a contrived event in which the journalist, in collusion with a person seeking publicity, invented rather than reported news. As late as 1926 the Associated Press prohibited its reporters from writing interviews. But generally, reporting in the United States by that time meant interviewing.

Interviewing, all but unknown in 1865, was widely practiced by 1900 and was the mainstay of American journalism by the First World War when it was still rare in Europe. The rapid diffusion of this new practice among American journalists seems to have been unaccompanied by any ideological rationale. It fit effortlessly into a journalism already fact-centered and news-centered rather than devoted primarily to political commentary or preoccupied with literary aspirations. It did not give rise to the objectivity norm but was one of the growing number of practices that identified journalists as a distinct occupational group with distinct patterns of behavior. The growing corporate coherence of that occupational group, generating a demand both for social cohesion and occupational pride, on the one hand, and internal social control,

on the other, would by the 1920s eventuate in a self-conscious ethic of objectivity.

Alternative perspectives on late 19th-century journalism

This perspective has little in common with standard explanations of the emergence of the objectivity norm. One of the most stubborn beliefs in journalism history is that 'objectivity' became the common practice in journalism in the late 19th century and after because (a) the telegraph put a premium on a terse, factual style; (b) the wire services required value-free reporting to serve clients of various political allegiances; and (c) newspapers in general found profit in winning over both Democratic and Republican readers.

The case for the decisive role of the telegraph was made well by Donald L. Shaw in several key articles. His study of Wisconsin newspapers from 1852 to 1916 found a decline in news bias over the period, as general accounts would have led him to expect. But Shaw finds a particularly sharp decline between 1880 and 1884, a period in which there was a leap from 47 to 89 percent of wire-based stories in Wisconsin newspapers' coverage of the presidential campaign. Later, and more slowly, non-wire news also showed declining bias, a fact that Shaw attributes to reporters' learning to imitate wire service style (Shaw, 1967: 3–12, 31; 1968: 326–9; 1971: 64–86).

Shaw's quantitative study is reinforced, more allusively, by James Carey's 'Technology and Ideology,' a justly famous essay brimming with ideas. Among Carey's arguments is that the telegraph required removing the colloquial and the regional twang from a language that would now be available everywhere; that it turned the correspondent who analyzed news into a stringer who just relayed facts; and that the high cost of telegraphic transmission forced journalistic prose to become 'lean and unadorned' (Carey, 1989: 211).

The logic of Shaw's and Carey's arguments seems at first glance unassailable and there is genuine satisfaction in finding so complex a social change as a shift in literary style and normative orientation to be so neatly explained. But that is exactly the temptation of economic and technological reductionisms that must be resisted. The beauty in these explanations may be only skin-deep. In this case, there are three problems. First, the explanation is vague about just what it explains. At most, it explains new social practices (in this case, a new literary style), not new moral norms. In that sense, it does not explain enough.

But it may explain too much. If Shaw and Carey are correct, should we not expect newspapers by the 1890s or at least by 1900 or the first years of the 20th

century, a full generation after Shaw's critical period, to be decreasingly partisan? Or to be displaying their partisanship in increasingly subtle ways? Should we not expect newspaper prose to be 'lean' and telegraphic? Should we not expect leading newspapers to be focusing increasingly on just relaying 'facts'? But in 1900, newspaper partisanship was still in most cases blatant, prose was still, by modern standards, long-winded. In fact, the ideals of journalistic prose by 1900 seem to have been quite varied. Far from cohering around a telegraphic center, the language of dashing correspondents from Cuba just before and during the Spanish–American War were personal, colorful, and romantic. The human interest reporting of reporters enchanted with urban life was sentimental. Coverage of politics was often self-consciously sarcastic and humorous. This was not prose stripped bare.

Now, this is my own observation, based on reading a fair number of newspapers of the turn of the century, not based on any systematic evaluation. This would be flimsy ground for disputing Shaw and Carey if their own work were based on more systematic content analysis. But this brings out the second problem with the technological–economic case: it is based on limited data, including data not easily bent to the overall argument. Carey's work is apparently entirely impressionistic. As for Shaw's, it has some curious features if it is to be a basis for a technologically determinist argument. Between 1852, when Wisconsin newspapers used no wire service stories in campaign coverage, and 1880, when half of the stories were wire stories, there was no decrease in measured bias (actually, there was a small increase) (Shaw, 1967: 6). Why should this increase from zero to 47 percent wire stories have produced no decrease in bias when the increase from 47 to 89 percent in the next four years led to a dramatic drop in news bias? (Shaw also finds a fairly steep increase in news bias from 1888 to 1892; only after that is there is a steadier decline. This is another anomaly that does not fit Shaw's explanation.) This makes no sense if the constraints of telegraphy necessarily force or at least have a very close affinity to a new prose style.

Remember that what is at issue is not only a new style of prose but the self-conscious articulation of rules with moral force that direct how that prose shall be written and provide a standard of condemnation when the writing does not measure up. Here the technological and economic explanations by themselves help not at all.

Neither Carey nor Shaw gives close consideration to alternative hypotheses. One hypothesis I advanced in *Discovering the News* (1978) is that professional allegiance to a separation of facts and values awaited, first, the rising status and independence of reporters relative to their employees, a change in journalism that developed gradually between the 1870s and the First World War, and second, the emergence of serious professional discussion about

'objectivity,' which came only after the First World War. Only with these developments were there the social, organizational and intellectual foundations for institutionalizing a set of journalistic practices to give 'objectivity' force (Schudson, 1978). Subsequent work confirms my original point that a self-conscious, articulate ideology of objectivity can be dated to the 1920s (Streckfuss, 1990: 973–83).

There is another factor of equal importance. Most newspapers remained deeply partisan until the end of the 19th century. In places like Wisconsin, the vast majority of these partisan papers were Republican. That might have made 1884 an unusual year, because many of the most prominent Republican papers in the country (including papers like *The New York Evening Post*, the *Boston Herald* and the *Springfield Republican*) abandoned Republican standard-bearer James G. Blaine. It is quite possible that the 1880–84 decline in news bias on which Shaw builds his argument had more to do with the unusual nature of the 1884 campaign when issues of the personal integrity or corruption of the candidates, rather than party loyalty, played an unusually important role (King, 1992: 185–7).

The notion that the move from partisanship to objectivity was economically motivated is widely believed but nowhere justified. The leading textbook in the history of journalism puts it this way: 'Offering the appearance of fairness was important to owners and editors trying to gain their share of a growing readership and the resulting advertising revenues' (Emery et al., 1996: 181). But was it? Readership was growing so rapidly in the late 19th century – from 3.5 million daily newspaper readers in 1880 to 33 million in 1920 – a great variety of journalistic styles were economically rewarding. Very likely the most lucrative option was strident partisanship. Certainly this characterized circulation leaders of the day like William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. Heated political campaigns and the newspapers' ardent participation in them were circulation-builders, not circulation-losers (King, 1992: 396–8, 467–8).

Another factor in the eventual triumph of a professional journalism is that the very concept of politics changed from 1880 to 1920 under the impact of Mugwump and Progressive reforms. Liberal reformers began to criticize party loyalty. They promoted new forms of electoral campaigning, urging an 'educational' campaign with more pamphlets and fewer parades. Newspapers at the same time became more willing to take an independent stance. By 1890, a quarter of daily newspapers in Northern states, where the reform movement was most advanced, claimed independence of party.

By 1896, a reform called 'the Australian ballot' had swept the country, changing forever the way Americans went to the polls. Until the 1890s, American election days were organized to the last detail by the competing

political parties. The state did not prepare a ballot. The parties printed up their own tickets and distributed them to voters near the polls. The voter then did not need to mark the ballot in any way – the voter did not need, in fact, to be literate. He just took the ticket from the party worker and deposited it in the ballot box. The act of voting was thus an act of affiliation with a partisan cause (Schudson, 1998a: 168–74).⁸

The Australian ballot symbolized a different understanding. Now the state prepared a ballot that listed candidates of all contending parties. The voter received the ballot from an election clerk and, in the privacy of the voting booth, marked the ballot, choosing the candidates from one or several parties as he wished. Voting was now a performance oriented to an ideal of objectivity, a model of rational choice, if you will. There was an increasingly strident rhetoric about the corruption of parties and the need for forms of governing that were above parties. Civil service reform, taking off in this same era, promoted this rhetoric powerfully in many nations around the world. But in the American case and in those other nations that adopted ballot reform, there was not only a verbal rhetoric but a kind of performative rhetoric in which millions of people acted out a social practice that incorporated a new model of objectivity.

With the Australian ballot, civil service reform, corrupt practices acts, voter registration laws, the initiative and referendum, the popular primary, the direct election of senators, and non-partisan municipal elections, politics began to be seen as an administrative science that required experts. Voting came to be seen as an activity in which voters make choices among programs and candidates, not one in which they loyally turn out in ritual solidarity to their party. This new understanding of politics helped transform a rabidly partisan press into an institution differentiated from the parties, with journalists more likely to see themselves as journalists, or as writers, rather than as political hangers-on (McGerr, 1986).⁹

Modern objectivity

What we might call modern analytical and procedural fairness dates to the 1920s. Analytical fairness had no secure place until journalists as an occupational group developed loyalties more to their audiences and to themselves as an occupational community than to their publishers or their publishers' favored political parties. At this point journalists also came to articulate rules of the journalistic road more often and more consistently. The general manager of the Associated Press, Kent Cooper, announced his creed in 1925: 'The journalist who deals in facts diligently developed and intelligently presented

exalts his profession, and his stories need never be colorless or dull' (Gramling, 1940: 314). Newspaper editors formed their own national professional association for the first time in 1922–23, the American Society of Newspaper Editors. At their opening convention, they adopted a Code of Ethics or 'Canons of Journalism' that included a principle of 'Sincerity, Truthfulness, Accuracy' and another of 'Impartiality,' the latter including the declaration, 'News reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind' (Pratte, 1995: 206).

This newly articulate fairness doctrine was related to the sheer growth in newsgathering; rules of objectivity enabled editors to keep lowly reporters in check, although they had less control over high-flying foreign correspondents. Objectivity as ideology was a kind of industrial discipline; a Weberian condition was at work. At the same time, objectivity seemed a natural and progressive ideology for an aspiring occupational group at a moment when science was god, efficiency was cherished, and increasingly prominent elites judged partisanship a vestige of the tribal 19th century. (Purcell, 1973)¹⁰ Here Durkheimian affiliation was a factor promoting the articulation of a norm of objectivity.

Another Durkheimian condition was also at stake: journalists not only sought to affiliate with the prestige of science, efficiency, and Progressive reform but they sought to disaffiliate from the public relations specialists and propagandists who were suddenly all around them. Journalists had rejected parties only to find their new-found independence besieged by a squadron of information mercenaries available for hire by government, business, politicians, and others. Early in the 20th century, efforts multiplied by businessmen and government agencies to place favorable stories about themselves in the press. A new 'profession' of public relations emerged and got a great boost from President Woodrow Wilson's attempt in the First World War to use public relations to sell the war to the American public. The war stimulated popular public relations campaigns for war bonds, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and the YMCA. By 1920, one journalism critic noted, there were nearly a thousand 'bureaus of propaganda' in Washington modeled on the war experience. Figures circulated among journalists that 50 percent or 60 percent of stories even in *The New York Times* were inspired by press agents. The new Pulitzer School of Journalism at Columbia was churning out more graduates for the PR industry than for the newspaper business. The publicity agent, philosopher John Dewey wrote in 1929, 'is perhaps the most significant symbol of our present social life' (Dewey, 1930: 43; Schudson, 1978: 121–59).¹¹

Journalists grew self-conscious about the manipulability of information in the propaganda age. They felt a need to close ranks and assert their collective integrity in the face of their close encounter with the publicity agents' unembarrassed effort to use information (or misinformation) to promote

special interests. When Joseph Pulitzer endowed the School of Journalism at Columbia (in 1904 although classes did not begin until 1913), he declared that he wanted to 'raise journalism to the rank of a learned profession'. By the 1920s, it seemed to at least some of the more intellectual-minded advocates of journalistic professionalism, that this meant a scrupulous adherence to scientific ideals. 'There is but one kind of unity possible in a world as diverse as ours', Walter Lippmann wrote. 'It is unity of method, rather than of aim; the unity of the disciplined experiment.' He wanted to upgrade the professional dignity of journalists and provide a training for them 'in which the ideal of objective testimony is cardinal' (Lippmann, 1920: 67, 82).

Nothing was more threatening to this ideal than the work of public relations. 'Many reporters today are little more than intellectual mendicants', complained political scientist Peter Odegard in 1930, 'who go from one publicity agent or press bureau to another seeking "handouts" ' (Odegard, 1930: 132). Just before the First World War, New York newspaper editor Don Seitz assembled a list of 1400 press agents for the American Newspaper Publishers Association, distributed the list to ANPA members, and urged them not to accept material for publication from any of them. But this was a losing battle and by 1926 he complained that the Pulitzer School of Journalism 'turns out far more of these parasites than it does reporters' (Seitz, 1926: 210).¹² He may have been right. By the time sociologist Leila Sussmann wrote her dissertation on public relations in 1947, her survey of some 600 public relations agents found that three-quarters of them had worked as newspaper journalists before turning to public relations (Sussmann, 1947: 87).

At this point – the 1920s – the objectivity norm became a fully formulated occupational ideal, part of a professional project or mission. Far more than a set of craft rules to fend off libel suits or a set of constraints to help editors keep tabs on their underlings, objectivity was finally a moral code. It was asserted in the textbooks used in journalism schools, it was asserted in codes of ethics of professional associations. By the 1930s, publishers would use the objectivity norm as a weapon against unionization in the newsroom (how could a reporter be 'objective' if he joined the Newspaper Guild?) – the Weberian condition of social control inside the organization gave publishers reason to promote the objectivity norm even if they had done little or nothing to invent it (Schudson, 1978: 156–7).¹³

The relevance of this Weberian condition may be better recognized by the observation that the further a reporter is from the home office, the greater that reporter's freedom to violate objectivity norms. Foreign correspondents are treated more as independent experts, free to make judgments, less as dependent and supervisable employees. In truth, they cannot be supervised nor do editors very often have the knowledge to second-guess them. For that matter,

readers do not normally have the background to fill in a context to make bare facts comprehensible.

Others – notably sports reporters – are exempt from rules of objectivity on different grounds. All journalism is ethnocentric, giving more attention to national news than foreign news. Where news organizations cater to local rather than national audiences, as is decidedly the case in the American press, they are ethnocentric with respect to their own city or region. In the rare cases where an American news organization is designed with a national audience in mind – *USA Today* – sports reporting operates by an objectivity norm, but ordinarily sports reporters openly favor local teams. If a Chicago newspaper provided a visiting basketball team coverage as sympathetic as it provides the hometown Chicago Bulls, this would be understood as treachery, as if *The Times* of London had treated press releases from Hitler's Germany with the same deference as those from 10 Downing Street.

From the perspective of the local news institution, the triumphs and defeats of the local team are examined from a stance that presumes enthusiastic backing of the team. The home team is within what Daniel Hallin has called the 'sphere of consensus' in journalism, a domain in which the rules of objective reporting do not hold (Hallin, 1986: 116–17). Journalism is a complex social and discursive domain. American newspapers are involved not only in reporting conflicts and competitions with professional detachment but also take part in establishing a local community identity. Not infrequently, in the 19th century, newspapers were founded in order to draw attention to and increase the real estate values of frontier towns. This 'booster' spirit survives and colors the American press. European newspapers, typically national in orientation, with close ties to national party organizations rather than to local business elites, are much less susceptible to boosterism. But in the central arena of reporting political news, American journalism embraced the objectivity norm.

At the very moment that journalists claimed 'objectivity' as their ideal, they also recognized its limits. In the 1930s there was a vogue for what contemporaries called 'interpretive journalism'. Leading journalists and journalism educators insisted that the world had grown increasingly complex and needed to be not only reported but explained. The political columnists, like Walter Lippmann, David Lawrence, Frank Kent, and Mark Sullivan, came into their own in this era. Journalists insisted that their task was to help readers not only know but understand. They took it for granted by that point that understanding had nothing to do with party or partisan sentiment.

Was this progress, a professional press taking over from party hacks? Not everyone was so sure. If the change brought a new dispassion to news coverage, it also opened the way to making entertainment rather than political

coherence a chief criterion of journalism. Speaker of the House 'Uncle' Joe Cannon objected:

I believe we had better publicity when the party press was the rule and the so-called independent press the exception, than we have now. The correspondents in the press gallery then felt their responsibility for reporting the proceedings of Congress. Then men representing papers in sympathy with the party in power were alert to present the record their party was making so that the people would know its accomplishments, and those representing the opposition party were eager to expose any failures on the part of the Administration.

In the independent press, in contrast, serious discussion of legislation gave way to entertainment: 'The cut of a Congressman's whiskers or his clothes is a better subject for a human interest story than what he says in debate' (Cannon and Busbey, 1927: 295). News, Joseph Cannon mourned in 1927, had replaced legislative publicity. What had really happened is that journalists had become their own interpretive community, writing to one another and not to parties or partisans, determined to distinguish their work from that of press agents, eager to pass on to younger journalists and to celebrate in themselves an ethic and an integrity in keeping with the broader culture's acclaim for science and non-partisanship.

Conclusion

Journalists live in the public eye. They are uninsulated from public scrutiny – they have no recondite language, little fancy technology, no mirrors and mysteries to shield them from the public. There are strong reasons for journalists to seek publicly-appealing moral norms to protect them from criticism, embarrassment, or lawsuits, and to give them guidance in their work to prevent practices that would provoke criticism or even lawsuits, and to endow their occupation with an identity they can count as worthy. But this instrumentality – the practical utility of having *some* norm – does not explain why *this* norm, the objectivity norm, came to dominate.

A variety of moral norms could achieve the ends of providing public support and insulation from criticism. Journalists work in Germany or China or Cuba or Argentina with norms that differ from the objectivity norm. To understand the emergence of a norm historically, it is necessary to understand not only the general social conditions that provide incentives for groups to adopt 'some' norm but the specific cultural circumstances that lead them to adopt the specific norm they do. Strategic uses for normativity help explain why journalists have norms at all, and I have spoken of the Durkheimian and Weberian conditions that promoted the generation of a new norm in American journalism. But these components of explanation do not explain why a

group selects the particular norm it does. The latter problem requires understanding the cultural environment the group can draw on, the set of ideas, concepts, and values that they have access to, find attractive, and can convey convincingly to themselves and others.

At this point, I return to the question of why European journalism did not initially develop the norm of objectivity and, when later they came to accept it, did so with less fervor than Americans. Some of the sociological conditions that affected journalistic norms in America were absent or less pronounced in Europe. The desire of journalists to distinguish themselves from public relations practitioners was absent in Europe. Public relations developed more extensively and influentially in the United States than in Europe. Moreover, the anti-partyism of American political life, intensified in the Progressive years, went much further than efforts to contain party corruption in Europe. In America, a civil service tradition had to be invented and emerged as the result of a political movement; in Europe, a degree of bureaucratic autonomy, legitimacy, and professionalism could be taken for granted, so there was less reason for European civil servants to ideologize themselves the way American reformers did. The ideological virtues of a journalistic divorce from party, so readily portrayed in America against this reform background, had no comparable political ballast in European journalism.

It may also be, to come at the comparative question from a different angle, that the space that could be occupied by 'objectivity' as a professional value in American journalism was already occupied in European journalism. It was occupied by a reasonably successful journalistic self-understanding that journalists were high literary creators and cosmopolitan political thinkers. European journalists did not have the down-and-dirty sense of themselves as laborers whose standing in the world required upgrading the way American journalists did. If there was to be upgrading, in any event, it was to a literary rather than professional ideal.

Jean Chalaby goes so far as to observe that journalism is an 'Anglo-American invention' (Chalaby, 1996: 303–26). British and American journalism became information and fact-centered in the mid-19th century, but French journalism did not. Until late in the century, when leading British and American newspapers employed numerous foreign correspondents, the French press drew most of its foreign news straight from the London papers. The French were much less concerned than the British and Americans to draw a line between facts and commentary in the news. French journalism, and other continental journalisms, did not participate in the 'unique discursive revolution' that characterized British and American journalism – and so would not come around to an objectivity-oriented journalism until many decades after the Americans and, even then, less fully (Chalaby, 1996: 313).

Chalaby treats the American and British cases as more similar than I think is warranted. The British case may be a kind of half-way house between American professionalism and continental traditions of party-governed journalism with high literary aspirations. Even so, Chalaby's explanation that French journalism could not partake of the Anglo-American discursive revolution because it was dominated by literary figures and literary aspirations is a point well taken.

It would be wonderful to find a person, a moment, an incident which gave birth to the objectivity norm in American journalism and then to simply trace the mechanisms of diffusion from newspaper to newspaper, and from American newspapers to world journalism. But there is no magic moment. The social conditions that made possible, desirable, and convenient the occupational practices that could be understood as 'objective reporting' emerged during the late 19th century in ways that did not initially produce a strong, self-conscious articulation of the objectivity norm. At the point where the norm became clearly articulated – in the 1920s – it was already operating in the daily activities of American journalists. It is easier to explain the articulation of the norm, arising from the Durkheimian and Weberian conditions I have sketched, than to establish exactly which features of the American cultural landscape and the changing social conditions of the late 19th century were most vital in preparing the soil for it. What is clear is that the moral norm American journalists live by in their professional lives, use as a means of social control and social identity, and accept as the most legitimate grounds for attributing praise and blame is a norm that took root first, and most deeply, in this journalism and not in others across the Atlantic.

Notes

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- 1 Donsbach conducted a survey to compare German, Swedish, Italian, British, and American journalists. He found Americans 'still uphold norms of objectivity, fairness and neutrality'. They do so more than their European counterparts who are much more likely to say that it is important for them to 'champion particular values and ideas'. Differences in norms seem also matched in differences in the social organization of work: only a sixth of American journalists who say their primary function is reporting or editing also acknowledge spending some time writing commentary, while for German journalists the figure is over 60 percent and for Italians and British reporters and editors about half acknowledge spending time in commentary. See also Donsbach and Klett (1993: 53–83) and Chalaby (1996: 303–26).
- 2 On newsroom practices, the landmark work is Gaye Tuchman (1972: 660–79). On journalistic defenses of objectivity against its critics, the two chief moments

- came in the 1960s in response to 'new journalism' and New Left critiques of journalism and in the 1990s in response to the movement for 'public' or 'civic' journalism. The former is summarized in Michael Schudson (1978: 160–94) and many of the latter defenses are cited and discussed in Michael Schudson (1998b: 132–49).
- 3 The eighth edition of the leading journalism history textbook (1996) emphasizes both explanations but also acknowledges growing uncertainty about their validity. See Michael Emery and Edwin Emery (1996: 185).
 - 4 Richard H. McAdams defines a norm as 'a decentralized behavioral standard that individuals feel obligated to follow.' This definition is meant to distinguish general social norms from law, the latter being a highly centralized and authoritative standard backed, at least in principle, by force. I think law is a particular kind of norm rather than something altogether different from it. See Richard H. McAdams (1997: 381).
 - 5 Buel quoting Pennsylvania jurist Alexander Addison. On Addison, see also Norman Rosenberg (1984: 399–417).
 - 6 For historical materials not otherwise footnoted, I draw primarily on Michael Schudson (1978).
 - 7 I draw here on a much fuller account of the history of the newspaper interview in Michael Schudson (1995: 72–93).
 - 8 The symbolic and substantive importance of ballot reform is emphasized in Michael Schudson (1998a: 168–174).
 - 9 See especially Michael McGerr (1986).
 - 10 Purcell discusses lucidly the general prestige of objectivist or 'scientific naturalist' understandings of science and social science in the 1920s.
 - 11 The history of public relations is not well developed. The material here comes from Schudson (1978: 121–59).
 - 12 See also Paul Hanna (1920: 398–399); George Michael (1935); Ernest Gruening (1931); Silas Bent (1927); and Eugene A. Kelly (1935: 307–18) for other critiques of press agency.
 - 13 The changing economics of newspaper publishing allowed publishers increasing independence from parties and made them more open to the 'public service' talk of the Progressive Era. Richard Kaplan emphasizes this in his study of Detroit newspapers. He found that at least one leading publisher, George G. Booth of the *Detroit Evening News*, adopted the language of 'public service' and 'impartiality' in the early 1900s. See Richard Kaplan (1998). I do not myself see how the self-justifying talk of publishers creates a psychologically powerful sense of obligation to impartiality on the part of reporters – although certainly declining pressure from publishers for their journalists to toe a party line would have been conducive to journalists taking themselves as serious, independent professionals.

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