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ANALYSIS

A Test of the News

Objectivity, democracy, and the American mosaic

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By **WESLEY LOWERY**



Graffiti on a wall in Lisbon depicts a priest chasing after two children—a commentary on the abuse scandal rocking the Catholic Church. Photo by Milliped via Wikimedia Commons.



We find ourselves in a perilous moment. Democracy is under withering assault. Technological advances have empowered propagandists to profit through discontent and disinformation. A coordinated, fifty-year campaign waged by one of our major political parties to denigrate the media and call objective reality into question has reached its logical conclusion: we occupy a nation in which a sizable portion of the public cannot reliably tell fact from fiction. The rise of a powerful nativist movement has provided a test not only of American multiracial democracy, but also of the institutions sworn to protect it.

In 2020, I argued that the press had often failed this test by engaging in performative neutrality, paint-by-the-numbers balance, and thoughtless deference to government officials. Too many news organizations were as concerned with *projecting* impartiality as they were with actually achieving it, prioritizing the *perception* of their virtue in the minds of a hopelessly polarized audience over actual adherence to journalistic principle.

To this day, news organizations across the country often rely on euphemisms instead of clarity in clear cases of racism (“racially charged,” “racially tinged”) and acts of government violence (“officer-involved shooting”). Such decisions, I wrote, are journalistic failings, but also moral ones: when the weight of the evidence is clear, it is wrong to conceal the truth. Justified as “objectivity,” they are in fact its distortion.

The response to my piece from parts of our field was a theatrical rending of garments. The author of a widely used textbook wrote that I had called for the focus on objective facts to be “replaced” (I had not); a popular commentator argued I’d advocated the “end of seeing all sides of a story” (I did not); and an industry historian claimed I believe objectivity is “inherently” racist (I do not).

These and similar voices cast themselves as defenders of a sacrosanct value suddenly fallen out of favor. This is all a ruse. The principle of fact-based reporting has not been attacked. There is no serious or sustained argument being leveled against “standards” or a methodical process of verification. This so-called “war on objectivity” has been about the corruption of *the term itself* and its *misapplication*. Neither I nor others have argued against open, empathetic inquiry.

The objection is less about the *principle* than the way it has been applied in *practice*. “What [Lowery] says is, in the actual day to day living of that lofty definition, that’s not what newspapers are doing,” observed former *New York Times* executive editor Dean Baquet, the first Black journalist to hold that role and, unsurprisingly, one of the few industry dignitaries who heard the critiques for what they actually were. “He’s saying ‘if that’s your definition of objectivity, you’re not living up to it.’” Such critiques are an appeal to our industry’s standards, not a call for their abandonment.

It is, in fact, objectivity’s self-appointed defenders themselves who have led its erosion. Rather than emphasize a fair reporting *process*, they focused obsessively on the *appearance* and *performance* of supposed *personal* objectivity, wielding the term to police personal expression—not journalistic work—in both public and private contexts. Their north star has often been *inoffensiveness*, necessitated by an advertiser- and audience-based business model that, *New York’s* Eric Levitz and others have noted, they now bizarrely refuse to acknowledge. Our standards were never simple matters of principle. They are dictated just as often by economic imperatives.

The path to better journalism is clear: we must construct an industry that reflects the diversity of our nation, articulate and live by clear values, deploy diligent journalistic methods, and construct a financial model that can insulate those values and methods from the demands of capitalism.

But rather than commit themselves to this work, too many industry gatekeepers spend their time slaying straw men, shouting in passionate defense of principles that are not in fact under dispute. As democracy dies, retired editors give duplicitous speeches decrying a misunderstanding they themselves created. They proclaim former president Trump a racist and a liar from the comfortable perch of hindsight, never acknowledging that these are the very terms they once restricted their “objective” reporters from deploying. They profess the highest

ideals even as the organizations they lead and have led permit, platform, and perpetuate the basest prejudices.

“The existing news-structure may be made serviceable to democracy,” journalist Walter Lippmann once wrote. “But while it may be, it will not be, simply by saying that it ought to be. Those who are now in control have too much at stake, and they control the source of reform itself.”

Lippmann wrote his most famous press critiques at a time much like our own. A bigoted president had worked to reverse strides toward Black equality. Technological advances and waves of new immigrant workers were seismically altering the nation’s demographics and economy. Citizens felt financially perilous even as industry titans became the richest men ever to roam the planet.

Many reflexively rebelled against shifting understandings of gender and race and the cultural innovations they sparked. A nativist movement became the most powerful force in American politics, as elected officials stoked fears of communist influence here and abroad. Anti-racist literature was banned and a fictitious mythology that denied American racism was printed in school textbooks. A war in Eastern Europe spawned debates about America’s responsibility to police the global order. Anti-Semitism was openly fanned by powerful societal figures.

The press, Lippmann noted, was deeply distrusted for reasons ranging “from accusations of unconscious bias to downright charges of corruption, from the belief that the news is coloured to the belief that the news is poisoned.”

By then, the idea of separating opinions from “objective” facts had been a widely discussed, if inconsistently followed, industry standard. The Associated Press, founded in 1846, purposely provided encyclopedic dispatches containing only facts (so partisan papers could add their own slant prior to publication). “News writing is objective to the last degree in the sense that the writer is not to editorialize,” University of Missouri professor Charles G. Ross observed in 1911’s *The Writing of the News*. “Even aside from ethical obligation, business reasons demand fairness. No paper can afford to offend a large group of readers.”

There was no greater bastion of such journalistic objectivity than the *New York Times*, but, in 1920, Lippmann charged that it was not living up to its self-proclaimed standards. In *Liberty and the News*, Lippmann accused *Times* owner Adolph Ochs of valuing his pet political causes over veracity. Ochs had vowed that his paper would “give the news impartially, without fear or favor.” But the *Times*, in Lippmann’s estimation, failed to produce a product that matched its marketing.

Months earlier, in *A Test of the News*, Lippmann and coauthor Charles Merz concluded that the *Times*’ coverage of the Russian Revolution had denied readers a factual depiction of what had actually transpired. The paper “reported” events and atrocities that never took place. At least ninety-one times, it told readers that the Bolshevik regime was on the verge of collapse. A loyal *Times* reader would have been flabbergasted when they not only took, but maintained, power.

“In the large, the news about Russia is a case of seeing not what was, but what men wished to see,” Lippmann and Merz concluded. “They wanted to win the war; they wanted to ward off bolshevism.... For subjective reasons they accepted and believed most of what they were told by the State Department, the so-called Russian Embassy in Washington, the Russian Information Bureau in New York, the Russian Committee in Paris, and the agents and adherents of the old regime all over Europe.... For the same reason they accepted reports of governmentally controlled news services abroad, and of correspondents who were unduly intimate with the various secret services and with members of the old Russian nobility. From the point of view of professional journalism the reporting of the Russian Revolution is nothing short of a disaster.”

Rather than accurately relaying accounts from government sources, Lippmann said, reporters should probe whether the things those sources say are actually true. Speed, he argued, is the enemy of rigor. “Complex and slippery,” news takes time to understand. “The true patterns of the journalistic apprentice are not the slick persons who scoop the news, but the patient and fearless men of science who have labored to see what the world really is.”

He called on journalism schools to train their pupils in critical thinking, not the rote production of daily news, and cautioned against professional standards overseen by “unenterprising stereotyped minds soaked in the traditions of a journalism always ten years out of date.”

Most crucially, Lippmann wrote, rather than *declaring themselves* objective, journalists must accept that they are not. Such acknowledgment would enable them to employ deliberate *methods* needed to do what separating fact from opinion could not. “The news as a whole is dominated by the hopes of the men who composed the news organizations,” Lippmann observed. “The chief censor and chief propagandist were hope and fear in the minds of reporters and editors.”

Lippmann was not endorsing the “objectivity” standard of his time. He was explicitly calling for processes that could make up for its failures. Today’s editors wrap themselves in Lippmann’s writings without acknowledging that it was them—an establishment that claims impartially—that he criticized. Were he alive today, they would demand he stop tweeting.

A century later, the criticism of the mainstream press remains the same. Unthinking reliance on unnamed government sources was at the heart of the failure to provide accurate facts during the run-up to the Iraq War, and still drives credulous coverage of law enforcement. We focus on politics and perception, not the messy details of policy. Right-wing complaints about hagiographic coverage of liberals and unfair treatment of conservatives echo Lippmann’s critique that too often the press hunts for facts to support a preconceived narrative.

While mainstream journalism codified its political independence, it never liberated itself from the constraints of American capitalism. Our press remains first a *business*, whose interests often clash fundamentally with its values.

The “scoop” remains the coin of the realm. Anonymous sourcing is ubiquitous, often with little context to allow readers to decipher the source’s credibility. A twenty-four-hour news cycle that attempts to merge information with entertainment often fails to provide either. An obsessive focus on the minutiae of national politics spawns an overabundance of micro-updates, prognostication, and political-theater criticism. “The subtle but sure result is a stream of daily messages that the real meaning of public life is the struggle of Bob Dole against Newt Gingrich against Bill Clinton, rather than our collective efforts to solve collective problems,” James Fallows presciently observed in 1996 in his classic “Why Americans Hate the Media,” which, as he wrote, ultimately presents “every public issue as if its ‘real’ meaning were political in

the meanest and narrowest sense of that term—the attempt by parties and candidates to gain an advantage over their rivals.”

Even Lippmann himself failed by the measure of his own standards. He never practiced the methodical journalism he had advocated. While he spoke out about harmful propaganda during the First World War, he used his nationally syndicated column to spread racist misinformation about Japanese Americans during the Second. He preached the need for a politically independent press while becoming a permanent fixture of the Washington establishment and behind-the-scenes adviser to Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson.

The ideology and theory of change taken as gospel by many American journalists—the belief that the public can be provided with enough reliable factual information by a protected free press that its individuals can make logical choices for both themselves and the society as a whole—is one Lippmann himself quickly abandoned. The average citizen, he observed, has a perspective hopelessly morphed by their own experiences and will simply contort the available facts until they correspond with what they already believe true. “Classic democracy ‘never seriously faced the problem which arises because the pictures inside people’s heads do not automatically correspond with the world outside,” biographer Ronald Steel wrote in *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*. “They did not correspond for a number of reasons—stereotyping, prejudice, propaganda. The result was to erode the whole foundation of popular government.” In later writings, Lippmann called the very concept and wisdom of popular democracy—taken as a given in his early press criticisms—into question.

In the meantime, “objectivity” quickly became a weapon of exclusion. In 1935, the Associated Press fired reporter Morris Watson, claiming his work was not “objective.” Both the National Labor Relations Board and the Supreme Court later found that his firing was not about the impartiality of his work—it was an attempt to prevent him from organizing a union. In the decades that followed, the concept of objectivity would be wielded time and time again by bosses seeking to punish reporters not for issues with their process or errors within their work, but because of personal expression that could, *theoretically*, prompt *some* readers to question that reporter’s *personal* “objectivity.”

In a recent speech, retired *Washington Post* editor Marty Baron, a legendary newsroom leader for whom I’ve twice worked, framed the current debate within journalism as the work of a handful of young renegades “enabled” by rogue

academics. That assertion is not just condescending, but astonishingly ignorant. For nearly a century there has been robust debate about both the principle and the practice of so-called objectivity within the social and natural sciences—including within the American press itself. How is it possible that you failed to notice?

For a century, the high priests of American institutions have proclaimed themselves objective when it is apparent to any thinking person that they are not. “We live under the myth of objectivity in legal research and writing,” Arthur Selwyn Miller, a leading constitutional scholar, observed in 1969. “Is it not time that something was done about it?”

Just a year before his media critiques, in 1919, Lippmann published an essay decrying the degradation and terrorization of Black Americans, proposing as a fix a system of “race parallelism”—in which Black and white Americans occupied equal but separate societies. “Parallel lines may be equally long and equally straight; they do not join except in infinity which is further away than anyone need worry about just now,” Lippmann wrote in an introduction to a collection of reporter Carl Sandburg’s coverage of the 1919 Chicago riot.

Of all Lippmann’s suggestions, it was this one that the mainstream press most eagerly took up. The press saw, and too often continues to see, itself as a white product, created by white journalists, based on the sensibilities of white readers and for the benefit of white communities. These biases prevented a mainstream American press that proclaimed itself objective from creating a written record reflective of objective reality. The mainstream press has been incapable of providing the journalism necessary to best serve and defend multiracial democracy because the mainstream American press has never, in practice, believed in multiracial democracy.

Papers misled their readers about the horrors of lynchings, justifying the actions of the murderers while denying the quantity and scope of the terror. These same papers largely missed the biggest domestic story of the century: the Great Migration of Black Americans into the North and West. Some of the most powerful papers in the South outright refused to cover the civil rights movement. Their colleagues in the North exploited white Americans’ fear of Black people to sell newspapers and newscasts, never bothering to probe why a race had been systematically forced into ghettos and denied education and economic opportunity. “The white Northern press,” Pulitzer Prize-winning

journalist Brent Staples observed in an analysis of the press's complicity in American white supremacy, "cemented the stereotype of the Negro barbarian by making Blackness synonymous with crime." All of this was presented by the industry as "objective" coverage. Clearly it was not.

In the decades that followed, local papers competed for grisly crime details to splash on their front pages as broadcast stations pioneered an "action news" model that deepened racial tensions and reinforced racial stereotypes. National outlets created and amplified moral panics around the racist myths of the "crack baby," the "superpredator," and the "war on cops." Ratings soared, news racks emptied, and people clicked. When a shameless bigot was elected president, Black journalists had their jobs threatened if they called his racism by its proper name or dared to expect their colleagues to do the same. Newsrooms claimed to value justice while truly coveting order.

In each case, our press failed to present the world as it actually is, further cementing a long-held belief among Black Americans that the media is not to be trusted. "The average Black person couldn't give less of a damn about what the media say," a volunteer for the Kerner Commission, set up to investigate the riots of 1967, reported of his interviews with Black residents. The conclusion of the commission about well-earned media distrust prompted by biased, inaccurate coverage could have easily been written today. "The intelligent Black person is resentful at what he considers to be a totally false portrayal."

Journalists are often taught to go after "the story." But that terminology can be misleading. Every story is, in fact, many stories. Despite our best efforts, very rarely does any one journalist or media organization tell any of them completely. The same question, asked several times, can yield different answers. Some sources eager to speak with you will refuse to talk to me. Our eyes are connected to our bodies, which often shape the way we experience the world and how the world experiences us. My eyes will see some things that yours never will.

The "story" we seek to tell is in fact a mosaic that must be filled in piece by piece. While one journalist may supply many tiles, seeing the entire scene requires others to fill in the rest. Thus, understanding objective reality requires a diversity of contributors. As the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar observed: truth

is symphonic—the only way to hear its totality is if each instrument contributes its distinct part.

This requires a robust media ecosystem including both national and local organizations, general interest and community media, nonpartisan and partisan outlets that are for-profit, nonprofit and publicly funded. At a newsroom level, it means staffs and leadership that fully reflect the diversity—in race, gender identity, sexuality, religion, political inclination, geography, lived experience and culture—of the American mosaic. If the news, as Lippmann observed, is dominated by the hopes and prejudices of the journalists who tell it, then it's of vital importance that those journalists reflect the full spectrum of human perspective and experience. The critical, creative process of journalism requires the unique chaos that can only come through the collision of people from varying perspectives and backgrounds.

Key to such a system is establishing the norm that the impartiality of a journalist should be judged by their edited and published journalistic work—and nothing else. A newsroom from which someone can be banished because a theoretical reader *might* believe they *may* possess or have expressed an opinion or experience that *could* compromise the integrity of their journalism is not one capable of retaining the workforce needed to cover our nation and our world. Such a system incentivizes malicious actors to seek disqualifying personal information against individual journalists, working the refs against anyone who offends them by doing their job effectively. No journalist should be told—explicitly or implicitly—that who they are disqualifies them from their profession.

Further, we must not as an industry or as individual newsrooms shy away from explicitly stating and vowing to uphold our values. Diversity must be the cornerstone of our profession—it is not a feel-good ideal; it is a journalistic imperative. We must value truth, democracy, and the equal and fair treatment of all people. We should stand up for the vulnerable—who are not voiceless; rather they are unheard by a society and institutions that refuse to listen—while taking heed that we do no harm.

But it's not enough to simply diversify our ranks and state our values. Living those values in practice requires deliberate methods and

procedures by which we create our journalism. These are the six I would propose:

A devotion to rigor. Our work must honor the fundamental journalistic functions—uncovering, compiling, and chronicling information previously unknown. Rigor requires that we not hit publish until we've actually answered the questions at the heart of a story, tracked down the interested parties, and done the homework to ensure we know what we're talking about. At a time when every citizen owns a printing press and the ranks of diligent professionals have been severely diminished, far too much of what gets published just isn't very good. One reason people don't trust "the media" is that much of the media they encounter is not trustworthy.

A commitment to fairness. We don't live in a world of angels and demons or of monsters and saints. This means that each interested party receives a full, good-faith hearing as part of our reporting process. It does not guarantee we will broadcast every assertion made by every character on every side of a given story, but rather that we are willing to hear and consider them.

Valuing context. We recognize that our job is not simply to accurately record a series of facts, but to provide those facts in a form that is coherent and meaningful, empowering our reader to place a given event or development in concert with other current events and with history.

Practicing transparency. We don't conceal possible conflicts or traffic in the fiction that any reporter functions as a disinterested party. We pay taxes, own property, practice our faiths, and send our children out into our society and its schools. We fear crime, mass shootings, or the possibility that we or our loved ones may face mistreatment because of who they are, how they present, or who they love. Our pursuit of principles is not because we're not invested in societal outcomes; it is necessitated by the fact that we are.

Exploring nuance. Good journalism leans into the gray and does not conceal it. It is honest with the reader about the unknown or unknowable; it allows for complications and narrative messiness. Journalism must not launder simplistic answers to society's complicated questions.

But seeking clarity. We pull no punches: when the weight of the objective evidence is clear, we must not conceal the truth through euphemism; rather, we should employ direct language. Our aim is not to be perceived as impartial by the people we imagine are our readers, but to accurately inform them about the world they live in.

It was by these methods that the best of us have done the type of work to which we all aspire.

It was through rigorous reporting that *Washington Post* reporters exposed the failings to treat wounded veterans at Walter Reed and *New York Times* reporters chronicled the vast civilian toll of US air strikes in the Middle East. Our most talented storytellers have practiced their craft through forthright transparency of their own humanity, perspectives, and at times direct connections to their topics—allowing readers to witness scenes and experience emotions from which they would otherwise be partitioned. A devotion to fairness and open inquiry compels us to seek out and tell stories that otherwise could easily have never been told. Some of the best journalism of our time explicitly aims to insert historical context into contemporary debates. Through nuanced consideration our wisest writers have helped us navigate our times, our culture, and the most vexing issues that face our society.

When the *Tampa Bay Times* revealed the devastation resulting from the abandonment of school integration, when John Archibald exposed a predatory Alabama police department, and when the *Boston Globe* published its investigation into the Catholic Church, there was no hint of euphemism. All portrayed their reporting's hard-won conclusions with uncompromising clarity.

These methods represent standards that can be applied across the professional media—both politically partisan and avowedly neutral; to news reporters, commentators, and opinion journalists. They allow us to thoughtfully combat the biases baked into our competitive, market-oriented profession: speed, sensationalism, conflict, and simplicity. At a time when a torrent of news, information, and nonprofessional journalism floods the public discourse, they allow us to distinguish the careful, considered work of professionals.

There is, of course, no guarantee that better journalism will result in a public more capable or willing to embrace objective reality. Yet our urgent charge in this moment is to leave behind as complete and as accurate a record of our objective reality, to rid our ranks of charlatans, and to identify financial paths forward to ensure rigorous, fact-based reporting is available to all Americans. The journalism that multiracial democracy deserves is possible, but only by a press that reflects the American mosaic. We must build a resilient mainstream press committed to empowering our communities to themselves participate in the journalistic process.

After nearly three years of the current iteration of this debate, it's time to set aside silly word games and to rise to the urgent test presented by this moment. Our profession, and our democracy, cannot survive if we do not.

Wesley Lowery is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, a Journalist in Residence at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY, and the author of *American Whitelash: A Changing Nation and the Cost of Progress*, which chronicles the rise in white supremacist violence since the election of Barack Obama and will be published on June 27.

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