

OBJECTIVITY IN MEDIA REPORTAGE: NAIVE EXPECTATION

By

Austen Amechi Sado
Linguistics and Communication Studies,
Faculty of Humanities,
University of Port Harcourt

ABSTRACT

Objectivity in Media reportage has been a controversial concept to discuss particularly since the commercialization of media. This paper was conceived to re-evaluate the controversy to determine prevailing thoughts among scholars. The study was underpinned by Altschull media ownership theory which posits that media are not inherently neutral, and objectivity is a function of the economic / political interests of the promoters. The focus group discussion (FGD) was adopted because it is a suitable method for re-affirming prevalence of beliefs or social construct. Academics in philosophy, Sociology and Media Studies were carefully selected as participants. The study concludes that objectivity is a process rather than an absolute and is subject to the symbiotic relationship between journalists and the elites makes the attainment of objectivity inconceivable.

KEYWORDS: Naive Expectation, Objectivity, Selective Subjectivity, Media Ownership.

INTRODUCTION

Democratic societies pride themselves as ecosystems of freedom of the citizen to choose their leaders and determine for themselves how they should be governed. In such systems, there is the unique expectation of checks and balances by the branches of government – executive, legislature and judiciary – but the media are noted as the fourth estate of the realm because of their ability to hold itself and the other three branches accountable. At least that is the minimum expectation or requirement. The media are therefore expected to be objective – a concept that could mean different things to different people – in their coverage of events. That is one sure way to guarantee the citizen's trust and participation in governance. Media credibility, however, has been under scrutiny in recent decades due to the alleged misrepresentation of viewpoints in media reportage. The increased access to information by the citizens due to the growth of social media has compounded the challenges of objectivity in media reportage. Questions have been and continued to be asked about the influence of ownership on media objectivity. Arguably reasons have been advanced to cast doubt on media objectivity even in Western-styled democracies. Since the 1980s, particularly with Altschull's (1984) book "Agents of Power: The Role of the News Media in Human Affairs," media have been accused of reflecting the interests of those who finance them, be they private ownership or state ownership. The concept of objectivity has attracted the attention of scholars, journalists and even the general public, and sparked a lot of controversies trying to balance the power play involved in the daily struggle for relevance. Journalists, as human beings with some economic and social needs, are careful in

navigating the treacherous landscape of journalism. Even when they are ethically persuaded, their survival instinct is at razor-sharp alert level.

Again, the controversy surrounding what objectivity really means has not helped its evaluation as a media construct. When a medium is accused of lack of objectivity, does it mean bias, partisanship, false, preexisting preference, plurality, or imbalance? And does the existence of any of this mean in the face of the increasing commercialization of the media, can objectivity remain an acceptable measure of media credibility?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper was underpinned by Altschull (1984) media ownership theory which is often referred to as the "economic theory of media content." Altschull argues that media do not operate independently irrespective of their ownership structure whether they are public or privately owned or even funded by advertisers. Altschull identifies five levels of influence on news content to include a reflection of social reality, it is shaped by media routines, influenced by journalists' socialization/attitudes, influenced by social institutional forces and influenced by ideological position of the status quo which he argues to be the most fundamental of the five. The implication of this theory is that media are not inherently neutral and objectivity is a function of the economic/political interests of promoters or funders. The amenable nature of the media to fundamentally ideological differences such as capitalism and socialism is one of the strongest points in support of ownership influence. The media which ought to be the watchdog are often considered a lapdog that understands the voice of its owner and obeys the command. "He who pays the piper dictates the tune" is a popular cliché in support of the relationship between media ownership/control and news reports.

UNDERSTANDING OBJECTIVITY

Media objectivity is one concept that has thrown up debate as much as controversies in the last two decades. Objectivity rooted in the philosophical sense of "as perceived or thought" since the 1600s has become an overarching concept that determines how detached or otherwise a journalist is from the information. According to Donsbach and Klett (1993), objectivity can be understood or interpreted from four different connotations: absence of personal subjectivity, fairness in presenting the relevant sides, skepticism toward all sides, and providing factual context. It is obviously clear that objectivity means different things to different people and perhaps different things at different times depending on the circumstances. If one was to understand objectivity as absence of personal subjectivity, what about institutional or ownership influence and control? Who determines the relevant sides? Neutrality, which may be perceived as lack of commitment, has also been associated with objectivity. The question that arises is if it is possible to exhibit objectivity by being neutral where alignment may be a mark of courage?

Often times media objectivity is taken as truth-seeking (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). On the surface providing citizens with information, particularly when the information is got from a

rigorous process to find it, is at the root of journalistic requirements. Whether or not that translates to objectivity is a different story altogether. If truth is one side of contending views, the truth may have been told, but objectivity will definitely be subjective.

Proportionality is considered a means of avoiding false balance and considered objectivity (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2007; McQuail 2010; Ward 2004). This can lead to a subtle distortion. Proportionality addresses the weight given to issues or views and its application does not show objectivity if equal time is given to a fringe issue claims and a well-established fact.

Even though news organizations expect their journalists to be objective in handling information (Stovall, 2005), what constitutes objective is not easily determined. In most cases the expectation is to be accurate and fair. Accuracy is a measure of how factual or reliable a piece of information is, particularly if it is verifiable. And fairness addresses anything from how a journalist sources information to how the parties involved are represented or characterized. Both accuracy and fairness cannot be describing or defining objectivity. Every new attempt made to illuminate the concept of objectivity raises a new challenge in understanding what it is and what journalists are expected to do. Objectivity has become a contentious concept that even the selection of stories to publish or not, is subjective (Amin, 2006). Lichtenberg (2000) and Frost (2007) thematized objectivity into three categories: those who assert that objectivity is attainable, those who assert that it is impossible, and those who assert that journalistic impartiality is undesirable. Conceptualizing or understanding objectivity has become an issue of opinion with scholars failing to agree. How do we hold journalists who believe that objectivity is impossible accountable. Should we hold them to different standards of objectivity?

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Henry O. Fisher studied "Media Objectivity and Bias in Western Coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict" to determine if journalistic objectivity was compromised in the coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The study adopted a combination of critical analysis, discourse analysis, semiotic, and narrative analysis as well as content analysis. The study established that Western media coverage disproportionately represented the Ukrainian perspective and marginalized the Russian standpoint. It was also found that Western media normalize or trivialize the role of the Neo-Nazi organizations in the conflict while downplaying potential war crimes committed by the Ukrainian side. This study was not hinged on any theory against which assumptions the findings were evaluated. But it clearly aligns with the thoughts of objectivity as a source of worry to journalists and researchers.

Lawal, Babatunde and Olaoye (2023) studied Ownership Influence and News Objectivity: An Empirical Assessment of Media Control and Editorial Independence in Nigeria. The aims of the paper were:

1. To measure audience knowledge of media ownership.
2. To identify the kind of influence that ownership has on the objectivity of news content.

3. To know if the audience compares and contrasts the objectivity of news content of various media owners.
4. To ascertain the decisions of the audience after comparing and contrasting the ownership influence on objectivity of news content.

The Social Responsibility theory guided the study which was a descriptive survey. The study concluded that audiences recognized the influence of media ownership and its potential negative effects on the substance of news and recommended collaboration by stakeholders to develop media literacy programmes to equip individuals to critically assess news sources.

The study is different in approach to this present paper in some aspects. The present study is premised on Altschull's theory of media ownership against the Social Responsibility theory adopted in the reviewed work. The methods are also different. However, the outcome was not measured against the assumptions of the Social Responsibility theory. This is a major set back because the relationship with the theory could not be refuted or affirmed.

METHOD

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method was considered appropriate and adopted for this paper. Focus group discussion as a qualitative method is widely used to explore meanings, gain insights, and determine perceptions (Krueger and Casey, 2015; Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1997). This paper, which revolves around the place of objectivity as one of the pillars of journalism, would benefit from scholars across different fields of knowledge in sociology, philosophy and media, whose research have shaped the understanding of the media and its functions in the society. Krueger and Casey (2015) suggest that the size of a focus group participant could be between 6 and ten. It is possible to have smaller groups, but such groups are unsustainable, even as larger groups may be difficult to manage in terms of time available for each participant.

This study settled for 8 member participants across three departments of Media studies, philosophy and sociology. There were four scholars from media related studies and two from philosophy and sociology respectively.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (FGD)

Moderator: We have talked about the challenge of defining media objectivity generally, but I would like to get your understanding of objectivity as a concept.

Participant 1: I often imagine objectivity is an ideal that is expected in news to give a semblance of detachment by journalists away from contending parties in the news. I say ideal because I do not imagine that it is possible for any journalist to attain the expectation of objectivity in news reporting given that there are so many strings—institutionally, community and personal—demanding conformity or loyalty of the journalist to one viewpoint or the other.

Participant 5: I don't completely agree with your conceptualization of it as an ideal. I believe it is an ethical demand and must be met to ensure the credibility of news. If readers were to understand that journalists consider the demand for objectivity as an ideal, trust would be lost completely and the media ecosystem would be chaotic.

Moderator: Participant 5 just talked about preserving the ecosystem, but how does striving to understand a concept lead to chaos? Participant 3, do you feel the same way?

Participant 3: Absolutely not. We may talk about ethics but the fact still remains that today's media landscape has changed from what it was.

The independence offered by the internet means that the journalist has access to more shared relationships and attachment to multiple groups demanding loyalty.

Moderator: Apart from participant 5, does anyone else think differently from participant 1? (No response). Alright, let's talk about our evaluation of media objectivity in news reporting. What is your assessment of media objectivity? Let's start with participant 4.

Participant 4: My assessment both locally and internationally is that objectivity does not exist or at best we can say it is subjective objectivity. It's a matter of perspective. If you compare news during the colonial period and now, you would notice that the demand or expectations of government officials, indigenous or colonial, are largely the same from the media but the needs are different. If objectivity were to be an absolute, why should the interest of different groups be uniform?

Moderator: What do you mean by the needs are different?

Participant 4: In principle the indigenous government is expected to think about its own people as opposed to the colonial administrators whose interest basically is the home government. Why should objectivity mean the same thing to both groups?

Moderator: It appears that participant 4 is saying that bias should be the measure for objectivity. I want participants 7 and 8 to answer this.

Participant 7: One of the difficulties of conceptualizing objectivity is that you discuss it as the other side of most other concepts. Bias, as we know, is the prejudiced presentation of information and is seen as the opposite of objectivity and neutrality, concepts that require understanding also.

Participant 8: I believe that scholars have to do more to make objectivity easier to understand. The question to answer is whether you are talking of bias or objectivity, is whose perspective determines it? Whose objectivity, and how do we know when it is attained? My point here is that judgment of what is objective or not is jaundiced by political affiliation, economic considerations, preexisting preferences and in the present state of insecurity in Nigeria, there are

other social factors to consider. Is there anyone who wants his/her death to prove objectivity? Can we think about media objectivity? The answer is absolutely yes, but its attainment is unimaginable.

DISCUSSION

The more you try to understand media objectivity the more confused you become. What has come out clearly however is that objectivity is not a destination but a process. In political information dissemination, the first test of objectivity must be access to all shades of opinions, all viewpoints. To censor in any form is to be selective which almost the opposite of objectivity is. Is this possible in a world where media is dominated by two major interests - government and business - which actually approximate to one. The advertising fund is so huge that media hardly ignore, and by implication the stranglehold of business on government, money is the ultimate power.

The claim of media objectivity in a capitalist and exploitative world is jaundiced by the question of whose story - cultural, political, economic and social - we tell and the arrogant denial and obfuscation of the opposing views. In present day South Africa where xenophobic attacks are taking place against immigrant Africans, whose viewpoints are represented? Do the minority immigrant groups' voices get heard? Once access is denied, the claim of objectivity collapses. Even the conceptualization of the media as the fourth estate of the realm supports the idea that the media are in cohort with the other more formal branches of government - executive, legislature and judiciary - in their pretense to organize society in a way that benefits all. In reality they are manifestly preoccupied with plans to dominate or better put conquer the people. A select group of people who owe their very existence to their paymasters - government officials or business owners - can only pretend to be objective in its presentations and analysis, but that is all it is.

The media are hegemonic like the other agents of power; the world-views of their promoters approximate to their imagined view of the people who have no voice to challenge or even propagate any alternative viewpoint.

One of the challenges of conceptualizing media objectivity is the interpretation of what it means or doesn't mean. Does it mean fair representation, neutrality or non-bias? If objectivity is construed as a representation of eyewitness account confirmation by multiple sources or at least more than one source and presentation of all sides to an issue or dispute what is the gauge or determinant of this emotional persuasion of the reporter and/or the institutional control. In practice, journalists as humans have symbiotic relationships with the elites - political, government, religious, business and sundry power brokers - and it is inconceivable that a measure of absolute neutrality can be established. The conclusion is agreement with Altschul's media ownership theory that media are not inherently neutral and objectivity is a function of the economic/political interests of promoters or funders. The amenable nature of the media to

fundamentally ideological differences such as capitalism and socialism is one of the strongest points in support of ownership influence.

REFERENCES

- Altschull, J.H. (1984). *Agents of Power: The Role of the News Media in Human Affairs*. Longman
- Amin, H. (2006). Objectivity and neutrality in Arab journalism. In K. Hafez (Ed.), *Arab Media: Power and Weakness*. Hampton Press
- Donsbach, W., & Klett, B. (1993). Subjective objectivity: How journalists in four countries define a key term in their profession. *Gazette*, 51.
- Fisher, H.O. (2023). *Media Objectivity and Bias in Western Coverage of Russian Ukrainian conflict*. Media Communication Studies, Sodertorn University, Stockholm.
- Frost, C. (2000). *Media Ethics and self-regulation*. Longman.
- Kitzinger, J. (1995). *Qualitative research: Introducing focus groups*
- Kovach, B., & Rosentiel, T. (2007). *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and Public Should Expect*. Crown Publishers
- Krueger, R. A. & Casey, M.A. (2015). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Sage Publications
- Lawal, A.A., Babatunde, V.O. & Olaoye, U.A. (2025). Ownership Influence and News Objectivity: An Empirical Assessment of Media Control and Editorial Independence in Nigeria. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.908000256>
- Lichtenberg, J. (2007). A liberal theory of press. In O.B. Wilcox & R. O. Fox (Eds.) *Moral issue in journalism: A cassebook for reporters, editors and Managers*. Wadsworth.
- McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. Sage Publications
- Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications
- Stovall, J.G. (2005). *Journalism: Who, Where, Why and How*. Boston: Pearson
- Ward, S.J.A. (2004). *The Invention of Journalism Ethics: The Path to Objectivity and Beyond*. McGill-Queen's University Press