

## CHAPTER 6

## Objectivity and Its Discontents: The Struggle for the Soul of American Journalism in the 1960s and 1970s

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From a twenty-first-century perspective, the 1960s and 1970s seem like a golden age for the American press—especially for leading newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. The “just-the-facts” approach to reporting that had prevailed in the 1940s and ’50s crumbled, and journalists began to focus instead on the more exciting work of explanation, interpretation, and investigation. They found themselves at the center of great national crises such as the civil rights struggle, the Vietnam War, and Watergate, which gave many journalists the opportunity to launch brilliant careers and influence the course of history. Perhaps most importantly, it was a time of healthy profits and steady expansion. Layoffs were almost inconceivable, and editorial departments spent freely, even extravagantly. The *Los Angeles Times* insisted that its staffers always fly first class—never business class.<sup>1</sup> The situation did not look so rosy to the people running these newspapers at the time, however. They were proud of their successes, but they had deep, almost existential concerns about the future.

In 1971, *L.A. Times* editor in chief Nick Williams wrote to a colleague, “I have a terribly uneasy feeling that journalism has reached both a pinnacle and a crossroads. I suspect it has gained enormously in power and has lost credibility . . . with an alarming percentage of the people.” If that trend were to continue, Williams said, “we [will] have destroyed or weakened a keystone

of our Constitution.”<sup>2</sup> Williams’s boss, *L.A. Times* publisher Otis Chandler, also believed newspapers such as his faced a crisis. In a 1969 speech about the hippie generation’s disdain for the mainstream press, Chandler noted that the problem went even deeper. He said, “The far right does not like us; they see us as too soft on communism [and] as too sympathetic with rioting minorities. . . . The far left does not like us; they see us as a tool of the rich and feel that we filter the news to suit them. . . . Middle-class establishment adults do not like us. We are not tough enough on student uprisings. We are not supporting the police enough in their efforts to enforce law and order.”<sup>3</sup>

Like many other established institutions in the late 1960s, the press had become a political battleground. As historians have shown, nearly all sources of traditional authority were being challenged during this era.<sup>4</sup> Newspaper managers recognized this at the time, but it provided them little solace. “To say that there has been an overall decline in public confidence in established institutions is a cop out,” a *New York Times* executive wrote in a 1973 memo addressing the paper’s declining credibility. “When this feeling attacks the fundamental base of this newspaper, we cannot afford to accept this answer.”<sup>5</sup> The ballast supporting that “fundamental base” was American journalism’s most cherished principle: objectivity. The news industry’s professional associations adopted objectivity—meaning some amalgam of fairness, accuracy, impartiality, detachment, and independence—as an ethical standard in the 1920s, and it became even more entrenched in the next few decades.<sup>6</sup> Earning a reputation for objectivity enabled news organizations to enhance their credibility, and therefore their potential appeal, among the broadest possible audience. By the late 1960s, however, that strategy was no longer working. Polls, surveys, and letters to the editor showed the public’s distrust and dislike of the press rising sharply.<sup>7</sup> People began to speak of a “credibility gap” between the news media and the public, adopting a term that the press itself had coined to describe misleading U.S. government pronouncements about the Vietnam War.

Editors and publishers fixated on the credibility gap as a major long-term threat. In a 1966 memo about the challenges facing journalism, Nick Williams emphasized “the feeling on the part of a large segment of the public that newspapers slant their news, or select their news, to accomplish a specific and not always honorable purpose.” He noted, “We sell credibility. . . . It is probably our most important asset.”<sup>8</sup> Williams’s successor as *L.A. Times* editor in chief, Bill Thomas, told the paper’s business managers in 1972, “We must above all else remain credible, or we are of no value to anyone.”<sup>9</sup>

At the *New York Times*, editor in chief A. M. (Abe) Rosenthal was obsessed with maintaining the paper's reputation for objectivity and credibility. His goal, he wrote in 1969, was to provide a newspaper "that a reader can turn to confident that he is getting the utmost possible in fairness and objectivity."<sup>10</sup> Upon hearing that many people considered the *New York Times* "a political journal" rather than "an information medium," Rosenthal confided to his journal in 1971, he took it as a serious blow.<sup>11</sup> When he rebuked reporters and editors for passages that he considered biased—something he did frequently—he often reminded them that these violations of objectivity could do irreparable harm to the paper's credibility.<sup>12</sup>

As editors and publishers wrestled with how to handle the knotty issues of credibility and objectivity, they received much unsolicited advice. The problem, said many people on the right, was that journalists had taken up the antiestablishment cause of the late 1960s—instead of being objective, they were slanting news coverage to suit their left-wing biases. Vice President Spiro Agnew famously leveled this accusation in a series of speeches in 1969 and 1970. At the same time, many on the left insisted that the problem was objectivity itself; in trying to be objective, they said, journalists inevitably became biased *in favor* of the establishment.

These competing critiques bore directly on the most pressing concerns of news organizations: preserving their credibility, maintaining the goodwill of advertisers, attracting and retaining talented staff, and appealing to a broad cross section of readers, especially the younger generation. Furthermore, the sources of these critiques made them impossible to ignore. Agnew was the vice president, and he seemingly spoke for much of the Silent Majority, judging by the way his popularity shot up after his inflammatory speeches.<sup>13</sup> And the fiercest left-wing critics of objectivity were journalists themselves, often well-respected ones working for high-profile publications. News organizations therefore needed to reassess their fundamental values and practices. This essay examines how that process unfolded at two of the county's most influential newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

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The importance of objectivity was an article of faith at most American news organizations in the early 1960s, but it was especially central to the identity of the *New York Times*. In a famous 1896 editorial, publisher Adolph Ochs

promised to "give the news impartially, without fear or favor." This championing of objectivity earned his newspaper great financial success and even greater prestige, and many others emulated it.<sup>14</sup> Ownership of the paper has remained in Ochs's family ever since, and its editors have venerated him and his commitment to objectivity—none more so than Abe Rosenthal, who led the newsroom from 1969 to 1986.

In October 1969, two months after becoming managing editor, Rosenthal sent a memo to the entire staff in which he listed seven core beliefs on which "the character of the paper" rested. Five of the seven concerned objectivity:

The belief that although total objectivity may be impossible because every story is written by a human being, the duty of every reporter and editor is to strive for as much objectivity as humanly possible.

The belief that no matter how engaged the reporter is emotionally he tries as best he can to disengage himself when he sits down at the typewriter.

The belief that expression of personal opinion should be excluded from the news columns.

The belief that our own pejorative phrases should be excluded, and so should anonymous charges against people or institutions.

The belief that presenting both sides of the issue is not hedging but the essence of responsible journalism.<sup>15</sup>

Rosenthal did not accuse anyone of failing to honor those beliefs. "I am bringing all this up," he wrote, "not as a warning nor as a cry of alarm, because neither is needed, but simply as a reaffirmation of the determination to maintain the character of The Times as we grow and develop."<sup>16</sup> That was disingenuous—privately, he felt there was indeed cause for alarm. He had adapted the memo from a letter he wrote the year before to James Reston, then the paper's executive editor. That letter included the same core beliefs and the same emphasis on the *New York Times* maintaining its character, but Rosenthal also warned of a serious internal threat to that character. "There are more reporters on the paper who seem to question or challenge the duty of the reporter, once taken for granted, to be above the battle," he wrote. "Inevitably, more young reporters reflect the philosophy of their age group and times—personal engagement, militancy and radicalism."<sup>17</sup>

This generational conflict was roiling newsrooms throughout the country. Writing in the fall of 1969, the longtime *Hartford Courant* editor in chief Herbert Brucker noted that, a decade earlier, “everyone agreed . . . that an accurate, unbiased account of the event reported was journalism’s purest gem. . . . Today objective news has become anathema to young activists in journalism.”<sup>18</sup> In a May 1970 speech, the editor in chief of the *Wichita Eagle* observed that many journalism students “regard . . . objectivity as obscene.”<sup>19</sup> A June 1970 headline in the newspaper trade journal *Editor & Publisher* described the situation succinctly: “Attack on Objectivity Increases from Within.”<sup>20</sup> After an article in the *Wall Street Journal* mentioned Rosenthal’s staff memo and quoted excerpts from it, editors and journalism professors from around the country requested copies of the complete memo, saying they felt objectivity needed to be defended from its detractors in the younger generation.<sup>21</sup>

Not all of those who dismissed objectivity were brash youngsters, however. The *New York Times* was being “attacked from within” on objectivity, as Rosenthal complained to the publisher, by a member of its top brass: associate editor and columnist Tom Wicker.<sup>22</sup> A standout Washington correspondent in the early 1960s, Wicker became Washington bureau chief in 1964. But he was an ineffective manager, and he left Washington after four years to devote himself full-time to the opinion column he had begun writing in 1966.<sup>23</sup> As a consolation for losing the prestigious bureau-chief job, Wicker received the title of associate editor. Although he had no editing or managerial responsibilities, his name appeared on the editorial-page masthead alongside the paper’s publisher and top editors.

As a columnist, Wicker had free rein to express his opinion, in the *New York Times* and elsewhere. Writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 1971, he declared objectivity to be the American press’s “biggest weakness.” By objectivity, Wicker said, he meant the press’s “reliance on and its acceptance of official sources”—that is, privileging the perspective of the powerful. “The tradition of objectivity,” Wicker explained, “is bound to give a special kind of weight to the official source, the one who speaks from a powerful institutional position.”<sup>24</sup> Rosenthal objected strongly to Wicker’s article. In a letter to *Times* publisher Arthur Ochs “Punch” Sulzberger, he lamented: “Here we have a man whose name appears on the masthead telling his readers that what The Times promotes and what is at the base of its existence are not worth having. . . . It seems to me fairly obvious that these people inside the paper who wish us to drop objectivity and comprehensiveness will

receive comfort and inspiration from Wicker’s article, thus making our job even more difficult than it is or need be.”<sup>25</sup>

Rosenthal was right to be concerned about “people inside the paper” who shared Wicker’s view. Wicker hit on what many journalists found to be the most convincing critique of objectivity: that it privileged establishment perspectives while excluding others. The 1968 student uprising at Columbia University made young *New York Times* staffers acutely aware of this issue. Steve Roberts, at the time a twenty-five-year old reporter, recalled decades later, “We felt that the coverage of Columbia was heavily influenced and tilted toward the police version and the administration version, and that the *Times* would not allow us to give voice to the protesters’ side of things.”<sup>26</sup> This frustration increased when Rosenthal wrote a front-page article that sided openly with Columbia’s embattled president and demonized the student protesters.<sup>27</sup> Such episodes led some *Times* journalists to equate Rosenthal’s brand of objectivity with his relatively conservative political views, and thus to reject it. Those who clashed with Rosenthal most fiercely tended to be passionate left wingers.<sup>28</sup> But the dispute went beyond politics. On controversial issues, there are certain viewpoints that journalists feel merit inclusion in their coverage—these viewpoints fall into what the political scientist Daniel Hallin calls the “sphere of legitimate controversy.” Other viewpoints journalists consider unfounded or too extreme—these fall into the “sphere of deviance” and rarely get discussed. Noncontroversial views are contained in the “sphere of consensus.”<sup>29</sup> In the case of Columbia, some *Times* journalists (most notably Rosenthal) felt the views of radical leftist students fell into the sphere of deviance, whereas others (such as Roberts) felt they belonged in the sphere of legitimate controversy.

Even if they did not think of it in precisely these terms, most journalists understood that, in practice, objectivity entailed deciding which viewpoints deserved serious consideration and which did not. Therefore, those who sympathized with viewpoints outside the mainstream—in particular the New Left—often rejected objectivity. Similar disagreements about which viewpoints merited serious consideration made many African-American journalists skeptical of objectivity. Gerald Fraser, who became a *New York Times* reporter in 1967, recalled the paper spiking a story he had written about black college students in the late 1960s. “I just went out and asked the black students what they thought, and that’s not what the *Times* wanted,” Fraser said. “Had I interviewed the deans and college presidents and said, ‘How are you dealing with the black students now?’ [my editor] would have liked that.”<sup>30</sup>

Fraser said he and his fellow black reporters at the *Times* recognized “that our viewpoint was different than the general viewpoint on the news.” Along with African-American journalists working for other publications in New York, they formed a group called Black Perspective, which met regularly in the offices of Kenneth Clark, the renowned African-American psychologist at City College.<sup>31</sup> In that forum as well as in others, they discussed objectivity frequently. Earl Caldwell, whom the *New York Times* hired as a reporter in 1967, said that he and his black colleagues in the late 1960s thought the paper was failing utterly to be objective in its coverage of issues affecting people of color; therefore they found it hard to take their (white) editors seriously when they insisted on some murky standard of objectivity. As Caldwell recalled, “The objectivity thing—I never got caught up on that. I always just said, ‘I’m going to try to be honest, and I’m going to try to be fair.’”<sup>32</sup>

The press’s detractors on the right also took issue with whose perspectives received prominent coverage. As Spiro Agnew said mockingly in one of his speeches skewering the news media, “If a theology student in Iowa should get up at a PTA luncheon in Sioux City and attack the president’s Vietnam policy, you would probably find it reported somewhere in the next morning’s issue of *The New York Times*.”<sup>33</sup> And yet, Agnew claimed, when a majority of congressmen signed a letter in support of Nixon’s Vietnam policy, the *New York Times* did not report it.<sup>34</sup> This critique did not originate with Agnew. William F. Buckley Jr. founded the conservative journal *National Review* in 1955 partly because he felt most newspapers and magazines excluded right-wing views like his. Many white Southerners in the late 1950s and early ’60s believed (correctly) that the country’s leading news organizations sympathized openly with the civil rights movement and denigrated the perspective of segregationists, a posture that they attributed to the press’s liberal bias.<sup>35</sup> Agnew, however, helped bring the fixation on liberal bias from the fringes to the mainstream, and it has remained a central component of Republican orthodoxy ever since. This was a remarkable turnaround from earlier decades when, as Sam Lebovic writes elsewhere in this volume, liberal politicians criticized the press as a propaganda vehicle for conservative corporate interests.<sup>36</sup>

Antipress sentiment among conservatives had been building for several years prior to Agnew’s offensive, deriving partly from a sense that the press was giving less attention to their perspective and more attention to left-wing or radical viewpoints. The *Los Angeles Times* was especially vulnerable to his criticism, because prior to Otis Chandler becoming publisher in 1960,

it had featured right-wing perspectives prominently in its news coverage and had ignored most others. In 1969, the paper published a lighthearted profile of the unassuming, middle-aged woman in charge of the Communist Party in Southern California—this infuriated television commentator George Putnam, among others. Putnam declared that Americans should be “shocked into a rage” and told his viewers to protest “this insult to American patriotism.”<sup>37</sup> Naturally, many people felt that the perspective of an avowed communist did not belong in a major U.S. newspaper, but more frequent complaints from the right accused the *L.A. Times* of devoting inordinate attention to the views of student radicals or the black community. A front-page article about dissatisfaction among African Americans with Richard Nixon’s selection of an all-white cabinet in 1968 prompted an acquaintance of editor in chief Nick Williams to protest, “Don’t you think all this propaganda about negro representation is overdrawn and for the grandstand? . . . I fail to understand why [one] minority group is so important.”<sup>38</sup>

Seven years later, in 1975, the managers of the *L.A. Times* were still fielding complaints that they—and the press more broadly—overemphasized the perspectives of the discontented. This perception concerned Bill Thomas so much that he felt compelled to write a front-page article about it—the only article he wrote for the paper during his seventeen-year tenure as editor in chief. Under the headline, “The Press: Is It Biased Against the Establishment?” Thomas offered an explanation for why many people perceived the *L.A. Times* and other newspapers as antibusiness or anti-cop. “Until about 10 years ago, the press tended to rely almost solely on sources within so-called establishment institutions,” Thomas wrote. “A crime story quoted police spokesmen; an economics story rested on business and industry and chamber of commerce sources; stories about racial problems came from the mouths of government spokesmen and sociology professors. One heard little from black people, the poor, the dissident, the accused criminal, and others who spoke without institutional blessing.” Thomas implied that people who complained about antiestablishment bias simply were not accustomed to seeing nonestablishment perspectives in the news. But having identified the cause of the complaint, he had no intention of placating the critics. He argued, “Really, all that has happened is this: where establishment voices alone were heard, others have gained access. To some, this is anti-establishment; to us, it is not only fair but the only way to bring about sensible, informed decisions.”<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, the *L.A. Times* would remain committed to conveying the perspectives of “black people, the poor, the dissident.” In the late 1970s, some of

the paper's editors felt they were not devoting enough attention to the problem of poverty in Southern California. So they appointed a new city-county bureau chief, Bill Boyarsky, whom they knew to be sympathetic to the plight of the poor. He was allowed to recruit his own staff and was given a mandate to remedy this shortcoming in the paper's local coverage.<sup>40</sup>

Like other major metropolitan newspapers, the *New York Times* began increasing its coverage of antiestablishment perspectives in the 1960s. Abe Rosenthal had reservations about this trend. A few months after becoming managing editor in 1969, he sent a memo to the national and metropolitan editors in which he remarked on how many articles in that day's paper concerned protesters, poverty, or discrimination. He wrote: "I get the impression, reading *The Times*, that the image we give of America is largely of demonstrations, discrimination, antiwar movements, rallies, protests, etc. Obviously all these things are an important part of the American scene. But I think that because of our own liberal interest and because of our reporters' inclination, we overdo this. I am not suggesting eliminating any one of these stories. I am suggesting that reporters and editors look a bit more around them to see what is going on in other fields."<sup>41</sup>

This mildness of this memo, and the fact that Rosenthal rarely mentioned the issue subsequently, suggests that it was not a priority for him. As his reference to "our own liberal interest" indicates, he likely recognized that he would not have enough support within the paper to reduce the number of antiestablishment stories even if he wanted to. The section editors chose the story topics, and the reporters chose whose views to include and emphasize. Rosenthal had to pick his battles, so he concentrated on his primary concern: keeping reporters' political opinions out of news articles.

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On the question of perspectives, the critics of objectivity won. They may not have seen it that way—many on the left continued to claim that the press ignored or dismissed views outside the mainstream—but from a philosophical perspective, most newspapers by the 1980s recognized the pitfalls of overreliance on establishment sources and the importance of presenting a range of viewpoints. However, many journalists in the 1960s and '70s challenged objectivity on other grounds as well. For one thing, they said, true objectivity was not humanly possible. This was something of a straw-man argument, because even the staunchest proponents of objectivity, like Rosen-

thal, conceded that it was not wholly achievable. A more salient critique charged that in trying to be objective, journalists censored themselves and obscured the truth. They presented opposing views in an effort to achieve balance, but if they believed certain views were false or misleading, they withheld that belief from the public in the name of objectivity.

This critique, equating objectivity with meek neutrality, remains common today, and it was not entirely new in the late 1960s.<sup>42</sup> Seeking to explain how they had enabled the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy during the Red Scare, many journalists faulted their colleagues for publicizing his accusations without telling readers how dubious they were. Partly as a result, newspapers began to include more context and analysis in news articles, permitting their reporters to express judgments, but not opinions. This was controversial initially—in a 1961 speech to California newspaper publishers, Nick Williams had to make a plea for "interpretive" reporting to his skeptical audience—but by the mid-1960s, most mainstream commentators accepted it.<sup>43</sup> In 1967 Irving Kristol, a founding father of neoconservatism, argued that objective journalism without analysis was "a rationalization for 'safe' and mindless reporting." He declared, "To keep a reporter's prejudices out of a story is commendable; to keep his judgment out of a story is to guarantee that truth will be emasculated."<sup>44</sup>

In the late 1960s, however, some journalists took this critique a step further, arguing that reporters should be permitted to express not only judgments but also personal opinions. Writing in *The Nation* in 1968, a former member of the *New York Times* foreign staff, Leslie Collitt, argued for the superiority of European newspapers, in which stories were "presented as the opinion of the reporter." In the American press, by contrast, "Various views on an issue are presented, point-counterpoint, and the only opinion omitted is the one that would matter most to the reader—the reporter's own."<sup>45</sup> In the same magazine a year later, *Boston Globe* reporter David Deitch said newspapers "must admit that the editorial function is inherently biased and that reporters have opinions." The solution, he said, was to imitate the respected Parisian daily *Le Monde*, which "makes itself credible by rejecting the myth of objectivity. It exposes all its biases to the reader."<sup>46</sup>

This push from some reporters for more freedom to write what they wished was part of a larger power struggle between reporters and editors. The editors—generally older, more cautious, and more wedded to the concept of objectivity—had the power to dole out assignments, change the text of articles, write headlines, and determine how prominently stories were

displayed. Reporters had resented this ever since reporting became a profession, but they rarely challenged the editors' power until the late 1960s. In 1970, a group of prominent *New York Times* journalists began holding informal meetings during which they shared their grievances about heavy-handed editing and the paper's top-down decision-making process. They jokingly called themselves "the cabal."<sup>47</sup> Some, like star reporter J. Anthony Lukas, felt that the line between judgment and opinion was arbitrary. Covering the trial of the Chicago Seven, Lukas resented that the editors would not permit him to share his unvarnished impressions of the proceedings—he later wrote a book about the trial, compelled by his desire to explain "what really happened."<sup>48</sup> At many other news organizations, disgruntled journalists were challenging their bosses in similar ways, demanding a greater voice in determining news policies and some relief from the strictures of objectivity. Observing this phenomenon, the *Columbia Journalism Review* said a movement for "reporter power" was afoot.<sup>49</sup> Many journalists seeking greater freedom of expression left the daily newspaper business to work for magazines and journalism reviews, where the so-called New Journalism was flourishing: writers were free to include their own opinions and to use novelistic techniques in the interest of vivid storytelling and pointed commentary.<sup>50</sup>

But while some newspaper reporters felt they were being stifled or censored, the mirror image of that complaint came from the right. Conservatives believed that reporters were expressing themselves *too* freely; the press had crossed the line between reporting and commentary, they argued, and thereby sullied its objectivity. In Spiro Agnew's first speech about the media, in 1969, he decried the way TV news anchors slyly injected their personal views into supposedly objective reports. "A raised eyebrow, an inflection of the voice, a caustic remark dropped in the middle of a broadcast can raise doubts in a million minds about the veracity of a public official or the wisdom of a government policy."<sup>51</sup> Agnew thus implied that journalists reporting the news should not "raise doubts"; if they have doubts, they must keep them to themselves. Many journalists would consider that self-censorship or dishonesty, but Agnew considered it responsible journalism. In 1972, Tom Wicker wrote in the journalism quarterly *Nieman Reports* that objectivity should be abandoned "so that reporters can stop being mere transmitters" of information.<sup>52</sup> The conservative media-watchdog group Accuracy in Media (AIM), which had been founded in 1969, seized on this remark as indicative of the problematic direction in which the press was headed. In a letter to the

editor of *Nieman Reports*, AIM's executive secretary wrote that unlike Wicker, "We would like to strengthen the tradition of objectivity. We want to see reporters become transmitters of accurate information, and we would not use the adjective 'mere.'" The journalist's appropriate task, according to AIM, was "to dig out and report facts accurately, even when the facts clash with deep-seated beliefs."<sup>53</sup>

The right-wing critics would have liked to see the press revert to 1950s consensus-style reporting, in which official sources were rarely questioned and interpretation was confined to the opinion columns.<sup>54</sup> But that would never happen. In addition to interpretive reporting having become firmly entrenched, the press was adopting a more adversarial posture toward those in power.<sup>55</sup> Conservatives may have recognized the hopelessness of their mission to turn back the clock, but as Nicole Hemmer suggests elsewhere in this volume, they could use objectivity as "a vital conceptual tool for undermining mainstream media"—a major long-term goal of the conservative movement.<sup>56</sup> The press might not change its behavior in response to charges that analysis and objectivity were incompatible, but it could at least be made to look hypocritical and untrustworthy.

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Despite their influence, neither angry conservatives nor frustrated reporters could cause news organizations to change their fundamental values. Those decisions rested with the top editors and publishers. Thanks to the outspoken Abe Rosenthal, it was clear where the *New York Times* stood on objectivity: it remained the paper's guiding principle. Rosenthal did not, however, subscribe to the same definition of objectivity as Spiro Agnew or Accuracy in Media. In Rosenthal's view, objectivity allowed for analysis, interpretation, and colorful writing.<sup>57</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* had a more ambiguous position on objectivity, and it changed over the course of the 1960s. In 1964, Nick Williams composed a form-letter response to readers who complained about a left-wing slant in the formerly Republican paper. The letter stressed, "The Times does make every effort to be objective, complete and factual in reporting the news."<sup>58</sup> By the late 1960s, however, Williams no longer promised objectivity to disgruntled conservatives. To one such reader, he wrote in 1969, "We do try, if not always for objectivity, at least for fairness."<sup>59</sup> In a speech the following year, he said, "I want to quarrel a little with . . . the basic theory of so-called objective journalism." His quarrel, he explained,

ved from his belief that objectivity was incompatible with interpretive reporting.<sup>60</sup>

Clearly, Williams defined objectivity differently than Abe Rosenthal. It was mainly the term, not the concept, that he disliked. Williams's successor, Bill Thomas, felt the same way. In a 1972 television interview, Thomas was asked, "Is there such a thing as objectivity, in your judgment, and can an editor expect it of his reporters?" He replied, "No. It's a word that's been tossed around so much that nobody knows what it means anymore. I don't think you can expect pure objectivity of anybody in any field at any time . . . it's probably not humanly possible." However, Thomas quickly added, "I think you can expect fairness, and that implies professional standards. In that regard, looking at objectivity through that definition, then I think you do have a right to expect that."<sup>61</sup> *L.A. Times* publisher Otis Chandler addressed the issue bluntly in a 1971 speech, saying, "I detest the word objective. Purging the word objective only leads you into a semantic jungle." He preferred to speak of "honest" journalism rather than objective journalism.<sup>62</sup> Chandler sensed, if he embraced the term objectivity, he would open himself up to criticism from people, mostly on the right, who defined the term in ways that he and his editors found unacceptable. The critics might insist that interpreting the news or calling into question official statements violated objectivity. At the *New York Times*, Rosenthal was surely aware of the danger, but he clung to the term nevertheless—although he acknowledged on multiple occasions that many people "get hung up on" the definition of objectivity.<sup>63</sup>

The *New York Times* and the *L.A. Times* dismissed right-wing critics who demanded curbs on interpretive reporting, but they also disagreed with left-wing critics who wanted the freedom to insert their personal views into news articles. The *L.A. Times* was less strict on this question than the *New York Times*. In a 1970 memo to his most senior editors, Nick Williams took a cavalier attitude toward opinionated news coverage, saying he was "not persuaded" that the reporter's opinion should be included in news articles. He added, "Some of the finest writing in The Times in recent years has come very close to this border line of personal opinion."<sup>64</sup> The *L.A. Times* was considered "a reporter's paper," meaning reporters—especially the most talented writers among them—were given great freedom in choosing the topic, angle, style, and length of their articles. Rather than ask writers to strive for an ideal of objectivity that was difficult to define, impossible to achieve

fully, and discredited in the eyes of many journalists, Williams, and later Bill Thomas, allowed them significant latitude, trusting their editors to guard the line between interpretation and opinion. The *New York Times*, on the other hand, had a reputation as "an editor's paper." Articles had to adhere to the paper's standards and house style—including the editors' standards of objectivity—and they were often rigorously edited to guarantee that they did so. A conservative who read the *New York Times* and the *L.A. Times* each day likely would have perceived more bias in the Los Angeles paper, but because of the *New York Times*'s greater national stature, it was a more frequent target of Agnew and other right-wing critics.

Yet despite their different approaches to enforcing editorial standards, the managers of the *New York Times* and the *L.A. Times* had the same basic philosophy. They believed that their coverage should emanate from the political center, so being attacked simultaneously from the right and the left made it easier for them to reject both critiques. In speeches defending the fairness and credibility of the *L.A. Times* or newspapers in general, Chandler and Williams mentioned, seemingly with pride, that both sides of the political spectrum found fault with them. As Williams said in 1966, "The American press, so vigorously attacked from both the left and the right—described as both the lackeys of capitalism and the dupes of communism— . . . is, I earnestly believe, the most responsible of all our American institutions."<sup>65</sup> When a reader complained to Chandler in 1968 that the paper was devoting more coverage to Richard Nixon's presidential campaign than to the Democratic candidates, Chandler responded that he found the letter "quite refreshing," explaining, "Much of my recent mail has criticized The Times for not giving Mr. Nixon enough space. One of the best tests of objectivity a publisher has is to check and see if he receives criticisms from both sides at the same time on the same issue. This usually means his newspaper is pretty close to down the middle reporting, which is my constant aim for The Times."<sup>66</sup>

This was a common view at the *New York Times* as well. Harrison Salisbury, an influential senior editor and roving correspondent, told a friend in 1971 that he was unmoved by criticism of the news media from "the extreme right and the extreme left. . . . It seems to me that this is just the conventional yapping by people who always complain if others do not reflect their opinions. As you know, we get plenty of it here at the Times, and in almost equal measure from radicals who think we are the establishment and reactionaries

who think we are the revolution.”<sup>67</sup> Seymour Topping, deputy managing editor in the 1970s, recalled, “When I was getting [criticism] from both sides of an issue, there was an indication to me that we were doing our job.”<sup>68</sup>

Of course, to achieve “down the middle” coverage, it is necessary to determine where the middle is. The target audiences for the *L.A. Times* and the *New York Times* were not microcosms of the country as a whole—they were better educated and more left-leaning, among other characteristics. Nevertheless, the men running these papers misjudged the direction in which the United States was moving politically. Instead of seeking out a middle ground between the New Right and liberalism, they sought a middle ground between the old right and the New Left. This resulted partly from the concerns these men had about the future of their business. Both papers were financially healthy (indeed, the *L.A. Times* was a cash cow), but they worried about declining readership, especially among the younger generation. Pollster George Gallup investigated this issue in a confidential 1976 survey, and in his report to newspaper publishers Gallup underlined his main finding: “The greatest cause for concern is the loss of readers among the young adult group.”<sup>69</sup>

This had been a major worry at the *L.A. Times* and the *New York Times* for at least a decade. Sizing up the challenges facing his newspaper in 1966, Otis Chandler wrote to Nick Williams, “Knowing now the audience to which we need to appeal in the next five years, obviously it is the young, swinging group—not just young chronologically but in spirit and interests.”<sup>70</sup> As his use of the word “swinging” implies, Chandler equated young people with antiestablishment, countercultural attitudes. An influential survey a few years later by the pollster Daniel Yankelovich reinforced this perception. In a speech to newspaper publishers in 1969, Chandler cited Yankelovich’s finding that 42 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds were “radical,” and that these were “the ones who are gaining power; the ones who will lead the group; and the ones who will influence and shape the opinions of the under-18 group.”<sup>71</sup>

Decision makers at the *New York Times* also fretted over young readers and assumed that most were radical. In 1970, several executives debated adding a “youth section” to the paper but scrapped the idea after deciding that it would be condescending. As one executive wrote, “The kids of today are no longer swallowing goldfish and playing with hula hoops. They are now into stopping wars, de-polluting rivers, and marching on General Motors.”<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, the idea of a youth column was resurrected in 1976, with

managing editor Seymour Topping telling several top news editors, “The paper needs to become more attractive to young people.”<sup>73</sup> A few months later, Topping solicited memos from about a dozen editors and reporters with ideas about how the *New York Times* could attract more readers in their late teens and early twenties. One reporter in her thirties jokingly suggested, “Turn itself into a tabloid and change the name to Rolling Stone,” the bible of radical youth culture.<sup>74</sup>

Management seemed less concerned about attracting or retaining older, conservative readers. These readers wanted a comprehensive, high-brow newspaper, and they had no other good options: the *New York Times*’ main competitor, the *New York Herald Tribune*, had folded in 1966; in Los Angeles, the Hearst Corporation had shuttered its morning *Examiner* in 1962, leaving only its declining afternoon paper, the renamed *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, as a competing broadsheet. The *L.A. Times* realized that for a certain type of reader, they were the only game in town. When people canceled their subscriptions because they disagreed with the political views expressed on the editorial page, Nick Williams often reminded them about the paper’s unmatched news coverage. As he told one in 1970, “If at any time you feel that the overall coverage of The Times from its 18 foreign bureaus, its 7 national bureaus, and its staff in California reporting exclusively to Times readers, outweigh the work of two controversial cartoonists whose work occupies less than a column each day, the Editorial Department of The Times will be happy to welcome you back among our subscribers.”<sup>75</sup>

By the 1970s, the *L.A. Times* seemed to have written off the staunch conservatives who had formed the core of its readership two decades earlier. Analyzing the results of a survey about canceled subscriptions, Bill Thomas acknowledged that there were many “random comments from unhappy conservatives,” but he warned, “If we pleased these people, it’s possible—even likely—that we would lose the others.” Besides, he noted, only 2 percent of those who canceled cited as their primary reason “too opinionated: inconsistent reporting.”<sup>76</sup> Given those numbers, the *L.A. Times* was not inclined to reconsider its approach to reporting based on right-wing critiques.

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By the late 1970s, the peak period of concern regarding newspapers’ credibility and objectivity seemed to have passed. The tumult of the previous



decade and a half had died down. Spiro Agnew, having resigned over corruption charges in 1973, was a fading memory. The left-wing journalism reviews that reveled in the mainstream press's failings had begun to wane.<sup>77</sup> The malaise of the Carter era dampened enthusiasm for attempts to fundamentally transform institutions that, like the press, seemed to be functioning relatively well (unlike, for instance, manufacturing, energy policy, or the monetary system). Addressing an audience of journalists in 1978, Bill Thomas said, "We are closer than ever before to a position of real and, importantly, *perceived* independence. . . . We're getting close to a goal that looked unattainable, not so long ago: that of acceptance as a truly independent source of dependable information."<sup>78</sup> This was a far cry from Nick Williams's pessimistic assessment of press credibility in the late 1960s and early '70s.

Even Abe Rosenthal felt less of a sense of urgency to protect his paper's credibility. The number of memos he sent about advocacy or editorializing in the news columns declined sharply after 1975. In 1978, he collected several minor examples of instances "where we may have strayed" and sent them to Punch Sulzberger. Five or ten years earlier, he had laced such memos with warnings about the dire threat to the paper's principles and to American democracy. This time, he wrote, "My own belief is that in recent years we have gone a hell of a long way to improving [fairness and the level of discourse] and that whatever excesses that were in the past in American journalism have largely been eliminated as far as The Times is concerned. . . . So I am calling these to your attention not because they indicate a problem but just as a matter of interest."<sup>79</sup>

Debates about objectivity, advocacy, bias, and credibility would continue into the 1980s and beyond—it is hard to imagine that they will ever be resolved, as long as there is a free press. But beginning in the late 1970s, those debates reached a kind of stasis. For decades thereafter, critics on the right would level the same kinds of charges that Spiro Agnew had made: of liberal bias, elitism, arrogance, insularity, and unwarranted power. Those on the left would accuse the press of kowtowing to powerful interests and failing to report truthfully on the country's real problems. Neither side believed for a moment that the press was actually objective. Yet most news executives and journalists in positions of power continued to insist that they were guided by something like objectivity, even if some preferred not to use that word. This confidence in their core values, along with the immense profitability of their businesses, enabled them to embrace other substantial changes to the

news product, from interpretive articles to soft-news sections. But they would not need to fundamentally reassess their values and business model again until the twenty-first century. This time the challenge would be technological rather than ideological—the Internet—and how it will reshape journalism remains to be seen.