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# The War on Objectivity in American Journalism - Liberties

*Liberties, a journal of Culture and Politics*

57-73 minutes

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## The War on Objectivity in American Journalism

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In May 2021, a newly hired journalist at the Associated Press, a twenty-two-year-old Stanford graduate named Emily Wilder, began posting provocative musings on Twitter about fighting between Israel and Hamas. Wilder had not been assigned to write about the Middle East. She may have thought she was tweeting as a private citizen. But the Associated Press had just reminded its employees that they are prohibited “from openly expressing their opinions on political matters and other public issues,” as the wire service reported about her case, “for fear that could damage the news organization’s reputation for objectivity and jeopardize its many reporters around the world.” Two weeks on the job, Wilder had run afoul of one of her employer’s sacrosanct rules.

But Wilder’s mistake was bigger than that. Not only was she failing to uphold journalistic objectivity by sounding off about a sensitive issue while still a cub reporter, she also derided the AP’s very commitment to objectivity. “Objectivity feels fickle when the basic terms we use to report news implicitly take a claim,” she tweeted, making an argument at once convoluted and sophomoric. “Using ‘israel’ but never ‘palestine,’ or ‘war’ but not ‘siege and occupation’ are political choices — yet media make those exact choices all the time without being flagged as biased.” Setting aside Wilder’s confusions about the Middle East — the AP does, for example, use the terms “occupation” and “siege” — her words showed no appreciation that editors at the Associated Press, as at most top-tier news

outlets, think hard about and often revisit the content of their stylebooks: when to say “war” and when to say “occupation,” when to use “Palestine” and when to avoid it. It is precisely because of this diligence that the wire service is rarely “flagged as biased.”

Most of us would agree that the AP’s blue-chip reputation for telling it like it is — which endures, for the most part, even in our age of near-total politicization — is a good thing. The world needs high-quality professional reporting on issues far and wide, presented in a way that diverse readers can trust as accurate and not colored by politics. For over one hundred seventy years, the AP has shared its stories with hundreds and even thousands of subscribing newspapers, radio and TV stations, and web portals. Small-town dailies use it as their prime source of foreign and national news. Its analyses of election outcomes are so well respected that almost everyone else relies on them.

It was not surprising, then, that the AP fired Wilder. “Emily Wilder was let go because she had a series of social media posts that showed a clear bias toward one side and against another in one of the most divisive and difficult stories we cover,” Brian Carovillano, the AP’s managing editor, explained. That didn’t stop a mudslide of hypocritical outrage. On the right, fair-weather free-speech fans wallowed in her dismissal. On the left, pundits who had pitilessly shrugged off scores of unfair firings piously intoned that no one should be punished for expressing opinions. And they had a point: Wilder’s superiors could have simply reprimanded her and suspended her from Twitter until she recommitted to her organization’s rules.

Beyond the politics of cancellation, however, there was a larger inconsistency at work.

That inconsistency concerned journalistic objectivity. Wilder’s firing came as most liberals were lamenting — properly — the collapse of trust in mainstream journalism. Over several years, millions of Americans had forsaken their faith in the traditional “objective” news providers, which they came to conclude were ideologically skewed. As institutions ceded their nonpartisan reputations, willingly or unwillingly, the void was filled by mostly inferior news sources: partisan mouthpieces, fulminating talking heads, trashy internet sites, amateur punditry, dashed-off Facebook comments, unverified viral retweets, late-night

comedians, state-of-the-art misinformation, out-and-out fake news, and other varieties of click bait.

The consequences are well-known and grim. We saw that when a huge portion of the citizenry, prodded by Donald Trump and his apparatchiks, determined the coronavirus pandemic to be a giant hoax. That delusion led many to spurn medical advice to get vaccinated, deepening the crisis. Indeed, throughout the pandemic, the breakdown of trust in journalism helped to politicize the crisis, so that what should have been utterly apolitical questions — technical and scientific questions, such as whether to close schools or mandate masks — ended up turning on ideological leanings and parochial loyalties, not on a dispassionate assessment of the facts.

We saw the same stupendous distortion with the presidential election of 2020. Again Trump and company urged Americans to disbelieve traditional news sources in order to sow doubt about his loss to Joe Biden. The Capitol riot followed. One bulwark against Trump's disinformation was the sober-minded work of the Associated Press, which four days after Election Day concluded its professional review of the Pennsylvania vote to declare Biden the winner. The factuality of Biden's victory and the AP's role in establishing that truth played a crucial role in those uneasy transition months. They reaffirmed that, despite our partisan echo chambers, dependable sources of information are still in place, still doing their job, still a mainstay of our democracy. We were not yet hopelessly trapped in an irresolvable clash of narratives, because responsible empirical analyses of the narratives could still be made.

These two headline stories, Trump's fraud claims and the coronavirus, highlighted democracy's need for politically uninflected journalism that is committed to as complete and accurate an account of the facts as possible. In both cases, what we call objective reporting served as a stabilizing force in a destabilized time. That should have led objectivity's detractors to tip their hats to the Associated Press and other news agencies that try to uphold it. But in the Emily Wilder case and in our debates since, we are hearing only whooping and hollering over objectivity's imminent demise.



Actually the war on objectivity began many years ago. It is one of the distinguishing features of the cultural and intellectual history of our time.

Objectivity in journalism, an ideal that took root early in the early twentieth century, can be understood by considering the regime that preceded it. In the nineteenth century, newspapers were proudly partisan, not only in their editorials but also in their news columns—and sometimes in their names: the *St. Louis Democrat*, the *Plattsburgh Republican*. They openly rooted for candidates and causes and made no pretense of speaking to anyone else. That style of news never disappeared. Into the twentieth century, papers such as the McCormick family's *Chicago Tribune* blatantly slanted their coverage to promote a political program. What's more, there always were (and still are) an endless variety of magazine writers, editorialists, polemicists, radio hosts, and others who aim not to report but to interpret, explain, argue, advocate, preach, or ridicule. The rise of the ideal of objectivity never eliminated or threatened the prevalence of opinion in journalism. But in the new century it became standard for newspapers — which were the chief source of news — to avow that they would, as *The New York Times* famously said in 1896, “give the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of party, sect, or interests involved.” This was the intellectual and journalistic innovation. The *Times*' approach quickly shaped print journalism and, later, radio and television.

Journalistic objectivity was rooted in several assumptions. For a start, it was based on the view that reporting — news-gathering — was the press' central task. It was thus informed by the hardscrabble reporter's “just the facts” empiricism. This in turn was premised on the philosophical idea that empiricism was possible, despite the biases that inevitably attend each of our positions, and that it was valuable. Yet objectivity must not be supported in its naïve version: there is no such thing as pure investigation, research, and fact-finding. The influence of subjectivity, its unavoidable presence, had to be

acknowledged and confronted. As Michael Schudson argued in *Discovering the News* — still, four decades later, the best history of the subject — newsmen of the 1920s (there were not yet many women) were not oblivious to the limitations of their own perspectives. To the contrary, they were quite aware of them. That is why journalistic objectivity, and the corollary notion of identifying, neutralizing, and even eliminating biases, emerged. Objectivity is the unceasing attempt to correct subjectivity and thereby come closer to what people of many standpoints can agree is the truth.

It was easy enough to be accurate, as Walter Lippmann wrote in *Public Opinion*, when reporting on the stock exchange or a baseball score. Numbers defeat prejudices, at least for honest people. But the size and the complexity of modern society, the unquantifiability of the large human stories that had to be covered, made most subjects hard for even a skilled, knowledgeable correspondent to know with certainty. The attempt to do so was further impeded by the rise of corporate public relations and government spin doctors, who made it risky to accept officials' claims at face value. Above all, Lippmann reminded us, human beings have only a partial view of the world — a perspective that creates biases that can distort, even benignly, their transmission of the facts. Lippmann and others of his era thus conceived of journalistic objectivity not as some uncanny ability that reporters possess to divine God's Honest Truth, but as an epistemological safeguard — a disciplined bulwark against the ever-present pitfalls of subjectivity and bias. "As our minds become more deeply aware of their own subjectivism," Lippmann wrote, "we find a zest in objective method that is not otherwise there." As Thomas Nagel, perhaps our most influential contemporary defender of philosophical objectivity, elaborates in *The View from Nowhere*: "Objectivity is a method of understanding... To acquire a more objective understanding of some aspect of life or the world we step back from our initial view of it and form a new conception which has that view and its relation to the world as its object. In other words, we place ourselves in the world that is to be understood."

Reporters in the 1920s didn't need to read Lippmann (or philosophy) to know that perfect objectivity is not attainable. It is an ideal supported by a set of procedures and norms, meant to remedy as much as possible the biases that afflict everyone. Upholding objectivity means not that journalists will never

succumb to bias. It means that they will identify bias and think critically about it — that they will follow policies and practices to minimize and to correct for it, in the realistic but rigorous spirit of what Amartya Sen has called “positional objectivity.” The impossibility of pure objectivity is not an excuse for collapsing into subjectivity. Objectivity is an asymptotic pursuit, but when taken seriously it can certainly suffice for a credible and “checkable” account of events. And it can always get better.



For a century, then, policies and practices designed to promote objectivity have underpinned reported journalism. In the reporting stage, they call for independently verifying sources’ claims and talking to a mix of sources so as not to fall captive to one person’s perspective. In the writing stage, they prescribe an antiseptic tone: no ideology, snark, self-righteousness, anger, euphoria, invective, or exaggeration. They call for furnishing evidence to substantiate doubtful assertions. They stipulate the attribution of claims to let readers judge their validity. They require the inclusion of multiple, competing explanations about complex or controversial issues. Similar practices exist for editing (having multiple editors review a story); photojournalism (no staging or doctoring images); even anchoring the news (the Olympian Cronkite delivery). Large news agencies concerned with protecting their reputation for objectivity also impose rules to reassure readers that their employees approach stories with an open mind. While correspondents may offer considered judgments about the events they cover, they must not have conflicts of interest — a scruple that is a small moral revolution in itself. And they may not crusade on behalf of a cause or spout off carelessly. Doing otherwise would compromise their credibility, as Emily Wilder learned the hard way.

To support these practices, individuals internalized professional norms and values. For most newsmen and newswomen, a job well done came to mean breaking stories, revealing important information, exposing high-level

wrongdoing, delivering a thorough and reliable account of events. Newsroom reporters do not always consciously think of themselves as objective, but their practices adhere to the objective method. As Jack Shafer, an uncommonly thoughtful observer of the media, puts it, they “follow a hunch with reporting that could undermine the hunch, address possible criticisms, remain open to criticism and refutation, correct meaningful errors of fact, abandon dry wells instead of pretending they’re gushers.” The tenets of aspirationally objective journalists are not those of influence-seeking but of truth-seeking: skepticism, independent-mindedness, scrupulousness. The professional reporter doesn’t care if the official whom he caught in a lie is a Democrat or a Republican, or whether the subject of her thorough exposé is a corporate CEO or a union boss. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein insisted during Watergate that they weren’t going after the president, just after the story. For those who view everything as politicized, or measured for its political effects, such impartiality may be hard to fathom.

It is important to keep in mind, too, that since perfect objectivity is unattainable, journalists inevitably have fallen short. Sometimes they have been insufficiently vigilant and let editorializing creep into their copy. Puff pieces, hatchet jobs, scandal-mongering, sensationalism, and loaded comments are occupational hazards. At other times, overly literal-minded or plodding journalists have committed the opposite error: letting the duty to air multiple viewpoints keep them from giving a true picture of events. This second fallacy was concisely summarized by the intellectual historian Thomas Haskell in an essay called “Objectivity Is Not Neutrality.” Today it often goes by the inelegant name “both sides-ism,” and today’s media critics seem to think that they discovered it. In fact, the critique has induced bouts of self-scrutiny for decades. “It is current-day fancy to consider a journalist objective if he hands out slaps and compliments with evenhanded impartiality on both sides of the question,” Archibald MacLeish wrote in 1941. “Such an idea is, of course, infantile. Objectivity consists in keeping your eye on the object [and] describing the object as it is — without regard to the feelings of anyone.” In the 1950s, conscientious journalists saw how Senator Joe McCarthy manipulated them into publicizing charges that some prominent person was a Communist. “Our rigid formulae of so-called objectivity,” complained Eric Sevareid of CBS, “... have given the lie the

same prominence and impact that truth is given; they have elevated the influence of fools to that of wise men; the ignorant to the level of the learned; the evil to the level of the good.”

Reminders like MacLeish’s and Severeid’s were salutary. They forced journalists to stay alert to the dangers of a rote, unthinking application of their rules. They strengthened the cause of objectivity. MacLeish saw that the adherence to the “rigid formulae” of even-handedness represented a corruption, not a consummation, of the ideal. Objectivity did not require allowing liars to take advantage of the press. A lie, if widely proclaimed and believed, should be neither ignored nor suppressed; it should be reported in context, along with the truth. The public needs to know about falsehoods being spread, whether by demagogues, propagandists, knaves, or fools. Nothing prevents the news reporter from dispassionately adducing the evidence that would make clear when claims are simple or complicated, broadly accepted or hotly contested, false or true. To believe otherwise is to misunderstand how journalism works.

Whereas a critique of mindlessly balanced coverage developed early in the twentieth century, only in the 1960s did there arise a call to jettison objectivity outright. In that turbulent era, liberalism was suffering a pincer attack. Both the New Left and the New Right assailed “establishment” liberalism not just over public policy choices but also on foundational grounds — for assuming its own values as normal or natural, rather than created and maintained to keep power. Part and parcel of this attack was a dual offensive against mainstream journalism. The left argued that that news sources were captive to their corporate owners and advertisers, that reporters were too deferential to governmental sources, that the pose of neutrality reinforced the status quo — that objectivity was a disguise for power. Marxists, post-modernists, and neo-pragmatists alike, from Noam Chomsky to Michel Foucault to Richard Rorty, promulgated variations on this crude theme; Chomsky, after attacking objectivity in 1968 in *American Power and the New Mandarins*, argued more sweepingly in the 1980s that the media writ large were engaged in the sinister project of “manufacturing consent” (its title a misreading of Lippmann) on behalf of the powerful. On the right, meanwhile, Southern racists such as George Wallace and Jesse Helms rallied conservatives by demonizing the news media as having abandoned their charge to be balanced; the correspondents jetting in to



cover Montgomery, Little Rock, and Birmingham, they argued, were hostile to the segregationist South. (“The trouble with this country,” declared Birmingham’s public safety commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor, “is communism, socialism, and journalism.”) Others on the right argued sociologically. They held that the progressive college-educated arrivals in the newsrooms and the broadcast studios — “a small and unelected elite,” in Spiro Agnew’s phrase — were smuggling into ostensibly nonpartisan accounts beliefs that were in fact liberal: pro-civil rights, pro-counterculture, anti-Vietnam War, anti-Nixon. Both right and left saw objectivity as a cover for the liberal party line.



These critiques provoked enough soul-searching in the news business to keep the *Columbia Journalism Review* and a small army of journalism reviews, press critics, and ombudsmen in clover for decades. But objective journalism not only survived, it thrived. It did so by undertaking a thoughtful, incremental renegotiation of what the concept properly allowed: incorporating more context into news reports, creating space for interpretive and personal writing, revising cramped assumptions about what constituted excessive editorializing. The Fourth Estate bent so as not to break. *The Washington Post's* Style section welcomed forays into New Journalism, letting literary-minded writers indulge a cheeky subjectivity and a hip flair. Newsrooms founded investigative teams that ignored daily deadlines in pursuit of depth. Veteran reporters were given license to venture into “news analysis,” sharing their informed sense of what developments meant. *The New York Times* created its Op-Ed page to showcase a gamut of voices at variance with the staid unsigned editorials. And objectivity remained a bedrock principle.

This renegotiation led to a *modus vivendi* that Michael Schudson calls “Objectivity 2.0.” Critics still found fault with the media — for the superficiality of television news, the post-Watergate lust for scandal, the perennial blight of pack journalism, and a lot more. Conservatives still pounded the press as

skewed toward the left, and the left still charged that it was skewed to the right. Many journalists, having absorbed the attacks on “objectivity,” now eschewed the word, talking instead about fairness and balance (terms that were not necessarily improvements). When, in 1996, the Society of Professional Journalists revised its ethics code, it replaced a line calling for “objectivity in reporting the news” with a reminder to “distinguish between advocacy and news reporting.” But if the term fell from favor, the creation of escape valves for journalists’ desire to interpret, contextualize, and opine left intact the underlying insistence on the dispassionate empirical reporting of “hard news” carried out without fear or favor.

Yet it was not long before Objectivity 2.0 came under fire as well. One reason was a changed mediasphere that greatly magnified the space for opinion compared to hard news. As Ronald N. Jacobs and Eleanor Townsley remark in their book *The Space for Opinion*, the “dramatic expansion in news commentary and opinion ... accelerated particularly rapidly after the 1970s.” There were many reasons for this, but perhaps none was more important than the lure of punditry. In the midcentury years, journalists would spend their early careers reporting the news and then, at mid-career, perhaps graduate to a column, depart for a magazine, or make it onto television. But for journalists of the 1980s and 1990s — coming of age with television having eclipsed print — punditry beckoned early. (The term “pundit,” first applied in the 1920s to sage columnists such as Lippmann, now meant garrulous television commentators.) Pundits were celebrities, stars. Why toil away at a local paper in Oklahoma or work the metro desk when you could head straight to Washington and the limelight? Opinion journalism also cost less than reporting. Objective reporting had regained its prestige, or at least its footing, but it was being pushed aside by opinion.

With the rehabilitation of subjectivity under the mantle of opinion came a vogue for the once-taboo first person. The old culture frowned on the use of *I* in the news columns. By the late twentieth century, however, *I* was everywhere: confessional talk shows such as *Oprah*, the memoir boom, blogging, internet writing in general. Even academics clotted their articles with clunkers like “I mean to suggest...” and “I want to propose...” and “I think it is a mistake to assume...” (One academic claimed that “the suppression of the authorial *I* in

academic writing, is, ultimately, a rhetorical ploy” meant to foster “the appearance of objectivity.”) In 2015 a critic in *Slate* bemoaned “The First-Person Industrial Complex,” a torrent of experiential hot takes in online journalism that editors liked because they got traffic and writers liked because they could “build relationships with readers via self-exposure.” It was the age of the “personal essay.” Far from a mark of unreliable subjectivity, for many the first person was now an emblem of authenticity. Journalists — not only commentators but also news-gatherers — were themselves becoming public figures and then “brands.” No brand distinguishes itself from the pack, or achieves “self-exposure,” with a voiceless neutrality. (That is what fact-checkers are for, we think, even though fact-checkers perform a function we used to call reporting.) “Voice” has become a high-end journalistic virtue.

Then the internet pitched in to the new subjectivity. It did more than merely exalt the first person. Blogs, webzines, and *Drudge Report*-style portals elevated armchair analysts to the level of veteran beat reporters or experts. Every reader became a potential media critic, poking holes in authoritative statements, posting criticisms online, catapulting them through cyberspace. In a universe without objectivity as the lodestar, opinions came to be valued not for their veracity or their intellectual rigor, but for their authenticity, their sincerity, their provenance, or their wit (or what passes for it). Though some of it consisted in an admirable application of critical thinking to the issues of the day, there developed a larger climate of suspicion and mockery that ate away at the idea of journalistic authority itself. Digital commerce also played a role: web publications learned to boost traffic — that is, to produce the data that satisfied advertisers — by throwing up two or three times as much content as before, much of it with only cursory reviewing, since web journalism was usually edited much less rigorously than print journalism. (Writing a piece for, say, the *Atlantic* magazine involves many more rounds of scrutiny and fact-checking than writing for the *Atlantic* online.) Since the online stuff was so fleeting, the relaxation of rigor seemed less objectionable. The booming number of websites, all equally accessible to any reader with an internet connection, opened pathways to circumvent the gatekeepers who once would have nixed all those churned-out commentaries that now made passing sensations on *Salon*, the *Daily Kos*, *Powerline*, *The Huffington Post*, *Gizmodo*, or wherever.

In no time at all subjectivity evolved into partisanship. The move online hastened the reign of proudly partisan media. This tendency started on the right, which believed that “non-partisan” media were instruments of liberal partisanship. Although Americans had always consumed their share of ideologically oriented fare, conservatives under Nixon set out to institutionalize right-wing journalism as a full-blown alternative to the mainstream press, which they portrayed as an appendage to the liberal elite. Nixon’s attacks on the media mobilized the political energies of conservatives who resented the progressive attitudes they detected in the news; just as important, they eroded the news outlets’ credibility. Over time, as growing numbers of Americans concluded that the press was biased, their disaffection fed a market for partisan substitutes. In the 1980s, Rush Limbaugh and a legion of radio hosts forged a wildly popular subculture of right-wing news and puerile entertainment. Within another decade, Roger Ailes, Nixon’s old TV coach, had unveiled Fox News, the fruit of two decades’ labor to set up a full-fledged rival to the networks. It soon became the leading cable news channel.

While the right was battling liberalism in politics, the left was making incursions in academia — an important station in its long march through the institutions. To some, victories there meant little. “They got the White House,” went the complaint, “and we got the English departments.” But culture shapes politics, and the triumph of the left-wing campaign against objectivity in the universities — it flew under the flags of postmodernism, perspectivism, anti-foundationalism, pragmatism, and identity — indirectly shaped the climate of opinion that came after, including in journalism. In time the students brought their corrosive attitudes toward objectivity out of the campus and into the profession, marching now through different institutions. What all the strains of anti-objectivist dogma had in common was a militant skepticism toward Enlightenment liberalism, including the idea that knowledge could be distinct from power. One line of illiberal thinking, drawing eclectically from Nietzsche, the pragmatists, Gramsci, and the Frankfurt School, insisted that what passed for rationality and knowledge were constructs deployed for a cunning form of social control. The ground for this “sociology of knowledge” had been prepared by the Marxist notions of ideology and class. The war on objectivity, in this respect, is not a new war.

The emerging subjectivism of the 1980s and 1990s raised troubling and meretricious questions, but it usually stopped short of outright epistemological nihilism. As the intellectual historian Daniel Rodgers has noted, “For most of those who tried to think through the politics and epistemology of a world beyond certainties, truths were not dead. Truths needed to be argued out. ... Truth-seeking demanded doubt, demanded the ability to entertain more than one hypothesis, demanded patience.” In the new century, however, patience in research and reasoning would be in short supply.



All of these trends converged in a perfect storm during the presidency of George W. Bush. Like their Nixon- and Reagan-era forerunners, Bush-era conservatives viewed the bastions of the knowledge class — the universities, the think tanks, the foundations, the cultural industries — exactly as they viewed the media: as ideological organs that hid their liberalism behind a mask of expertise and authority. But now, three decades after Nixon began the project, the right had its own counter-establishment of institutions to push back.

Trotting out their own experts from their own think-tanks and their own foundations, the Bushies and their allies baited reporters into the old false-balance trap. Too many news stories about climate change, for example, gave roughly equal weight to the preponderance of scientists who saw peril in the warming planet and the fringe minority who did not. On birth control, abortion, second-hand cigarette smoke, and other issues, too, the Bush team spun its ill-supported science as one side of a legitimate debate. You have your experts, we have ours. Wags dubbed them postmodern Republicans.

The biggest controversy centered on the case for war against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, including the shaky claims that Saddam was rebuilding his nuclear program. Since the White House kept its intelligence secret, skeptics were hard pressed to introduce dispositive facts into the discussion. Still, reporters managed to discover evidence that cast doubt on the case for war, and a long

and robust public debate followed. Ultimately, the public backed the Iraq adventure not because Bush presented a watertight case or because the press relayed it credulously, but because a lot of Americans nursed a desire to exorcise the shame and humiliation of 9/11, however tenuous its connection to Saddam. Still, the perception that the press corps failed to ward off a disastrous war revived complaints that journalists were pursuing a cramped notion of evenhandedness at the expense of truth.

A bit surprisingly, however, Bush's critics — whether liberals in the opposition or workaday reporters — mostly doubled down on objectivity. Liberals took to boasting of their membership in “the reality-based community” after a Bush official used that enchanting term to mock people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” Stephen Colbert coined “truthiness” to satirize the idea, embodied by Bush, that it mattered not that an idea was true but that it felt true. News organs renewed their objectivity vows, too. An internal *New York Times* self-assessment entitled “Preserving Our Readers’ Trust” urged employees to “strengthen and better define the boundary between news and opinion.” It called for reining in reporters’ appearances on the shoutfests, setting up a system to avoid “conveying an impression of one-sidedness,” and pursuing diversity of viewpoint as well as of race and gender. These were ways to fortify objectivity, not to abandon it.

That was one response, anyway. Others wanted to be done with the whole thing. Liberals wrote books that simply branded their proponents “liars” rather than arguing against conservative ideas. Although Bush did lie (all politicians do), and although conservatives may lie more than liberals do (at least about the science behind certain policies), this rhetoric took the critics into treacherous terrain. A lie is a falsehood uttered with the intent to deceive. Were all those claims about projected tax cuts or the wisdom of military action abroad really outright lies, or might they have stemmed from alternative assumptions, values, priorities, and analyses? Would they all violate a courtroom oath, or might they be better classed with those partial, sometimes tendentious, but technically truthful claims that we call spin, of which nobody in politics is innocent?

The “liar” charge revealed not tougher scrutiny on the part of left toward false political claims, but greater laziness toward refuting those claims. (The right

also lazily slung the term at Democrats, as South Carolina Congressman Joe Wilson did at President Obama from the House floor.) Paul Krugman, rightly irritated at the credulity shown to Bush's economic plans, cracked that if the president called the world flat, headlines would read, "Opinions Differ on Shape of the Earth." But if Krugman was correct to chide headline-writers not to dignify flat-earthers, he was wrong to liken economic policy disputes — rooted in real ideological and analytical differences — to a clash between the enlightened and the benighted. Declaring one side of a policy debate illegitimate from the get-go represents is another form of retreat from actual intellectual argument.

Some on the left amplified this tendency by redoubling their efforts to create their own partisan apparatus, in mimicry of the right. For decades, of course, leftists had always had their magazines, such as *The Nation* and *Mother Jones*, and their coterie of syndicated columnists. But the left's impresarios never found their "liberal Limbaugh." ("It was never exactly a disgrace to American liberalism," Leon Wieseltier wrote in 2004, "that it lacked its Limbaugh.") When, in 2003, the activists Anita and Sheldon Drobny launched a left-wing radio network, Hendrik Hertzberg of *The New Yorker* was politely skeptical. "The main obstacle," he wrote, "is neither financial nor ideological but temperamental." The typical liberal political junkie, he noted, didn't revel in "expressions of raw contempt for conservatives" as a substitute for reporting. Hertzberg was partly correct. Most liberals (back then, at least) did prefer something like National Public Radio (back then, at least) — where a high-toned collegiate-class progressive attitude infused the sensibility and the story selection, but journalistic values, not ideology, largely governed the content. Yet the Drobny's were also partly correct. Their network, "Air America," did not last long, but it bequeathed to the airwaves Rachel Maddow and Al Franken, among others, and soon MSNBC started down the road toward becoming a left-wing Fox, if never as vicious or heedless of facts.

In 2001, the legal scholar Cass R. Sunstein warned, in a little book called *Republic.com*, that while the internet was expanding the tableau of available political viewpoints, it was also narrowing our horizons, steering us into pods of the like-minded. The ability to "customize" or "personalize" news feeds would blockade inconvenient information and promote groupthink. The book was

prescient. If we are not quite in Sunstein's dystopia, there is no denying that the diminished audience for general-interest, common-carrier news outlets — those that try to speak to us all — has fractured our polity. Reason and deliberation — genuine deliberation, not what passes for it in our media — are now rare in public discourse, and consensus and compromise distressingly elusive in matters of state.



Recently the calculus on objectivity has been scrambled again. The right still complains about a liberal bias in the media, but the hubristic boasts of “creating our own reality” have reverted back to a traditionalist (and seemingly disingenuous) espousal of the time-honored principles of unpoliticized reporting. “Whatever happened to professional journalism and the promise or at least suggestion that the press ought to pursue the *objective truth* in the gathering and reporting of news?” asks the right-wing radio host Mark R. Levin, in his book *Unfreedom of the Press*. *Perspectivist*, heal thyself!

Meanwhile some on the left are now arguing for a journalism of “moral certainty” or “moral clarity.” Those newly fashionable phrases should make us pause, not only because they were first popularized by Bush during the war on terrorism, but also because determining the correct moral posture on a political or policy issue is almost always difficult and certainly beyond the capacity of a daily journalist working at digital speed. Yet the Manichaeian language is unmistakably there today. Lewis Raven Wallace, author of the anti-objectivity tract *The View from Somewhere* (the title is a jab at Nagel), declares that our dire times necessitate “a moral stance” from reporters. Wesley Lowery of *60 Minutes*, another prominent critic of objectivity, likewise decrees on Twitter: “American view-from-nowhere, ‘objectivity’-obsessed, both-sides journalism is a failed experiment. We need to fundamentally reset the norms of our field. The old way must go. We need to rebuild our industry as one that operates from a place of moral clarity.” None of the new critics elaborates an understanding of



the relationship between moral clarity and intellectual clarity, or how such clarity can be achieved without first adopting a scrupulous regard for truth.

What changed? How did the happy, scrappy membership in the “reality-based community” of the Bush years give way to the righteousness of the Trump years? How did countering right-wing propaganda with searched-for empirical truth give way to countering right-wing propaganda with quips and exclamation points? We do not have to be technological determinists to refer back to the role of the internet. The newfound glut of accessible news, instead of producing a better-informed public, led everyone — given the polarized climate — to seek out sources that confirmed what they already believed. “Confirmation bias” is one of the epitaphs for our time. Instead of grappling with unwelcome facts and arguments, Americans now find it simpler to declare those arguments out of bounds. Hence the new fondness for deplatforming, cancellations, and censorship. Ideas once considered misguided, incorrect, or just objectionable have been recast as evil and intolerable. Being wrong became the same thing as being bad.

Two major political events of the last decade helped to spark the newest war on objectivity. The first was the racial ferment that seized the country toward the end of Barack Obama’s presidency, especially after a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri killed Michael Brown in August 2014. With the ensuing protests and the harsh police reprisals that followed, a surge of long-needed reform agitation took hold on the left. But so, in some quarters, did a wide-ranging race-centered worldview. Certain newly prevalent ideas condemned as irredeemably racist first police departments and then the criminal justice system and then many other institutions and cultures. Eventually a whole panoply of individuals, concepts, practices, and entities that might seem race-neutral or even progressive were implicated as racist or “white supremacist.” Some critiques indicted journalistic objectivity, too. What was objectivity, if not a cover for white power?

The race-centered attack on objectivity charges that the historic arbiters of journalistic fairness were often blind to their own racist assumptions. That argument is not wrong. But neither is it new. As the post-1960s debates had shown, white-led news organizations had indeed at times failed to consider how

black reporters or readers might view certain stories, to their detriment. As Matthew Pressman shows in his superb history *On Press*, the churn of the 1960s and 1970s led editors to incorporate black and other minority perspectives. But they did so slowly and incompletely. By the mid-2010s, with racial conflict spilling over, the patience of many black journalists was spent, and a new generation, much less forgiving toward those in power, was entering the profession or becoming politically activated.

As in the 1960s, a sense of urgency, even desperation, encouraged the issuing of demands, many of which we are now debating. Some of these are sensible, wise, even overdue. Lowery has argued that knowing how frequently law-enforcement authorities have twisted the facts of police shootings means that editors should “consider not publishing any significant account of a police shooting until the staff has tracked down the perspective — the ‘side’ — of the person the police had shot.” This proposal seems reasonable and practicable, although we should note that it is a call for stronger, not weaker, fidelity to the principle of presenting “both sides” of a story. It is an unwitting recognition of a point that is tragically missing from our bitter disputations: that objectivity is one of the conditions for justice.

What does not hold up in the new attack on objectivity is the far-reaching and suddenly popular claim that objectivity is itself inherently racist and therefore fatally compromised as an ideal. “The views and inclinations of whiteness are accepted as the objective neutral,” Lowery has written. When it comes to how to do journalism, however, “whiteness” has no intrinsic “views or inclinations” or indeed any autonomous power. Yes, journalistic objectivity took shape when the mainstream press corps consisted mainly of white men, and the manner in which they pursued the ideal reflected prejudices that black journalists may well have been less likely to share. But if that tells us something about the ideal’s implementation, it says nothing about the merit of the ideal itself. The flawed implementation of a justified ideal may not suffice to discredit the ideal. Walter Lippmann’s skin color does not invalidate the concept of objectivity any more than Isaac Newton’s skin color invalidates the concept of gravity. And as a historical matter, white journalists have shared no consensus at all about race and racism. The editors of *Newsweek* in the 1960s, which covered the civil rights movement aggressively, were far readier to include black perspectives

than were the editors of Southern dailies.

Lewis Raven Wallace, too, decries objectivity as racist, faulting it for the press' historical neglect of the views of not just African Americans but also gays, lesbians, and trans people, and many other minorities. Many of the examples in Wallace's book, from nineteenth-century accounts of lynchings to Reagan-era journalism about AIDS, will make readers cringe. But they don't expose flaws in the objectivity ideal any more than Lowery's arguments do. What they show is that newspapers and news networks, like other social institutions, express the prevailing outlook of the culture, including their biases against minority groups. In the past, not only straight-news reporters but also opinion journalists — journalists of a moralizing bent, journalists who scorned objectivity — tended to neglect minority groups and causes. The problem was not peculiar to big-time newsrooms or networks. Coverage of lynching and of gay rights improved not because objectivity was junked (it wasn't), but because society evolved.

Journalists came to revise their assumptions and attitudes not about objectivity but about lynching and gay rights. But Wallace — who justifiably deems stamping out bigotry and racial injustice an urgent matter — shows no interest in even elementary historicism. The fierceness of his conviction leads him to assert that the gravity of our injustices today should compel journalists to put aside traditional reporting and take up the cause of “fighting back against racism and authoritarianism.”

Wallace's pairing of “racism” with “authoritarianism” here is revealing. It suggests that the racial ferment of the 2010s was only one impetus for the new moralism, the usurpation (to borrow Rorty's words) of objectivity by solidarity, that he prescribes. The other impetus, of course, was Trump.



Early in Trump's presidential campaign, it was clear that he enjoyed a super-strength Teflon that Ronald Reagan would have envied. Vulgar, hateful, and obnoxious in ways that would have sunk most politicians, Trump regularly crossed over into ugly racist or

sexist or xenophobic statements. He lied constantly, and with a surpassing brazenness and indifference to the consequences. Journalists microscopically examined his sordid business behaviors, the sexual harassment and corruption charges against him, his fondness for dictators, his inflammatory tweets. But among Republicans his standing only rose.

Trump's stunning upset in 2016 and his unflagging support from a sizable minority of the electorate maddened his detractors, including those in the press corps. Many concluded that he could not be stopped without changing the rules. "If you're a working journalist and you believe that Donald J. Trump is a demagogue playing to the nation's worst racist and nationalistic tendencies, that he cozies up to anti-American dictators and that he would be dangerous with control of the United States nuclear codes, how the heck are you supposed to cover him?" asked Jim Rutenberg, a reporter-turned-columnist at the *Times*. "Because if you believe all of those things, you have to throw out the textbook American journalism has been using for the better part of the past half-century, if not longer, and approach it in a way you've never approached anything in your career." The blogger and journalism professor Jay Rosen said much the same. In order to defeat Trump, he wrote, journalists "have to do things they have never done. They may even have to shock us... Hardest of all, they will have to explain to the public that Trump is a special case, and the normal rules do not apply."

Not everyone agreed. After Trump's inauguration, Reuters editor-in-chief Steve Adler sent a memo to his staff bucking the tide and insisting that traditional reporting methods were still the order of the day. Those methods, which worked for Reuters in covering the Iranian mullahs and the Chinese dictatorship, didn't need to be tossed out because of Trump's authoritarian impulses. Marty Baron, the editor of the *Washington Post*, took a similar stance, declaring, "We're not at war, we're at work." But over the next four years, straight-news journalists seemed to follow Rutenberg's and Rosen's advice as often as Adler's and Baron's. Political imperatives frequently overrode journalistic ones. Sometimes the politicization of reporting was intentional; other times it happened unwittingly, as journalists breathed the air around them. Whether it was conscious or not, subjectivity, opinion, and moralism suffused the coverage of a president as never before.

In the newspapers, headlines and articles used pejorative and loaded language where they once would have striven for a clinical tone. Descriptive language dripped with scorn for the president and his agenda. CNN, which had upheld a nonpartisan space on cable TV as MSNBC swung left, now stuffed its evening line-up with anti-Trump programming. As White House correspondent, a role that called for an adversarial but impartial posture, Jim Acosta flew the resistance flag. Elsewhere on the cable channels, reporters who might once have donned a temperate persona for a PBS discussion or a Sunday-morning roundtable outdid one another in attesting to their antipathy to Trump. In November, 2017 a Pew Research Center study compared coverage of Trump's first months to those of previous presidents. It found that media — including straight news sources — dwelled on Trump's character more than on his policies, and with a "far more negative" valence than in the past. Harvard's Shorenstein Center found the same, concluding its report: "Trump has received unsparing coverage for most weeks of his presidency, without a single major topic where Trump's coverage, on balance, was more positive than negative, setting a new standard for unfavorable press coverage of a president." A pair of RAND studies in 2018 and 2019, which linguistically analyzed print, broadcast, and internet news, showed that the new subjectivity was not limited to coverage of Trump. "Our research provides quantitative evidence for what we all can see in the media landscape," said Jennifer Kavanaugh, the lead author. "Journalism in the U.S. has become more subjective and consists less of the detailed event- or context-based reporting that used to characterize news coverage." Reports now included fewer detached, factual accounts of events. Writers regularly blurred lines between fact and opinion. News contained more subjective — and more dogmatic — judgments.

Worst of all was Twitter. For journalists, hanging out on Twitter can feel like going to a private party or a bull session. You let slip your professionalism and fire off the sort of mean-spirited, impetuous, pointed, or opinionated *bon mots* that you might otherwise have shared over beers after work. But Twitter is a public forum, and a *New York Times* or AP reporter commenting there is heard by distant readers of all stripes. Your tweets shape how your reporting is received. If your job calls for you to banish editorializing from your stories, then you must do that on Twitter, too. Yet many normally responsible

correspondents at the *Post* and the *Times* spent the Trump years tapping out sassy, hostile, nit-picking, pompous, or ill-considered takes — all with scarcely a half-sentence of context to orient readers — eroding their credibility with each barb. As a result, when reporters did produce damaging facts to report about Trump, which was often, they could not so credibly claim, in the tradition of Woodward and Bernstein, that they were going after the story, not the president.

Some journalists justified the soapbox editorializing by saying that desperate times call for desperate measures. Wallace wants journalists to ask whether their reporting will help advance “fascism or democracy,” “capitalism or collectivity.” Rosen, whose previous hobbyhorse was promoting the idea of “the citizen journalist,” also insists, in effect, that reporters must choose between adhering to objectivity and saving democracy. In an interview with the historian Nicole Hemmer, he called Trump’s denial of his defeat in 2020 “a breakthrough moment where journalists said, yeah, I mean, we could really lose this democracy if Trump succeeds in his campaign to throw out the results, ... a moment there where I think they looked into the abyss and they said we have to cross this.” Rosen applauded “direct statements” on CNN that “there’s nothing to these claims, and this is a lie.”

Rosen made a number of errors. First, what debunked Trump’s spurious claims of victory was not the say-so of CNN personalities. What mattered was hard-headed reporting — objective reporting — on the vote counts in key swing states. That reporting investigated and refuted the claims of fraud; and detailed Trump’s many legal challenges and why they failed; and aired testimony from local Republican officials who judged any election irregularities too few to matter; and produced evidence that Trump pressured state officials to break the rules. Traditional empirical reporting — not moral clarity — exposed Trump’s lies.

Rosen also erred, like many, in imagining that it is self-evident what being pro-democracy entails. The reality is less obliging and edifying. How to serve or to strengthen American democracy must be searched for, reported out, and argued about. For many of us it is perfectly obvious that Republicans today are trying to constrain democracy by imposing state-level limits on voting. But that

judgment, even if universally accepted, will not dictate how to write about those laws. Should the statehouse reporter at the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* or the *Austin American Statesman* bellow that a new Jim Crow era is at hand? Or can that be left to the columnists and the cable blowhards, while reporters coolly present the debates about these laws — alongside a dispassionate analysis of who will be purged from the rolls, deterred from the polls, and given control over vote counting? What about the analyses of the *Times*' Nate Cohn, whose review of the academic research found that Georgia's new voting law is “unlikely to significantly affect turnout or Democratic chances”? Should newspapers ignore that conclusion because it might sap the urgency from the Democrats' efforts? Does it make Cohn's journalism insufficiently “pro-democracy”? To assume that there is only one pro-democracy position — or only one anti-racist position — which is knowable in advance of events is a form of subjectivity whose logic is to deprive audiences of information and ideas and to impede the search for truth.

Lovers of democracy and enemies of racism have nothing to fear from a journalism that uses conventional methods. The biggest mistake of Rosen and others like him is to fail to see that objectivity was never Donald Trump's friend. On the contrary: rarely if ever has a president's behavior been so self-incriminating. Trump's conduct in office was so manifestly ugly, dishonest, and irresponsible that the most bland and clinical description of it forms a damning indictment. Trump's support endured — insofar as it did — not because the namby-pamby media failed to slap his dim-witted followers out of their willful ignorance, but because those followers shared Trump's worldview, liked his policies, thrilled to his will to power, or hated the Democrats more. These followers could read the compendia of Trump's lies that newspapers published and the minute coverage of his impeachments; they could witness his groveling before Vladimir Putin; they could watch the Capitol riot with their own eyes. If anything, the rampant editorializing in the media worsened the perception of liberal bias and drove them further into their dark bubbles. A second Pew study found that trust in CNN, *The New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, and other major news outlets plummeted between 2014 and 2019 — led by Republicans — as these media were letting subjectivity and opinion flood into once-neutral spaces. If the journalism of moral clarity was supposed to persuade everyone

that Trump was a fascist, it didn't work.



Although it has now become a mark of one's progressive bona fides to disparage objectivity, many of its critics will actually concede, when pressed, that it is worth preserving, at least in large part. Jay Rosen keeps on his website a backgrounder where he admits that if objectivity means "trying to see things in that fuller perspective Thomas Nagel talked about ... pulling the camera back, revealing our previous position as only one of many" — which it does — then "I second the motion. We need more of that, not less." Wallace writes that pursuing truth "still requires the rigorous practice of reporting," including "the careful observation of events," "verification through a variety of means," and "analysis of data." (These parts of objectivity, presumably, are not expressions of white supremacy.) Even Lowery, while saying on Twitter that "the old way must go," modifies this position substantially in a *Times* op-ed, holding that journalists should "devote ourselves to accuracy," solicit perspectives they disagree with, and ask hard questions of everyone. Funny: that sounds an awful lot like the old way.

If Rosen, Wallace, and Lowery all concede the importance of so many components of objectivity, if they don't really want to kill off the "failed experiment" of twentieth-century-style reporting, what are they asking for? Rosen, according to his university biography, had only "a very brief career in journalism at the *Buffalo Courier-Express*" before entering academia, but in the cases of Wallace and Lowery, the origins of their anti-objectivity activism may be telling. Wallace took up his crusade in 2017 while a reporter for the public-radio show *Marketplace*. After he wrote a brief against traditional journalistic values titled, "Objectivity Is Dead, and I'm Okay with It" on *Medium*, a supervisor expressed concerns about it. He decided to keep it up anyway. The next week his boss told Wallace that in her view he "didn't want to do the kind of journalism we do at *Marketplace*" — a seemingly accurate statement — and fired him. Lowery got into the game under similar circumstances. As a



*Washington Post* reporter, he chafed at the constraints that his straight-news job placed on his public behavior. Editors had grown frustrated by his social media posts and comments on TV which they considered political, unprofessional, and contrary to *Post* policies: attacking *New York Times* reporters, calling Maureen Dowd a “decadent aristocrat,” getting in Twitter fights with a Republican official. Ultimately Marty Baron reprimanded Lowery, leading to his departure. Both Wallace and Lowery, in other words, did what Emily Wilder did: they violated rules safeguarding their institutions’ professional credibility. Perhaps what they are seeking, then, is not really an end to objectivity. Perhaps what they are seeking is the right to tweet.

There is nothing wrong with reporters tweeting. Lowery was part of a Pulitzer prize-winning *Boston Globe* team that covered the Boston marathon bombing in 2013. The portfolio that the *Globe* submitted included some of Lowery’s tweets. One read, “7:25 a.m. Now in Cambridge, outside of apartment believed to be shared by suspects. State police have street blocked off.” Another said: “3:08 a.m. Parade of more than 25 cruisers just peeled out. Headed away from original scene/current perimeter.” This is one kind of tweeting that reporters should do, sharing on-the-spot, factual information that they are in a unique position to deliver. It’s not exactly the same as calling a rival paper’s columnist “a decadent aristocrat.”

Which behaviors should be allowed or denied to straight-news reporters is open to discussion. Donating to candidates? Working for campaigns? Attending a pro-choice or pro-life rally? Writing polemical pieces for outside publications or on social media platforms? Giving ideological speeches on campuses? Voting? (There have been journalists and editors who have felt professionally compromised by casting a vote in an election.) Wherever an institution draws the line, making rules to ensure that the tone and the approach of reporters’ public statements match that of their journalism hardly infringes unfairly on their freedom. Nor does the enforcement of such rules fatally impugn the idea of objectivity. Any journalist who wants to be argumentative or partisan, snide or nasty, vocally opinionated or morally judgmental, can do so. It just entails moving clearly to a different role. No one has criticized Lowery or Wallace for the act of voicing strong views from their new positions. What’s problematic is holding a straight-news job while at the same time acting like an opinion

journalist.

Engaging in advocacy through your journalism is a perfectly respectable course of action, one chosen every day by libertarians at *Reason*, liberals at *The Atlantic*, conservatives at *National Review*, left-wingers at *The Nation*, wokesters at *Vox*, and anti-wokesters on Substack. Opinion journalism in America has never been so plentiful. Jay Rosen, in his conciliatory mood, says he simply wants to be “ecumenical” and “pluralistic,” letting “some in the press continue on with the mask of impartiality” while “others experiment with transparency,” or wearing one’s ideology on one’s sleeve. But this makes no sense. There is no need to “experiment.” We have always had journalists who are open about their politics, and the current configuration of American journalism could hardly be more ecumenical or pluralistic. The question that we are debating is not whether to permit *more* opinion journalism. The question before us is whether *any* journalism that aspires to objectivity should be maintained.

Forsaking the studious detachment of the newsroom for the moral clarity of Twitter may be permissible or even desirable for an activist-freelancer such as Wallace, an academic blogger such as Rosen, or a crusading TV journalist such as Lowery. Yet it is a terribly wrongheaded idea for straight reporters, whose job requires searching for truth, not virtue. Unless journalists remain genuinely open to viewpoints different from those of their own circles, they will not do their jobs well. In 2012, Fox News watchers and pundits alike had become so entombed in their own assumptions about the world that they could not believe Mitt Romney lost the election to Obama; the anchor Megyn Kelly had to traipse into the studio’s back rooms to interview the network’s own number-crunchers on air. Over the last twenty years we have seen countless other examples of the right’s isolation from factual reporting — its “epistemic closure,” as another ungainly neologism from a few years back called it. But the same problem is now surfacing in the mainstream media. The violence that occurred amid the largely peaceful protests in 2020, the misbehavior of some FBI agents during the Trump-Russia investigation, the anger among Virginia parents over racial pedagogy, Kyle Rittenhouse’s case for having killed two men in self-defense in Kenosha, the “lab leak” theory of the coronavirus’ origins — the failure to take seriously all of these things occurred when journalists neglected to scout out and

listen to sources and viewpoints at odds with their own. They happened because journalists chose moral certainty over objectivity.

Objectivity will always have its points of weakness. Every story will admit of different ways to be written and presented, and no one can ever correct for all of his or her biases. Sometimes journalists will veer into unwarranted opinion or attitudinizing. Other times they will slavishly hew to rigid formulae that make matters sound more uncertain than they really are. But just as Churchill described democracy as the worst form of government except for all the others, objectivity looks badly flawed only until you consider the alternatives.

Objectivity will always be a stronger basis for finding the truth than subjectivity, because it rests on external evidence, on verifiable and falsifiable claims, on impartial methods. The alternative is nothing less than a wild dystopia of unchecked feelings and unchallenged falsehoods in which shared ground has given way to shared contempt. The abandonment of objectivity would be a catastrophe for democracy.