

“Objective” news favors status quo



Ben Wallis

As accusations of “fake news” are increasingly common — only two weeks ago Donald Trump denounced CNN as this — it is understandable that news outlets defend their commitments to objectivity. According to a New York Times article “Fake news narrowly defined, means a made-up article with an intention to deceive.” However, the argument about “fake news” in past months has grown to encompass more general problems in media ethics, such as responsible sourcing and political bias. It is often thought that objective reporting should entail a balancing of sources and have little to no political bias. Objective journalism attempts to get at “the facts,” wherever they might be. But in doing so, journalists run the risk of overlooking the omissions and biases that quests for objectivity involve. Objective journalism, by avoiding criticism and politics, tends to affirm elite opinion and the status quo. A more critical, more political kind of journalism is needed, that is as concerned with its social and educative responsibilities as it is with “facts.”

Traditionally, one of the most immediate goals of objective reporting has been to balance opposing viewpoints. These viewpoints are the contrasting opinions and interests of, for example, the political left and right, a corporate CEO and a factory worker, or a university administrator and students. The assumption is that somewhere between these perspectives lies “the facts.” And this assumption is not always mistaken. However, in many cases one of the two perspectives — while popular or politically influential — bears little verifiable correspondence with reality. In 2014, The Wall Street Journal published an op-ed denying the veracity of human-driven climate change. This was in spite of the fact that in 2013, the journal Environmental Research Letters found that 97 percent of climate scientists agreed climate change is caused by humans. The Wall Street Journal’s adherence to “objective” procedures — in guaranteeing the balance of opposing viewpoints — served to mask the fact that one of the viewpoints was almost wholly unsubstantiated. Maintaining balanced coverage on climate change distorts the issue. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe “the facts” will be found midway between two perspectives.

Objective journalism’s predisposition to the political center is often complemented by a predisposition to accept the truthfulness of “official” sources. Government employees, experts and spokespeople are most likely to have the information that journalists seek, and so it is important for reporters to maintain good relationships with these sources. But there is also a danger in accepting the statements of these sources uncritically. In 2004 The New York Times editorial board issued a report on “The Times and Iraq.” In it, the Times admitted that it accepted reports from the Bush administration about aluminum tubes being used to construct weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. These assessments were accepted at face-value, even though “there were hints that the usefulness of the tubes in making nuclear fuel was not a sure thing.” Allegations that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction constituted a major component in the build-up for the 2003 Iraq War, allegations that the Times and other news sources failed to vet. Official sources, despite their sophistication and usefulness, possess agendas of their own. Claims to neutrality should be treated with suspicion, and no source should be above review.

In seeking to avoid biases, objective journalism inevitably creates its own. The tendency to find “facts” in the political center, mediating between viewpoints, only reinforces the status quo. The tendency to prize “official” sources grants excessive deference to those perspectives that are supported by large networks of material and informational resources. In brief, so-called “objective” journalism is biased towards the powerful. Journalists should be conscious of this and correct for it.

“There is a misconception that journalists can be objective,” Haaretz correspondent Amira Hass said. “What journalism is really about — it’s to monitor power and the centres of power.” News journalism has an almost unique capacity to inform its readers of the people and events that structure and influence their everyday lives. Though balancing viewpoints might be appropriate in some situations, it might be inappropriate in others. Officials might be correct only infrequently. Rather than retain these procedures for fear of appearing “political,” journalists should seize upon their social duty — to inform the public about the world, in order that they might change it.

Ben Wallis is a junior political science and history major from Troy, Mo.

Still Worth It by August Davis



Letter TO THE Editor

Dear Truman State faculty, friends and colleagues

This past election cycle has been, as we all know, one of the most caustic periods in our country’s recent history. Far too often, critical thinking and honest debate have been and continue to be abandoned in favor of lies, empty promises, and heated rhetoric. Indeed, many have named our new state of being the “post-truth” era.

As educators and researchers, academia cannot and must not abandon its commitment to rationality, honest investigation, open dialogue, and critical thinking. The American Association of University Professors, including our own chapter, therefore supports all forms of free expression, especially ideas that can be substantiated by facts and reason. We recognize that others may challenge our freedom to express ourselves, especially when our ideas conflict with those of administration or government, but in times such as these, it is imperative that those of us who draw from our experience, our compassion as educators, and our dedication to informed intellectual discourse must not be silent, or silenced.

The TSU chapter of the American Association of University Professors will continue to support academic and intellectual freedom on our campus. For our colleagues who feel that the freedom to teach, to share ideas, and to engage in constructive debate, argument, and if necessary protest has been constricted, we have resources at both the state and federal level to help. In particular the Facebook page of the state organization, MOAAUP, now has several informative articles, and is an important resource for Missouri’s academics.

Please feel free to contact us at any time for assistance or with questions. Consider attending our meetings, which will continue to be on the third Tuesday of each month at 4:30. And please, in preparing our students to meet the challenges of this conflicted social environment, understand that your compassionate and informed education of our students is now more important than ever.

The Truman State University Chapter of the American Association of University Professors

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