



# Journalistic Power: Constructing the “Truth” and the Economics of Objectivity

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores journalists’ role as truth tellers by investigating the distinctions journalists draw between journalism and activism. Relying on 30 in-depth interviews with journalists and theories of media power, objectivity, and epistemology, two key themes are discussed: (1) narrative framing and style, and (2) the economics of objectivity within digital media. Examining journalism as culture, I offer a theory of *journalistic power*—the recognition that journalism is never neutral, truths are never disinterested, and journalists’ epistemic practices are influenced by the power dynamics embedded in the sociopolitical and historical contexts in which they work. This study reveals how the political economy of digital media and activist media-makers are complicating journalists’ truth claims, upending journalistic routines, and redefining the field. Journalism scholars and practitioners must identify the spaces of media power during all stages of news production and distribution.

## KEYWORDS

Objectivity; activism; journalism culture; epistemology; framing; media power

## Introduction

Philosophers have wrestled for centuries with the question, “How do we know what we know?” By documenting events, collecting evidence, and distributing information to the public, journalists play a key role in determining what we know. Turning information into “the truth,” however, is a collective social process. It requires people believe the stories they read are accurate, and that the journalists who produce those stories are trustworthy. In recent years, trust in journalism has hit an all-time low, calling journalists’ role as truth tellers into question (Ingram 2018; Schudson 2019; Salmon 2021). Journalists historically have maintained their role as arbiters of the truth by performing routines, rituals, and “classification activities” (Tuchman 1972; Schudson and Anderson 2008), but a variety of circumstances within the current media environment are revealing that journalists’ practices are anything but routine.

As politicians label journalism they dislike “fake news,” and activists pressure journalists to report through the lens of justice, journalists are taking to social media, podcasts, and cable news to promote their stories, justify their editorial decisions, and say more about their personal and professional lives. Although these efforts may provide additional transparency and context for readers, I argue that the current media environment—which

operates under a market logic that incentivizes sensationalism and personal brands and enables the spread of misinformation—raises provocative questions about journalists' relationship with "the truth." Relying on 30 in-depth interviews in which journalists were asked to draw distinctions between journalism, activism, and advocacy news, I address the following research question: How is the political economy of media complicating journalists' truth claims, challenging their epistemic authority, and exposing the uneven power dynamics within journalism? Although this study focuses on U.S. journalism culture, three non-U.S. journalists were interviewed to offer perspectives on how they are navigating these sociopolitical and economic disruptions. By asking journalists to reflect on their editorial practices, explain their views on objectivity, and describe their social media activities, I sought to investigate which dynamics within digital media are influencing journalists' routines.

Interrogating objectivity is a necessary starting point for examining how journalists construct "the truth." Objectivity, according to Jay Rosen (1993), is a "theory of how to get at the truth" (49) that implicitly says two things: first, an absolute truth cannot be known; second, despite the first point, journalists value fairness in their quest for the truth. Rosen argued that objectivity persists as a journalistic ideal because it "is the expression of a very noble ideal in a democracy"—that there are "disinterested" truths (51). The notion that truths are disinterested, as Rosen correctly noted, does not address an important question dogging journalism today: *for whom?* Journalists select stories and make photographs *for whom?* Journalists identify sources and edit information *for whom?* Truths are disinterested *for whom?*

As global protests against systemic racism and inequality continue, historically underrepresented and marginalized communities are demanding that news organizations diversify their newsrooms and be transparent about which side they are on (Wallace 2019; Anderson 2020). Investigating *for whom* requires a theory of *journalistic power*: the acknowledgment that journalism is a cultural institution that is never neutral, truths are never disinterested, and journalists' truth claims and editorial practices are influenced by the power dynamics embedded in the sociopolitical and historical contexts in which they work.

## Objectivity, Epistemic Fields, and Media Power

### *Objectivity and Journalistic Authority*

The concept of objectivity emerged within journalism around the 1830s, but it didn't become a guiding principle until the 1890s (Schudson 1978). With the advent of new printing technologies and distribution outlets at this time, the market for journalism expanded rapidly. Publishers eager to capitalize on these new markets and appeal to the broadest possible audience—often affluent white readers—moved their papers away from partisan coverage, and sought to legitimize journalism through middle-of-the-road reporting (Schudson 2001). This rise of objectivity in journalism also coincided with the tremendous scientific successes of the early nineteenth century (e.g., medical breakthroughs and environmental discoveries). As researchers, scholars, and journalists increasingly relied on empiricism and the scientific method to test their theories, a "fact-value" dichotomy arose. This dichotomy says that *facts*—and by extension, "the truth"—emerge from value-free experiments or observations.

Muñoz-Torres (2012) offered a philosophical critique of objectivity by arguing that it is an ill-conceived concept for understanding “the truth,” because it is based on a flawed belief in positivism. “The positivistic claim of self-exclusion in knowledge is neither conceptually possible, nor feasible in practice,” he wrote (575). Stephen Ward (2010) attempted to overcome the positivism problem by offering “pragmatic objectivity.” Rather than ignore journalists’ subjective positions, pragmatic objectivity acknowledges that journalists use interpretative practices to produce news—for example, interviews, methods, and judgments.

Although objectivity has declined as a guiding principle in recent years in favor of more opinionated and emotive journalism (Coward 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019), the notion of “self-exclusion” remains strong among mainstream journalism outlets. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, *CNN* aired a television promotion touting its coverage of the crisis with the tagline “Facts First” (Diaz 2020). Another television promo ended with the on-screen text, “We will defeat the virus ... with facts.”

Self-exclusive, facts-first journalism is a common marketing strategy for news organizations for several reasons. For one, public officials are offering “alternative facts,” promoting conspiracy theories, and labeling journalism with which they disagree “fake.” In addition, social media filter news and information in ways that silo audiences, disrupt the economics of news, and exacerbate the spread of misinformation. These dynamics have exposed the social constructedness of news and information, and reveal an increasing propensity for relativism among publics. Unlike objectivity, relativism centers values, power, and subjectivity in the quest for knowledge. Reporting through one’s personal biases can be a useful method for journalists attempting to make sense of complex issues and bring new perspectives into the public debates. However, Muñoz-Torres (2012) argued that relativism reduces “truth to a mere subjective position, in a vain effort to make reality depending ... on individual or collective subjectivity” (577).

### ***Narratives, Truth, and Epistemic Fields***

To understand how journalists navigate this objective/relative dichotomy and construct “the truth,” journalism is viewed as an “interpretive community” (Zelizer 1993). Because no regulatory authority certifies membership in the field, journalism is best understood as a cultural field in which its norms, boundaries, and practices are discursively constructed and contested over time. The field maintains its boundaries and legitimacy through engaging in rhetorical competitions for “epistemic authority” (Bourdieu 1984; Benson and Neveu 2005; Carlson and Lewis 2018). These rhetorical competitions occur, for example, when journalists discuss their editorial practices, with each other or with audiences, and when reporters produce narrative frames.

Frames, according to Erving Goffman (1974), give stories a focal point and make certain pieces of information salient for audiences. Although identifying story themes and narrative styles is important, I approach framing as a set of relational social practices that occur within, and are shaped by, the material conditions in which journalists work (Carey 1988). Carragee and Roefs offered the “media hegemony thesis” (2004, 215) to encourage scholars to examine how the power dynamics embedded in media institutions influence news production and distribution. Zooming out to include the sociopolitical and economic

contexts in which journalists work recognizes journalism as a cultural and discursive field in which meaning, ideology, and values are contested (Tuchman 1980; Zelizer 2004).

Journalistic epistemology is also essential for examining framing as a series of social processes because, as Ekström (2002) argued, “the legitimacy of journalism is intimately bound up with claims to knowledge and truth” (260). For journalists to maintain their position as truth tellers, publics must view them, their institutions, and their stories as credible.

According to journalists I spoke with, their role as truth tellers is being disrupted for three primary reasons: (1) the changing labor relations within media industries; (2) the algorithms and incentive structures within digital media; and (3) the rhetorical competition among journalists, activists, public officials, and community stakeholders is increasingly networked and visible.

### **Media Power and Networked News**

In addition to the social and cultural changes that are complicating journalists’ truth claims, the deteriorating labor relations within media are altering the rhetorical competition for “the truth.” Because the political economy of media has dramatically reshaped news work, I resolved what Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2009) called the *newsroom-centricity* and interviewed 9 freelance journalists for this study (see also: Cottle 2007; Anderson 2011). This allowed me to examine the diversity of news work happening within journalism cultures, and understand how the increasing precarity among journalists is complicating their ability to make truth claims.

Media consolidation and networked media are having devastating consequences for the labor relations within journalism. Corporate consolidation—in which investors purchase failing news organizations and cut staff to maximize profits—has forced many journalists into part-time and freelance contracts. In the wake of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, thousands of journalists were furloughed or laid off and dozens of U.S. newspapers suspended publication or closed, exposing the faulty economics of media consolidation (Hare 2020). McChesney (2008) and Pickard (2019) have argued that media consolidation suppresses dissent and erodes democracy by concentrating the production and distribution of information into fewer hands. Freelance journalists working within this context, according to Cohen (2019) and Salamon (2020), are thus faced with a double-bind—they must view themselves as entrepreneurs with products to sell *and* as reporters producing news in the public interest.

Further complicating the situation, search and social media algorithms filter content based on users’ preferences, blurring the boundaries between journalism, activism, advertising, and entertainment. Netflix documentaries, WikiLeaks, YouTube channels, and *The New York Times* appear on the same screen, placing credible news next to conspiracy theories, and making it harder for audiences to distinguish the difference (Benkler 2011). A 2019 study by the Reuters Institute found that this context is changing how young people engage with journalism. According to the study, youth are less reliant on legacy news outlets and instead prefer news that is personal and social (Flamingo 2019). Algorithms do not simply affect how news and information is sorted. Technology giants Facebook, Apple, Amazon, and Google take a large percentage of online advertising revenue as a referral fee (Pickard 2020), making the once-stable advertising model that supported

many newspapers less viable. Therefore, digital media have serious implications for how editors conceive of their audiences, how freelance journalists frame their pitches, how audiences interact with news, and how individual journalists construct and deliver “the truth.”

These complex and interconnected dynamics between culture and political economy are examined as media power. Freedman (2014) defined media power as “a set of relationships that help to organize the deployment of symbolic resources ... that, in conjunction with other institutions and processes, help to structure our knowledge about, our ability to participate in, and our capacity to change the world” (30). Manuel Castells (2007) addressed media power by arguing that resistance to institutional power within networks represents *counterpower*. He wrote, “media are not the holders of power, but they constitute by and large the space where power is decided. ... Media are the space of power making, not the source of power holding” (238; see also Couldry 2000). Therefore, journalism that is produced, circulates, and contested within networked communications reveals the struggle over symbolic and political power.

Adrienne Russell (2016) also examined journalism through networked media power. She described a “media vanguard” consisting of citizen journalists, grassroots media makers, and hackers that put pressure on the journalistic field through innovation, media competence, and “a sophisticated understanding of media power” (9). Russell stressed that the activist/journalist continuum must be understood through both product *and* process. “Media competence today is about the ability not just to write and produce new kinds of content,” she wrote, “but to contribute to communication architectures and tools in ways that make for more robust and dynamic news” (9). Thus, media power is negotiated through both narrative framing and style, and through the dissemination of information within media infrastructures.

The media vanguard, Russell argued, challenges journalism’s epistemic authority and disrupts institutional routines by producing and distributing stories rooted in justice and solidarity with marginalized and oppressed people, and by developing new practices for making and sharing news—practices that are often collaborative, transparent, and democratic. By filling in the gaps left by the loss of local news and producing investigative journalism and documentaries, grassroots media makers critique, revise, and update journalistic routines and blur the boundaries between journalism and activism. These actors exert counterpower on the journalism field by demanding that journalists reexamine their routines and update their language (Carlson and Lewis 2015). Grassroots media makers are implicitly and explicitly challenging legacy journalism’s authority, and raising important questions about what it means to do journalism and who has access to the spaces where power and truth are decided.

## Method

In-depth interviews were conducted by phone, video conference, and in-person between November 2018 and November 2019. Participants were recruited primarily via Twitter, and by searching the staff bio pages of news organizations’ websites. A 2019 “State of Journalism” study by Muck Rack found that 83% of journalists said Twitter is their “most valuable social media platform” for sourcing and identifying stories (Winchel 2019). Therefore, Twitter was a helpful venue for identifying a broad range of journalists.

Twitter users that self-identified in their bio as a “journalist” or “reporter” were deemed eligible for the study and contacted via direct message or e-mail. Twitter users that self-identified in their bio as an “activist” or “media maker” were excluded from the study; future studies should interview activist media makers to examine how they view objectivity and “the truth.”

Interviews lasted between 20 and 85 min, and audio was recorded with permission. I began the interviews by asking journalists to define journalism. Working from their definition, I asked them to describe the distinctions between journalism and activism, and to explain bias and objectivity. I asked journalists to explain what it means to “be political,” and what steps they take to inform their audiences about their reporting methods. I asked journalists if current political rhetoric about “fake news” is forcing them to defend their reporting practices or report in a more adversarial manner.

Interviews were transcribed using an online transcription program and reviewed by me for accuracy. The program displays keywords that appear frequently in the transcripts, and this feature was used as a starting point for my analysis. I reviewed all transcripts “by hand” using grounded theory, and focused my attention on the sections with prominent keywords—for example, objectivity, style, activist, social media, and truth (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Two key themes emerged: (1) narrative framing and style, and (2) the economics of objectivity within digital media. Generalizability is not a goal of qualitative research; rather, researchers gather a diversity of perspectives from a specific culture, analyze themes that emerge from their conversations, and provide a descriptive account of their findings. The discourse journalists used to describe objectivity and their news-gathering practices is intricately related to the political economic and social constraints on these practices. Therefore, the themes, data collection procedures and analysis were relational and mutually constitutive (Corbin and Strauss 1990).

Diversity among the participants was achieved on various levels: professional experience, geographic location, age, gender, and personal identities. Eleven journalists (37%) self-reported as a person of color or as a person from an underrepresented or historically marginalized group (e.g., LGBTQ+, Indigenous, Muslim, or Latinx). The remaining 19 journalists did not self-report their personal identities, but that does not necessarily mean they are not a member of those communities. Seventeen participants (57%) are women, and 13 are men (one identified as a trans man). Although efforts were made to recruit journalists from various geographic locations, only three participants work outside of the U.S. (in Egypt, France, and Canada). The age of the participants is between 22- and 67-years-old, with professional experience ranging from one to 35 years.

I did not seek a representative sample of working journalists. Rather, I relied on non-probability sampling which provides researchers with opportunities to “identify theoretically significant ideas that warrant further study,” and understand “what ‘goes on’ in a particular population” (Barnes 2016, 21; see also Bernard 2006; Marshall 1996; Small 2009). I examined what is “going on” in U.S. journalism culture by asking journalists who perform various tasks (e.g., writing, editing, and photography) for various outlets (e.g., newspapers, broadcast television, online, and freelance) about their editorial practices and the emerging challenges to their journalistic authority. Qualitative research must consider data saturation when utilizing in-depth interviews (Bowen 2008). The interviews became repetitive after the 27th interview, and I decided that saturation was achieved.

## Findings

Journalists discussed constructing “the truth” as practices that are fundamentally connected to narrative framing and style, and the economics of objectivity within digital media. Although objectivity has been contested for decades within journalism studies and in newsrooms, the journalists I spoke with described profound new challenges that are complicating their role as truth tellers.

First, journalists described how narrative style and language must be understood in relation to power. Many journalists argued that editorial decisions (for example, story selection and sourcing), reveal journalists’ and news organizations’ orientation to power. Second, journalists argued that the political economy of media poses significant challenges to journalistic objectivity. Journalists said that the contemporary media ecosystem is an attention economy (Wu 2016) that encourages individual reporters and news organizations to develop “brands” that resonate with audiences (Holton and Molyneux 2017). Freelance journalists discussed how precarity compels them to frame pitches and stories in ways that are consistent with a publication’s style, even if that style is explicitly partisan or activist. Analyzing journalistic objectivity and the construction of truth through media power and the political economy of journalism reveals how U.S. journalism cultures are evolving (Hanitzsch 2007).

### *Narrative Framing and Stylizing the Truth*

Tensions around narrative framing and objectivity are growing more pronounced in recent years, journalists said, due to pressure from activists who are using social media to highlight injustices and critique how journalists frame stories. These tensions are part of the rhetorical competition for epistemic authority. A 33-year-old digital editor in the U.S. said, “I think that journalists like to think of themselves as truth tellers, but your truth may be different from somebody else’s truth.” When journalists claim to be neutral observers who are “telling some kind of objective truth,” she said, they “are not acknowledging their blind spots and doing a disservice to people that they seek to serve.” She discussed how the *New York Times’s* reaction to the 2016 U.S. presidential election revealed its biases as an elite publication that serves primarily affluent white audiences. “*The Times* published a bunch of stories that said, ‘How did we not see this coming?’” she said. “And a lot of journalists and writers of color were like, ‘Who is this we?’”

Her comments reveal how the 1968 Kerner Commission’s recommendations for U.S. newsrooms remain unresolved. The commission—convened by President Lyndon B. Johnson to study racial tensions in the U.S.—concluded that the lack of diversity within American newsrooms makes them incapable of effectively covering racial injustices. A 2018 Shorenstein Center study found that this problem persists. According to the study, the *New York Times’s* 2016 political reporting teams were 90% white and 70% men (Chideya 2018).

A 20-year veteran journalist with a digital outlet in the U.S. expressed a similar sentiment about how narrative style is connected to newsroom demographics and power. As a Muslim woman of color, she said, audiences and editors hold her reporting to a higher standard. To protect her journalistic credibility from extra scrutiny, she self-censors her language on social media and stopped attending her mosque. The



“enforcement of this journalistic standard that is about craft and protecting journalistic ethics and the great wall between opinion and editorial and activism,” she said, “is really enforced against women and people of color.” Several of her colleagues felt so frustrated with editors policing their language that they suggested creating a new style manual “that feels inclusive.” The idea “fizzled because none of us had the power do that,” she said. “We are just a bunch of reporters of color who are frustrated with the framing and the language that hasn’t caught up to the times . . . . In the end, it was basically about power. We just didn’t have it.”

Altering the power dynamics within newsrooms and shifting long-standing professional norms and routines within journalism cultures, she said, takes time. Waiting for her colleagues to “catch up” on racial justice issues exposes another way the objectivity norm influences journalists’ truth claims. She said: “[Journalists use] every other euphemism instead of calling [something] racist, when all we are taught in J-school is to dispense with euphemism and deal with the truth. So, that feels like a fundamental flaw in what we’re doing right now.”

Narrative style and newsroom demographics were contested publicly during the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprisings. In one case, journalists at the *Washington Post* sent 11 proposals to newsroom management demanding updated policies regarding racial justice. Among the proposals, journalists asked management to diversify the newsroom and update the *Post*’s stylebook to reflect culturally appropriate and inclusive language on race, gender, and identity (Smith 2020). In another case of activists contesting style and framing, the *Associated Press* (2020) announced updates to the *AP Stylebook*, which now recommends capitalizing the letter “b” in Black and the letter “i” in Indigenous “when referring to people in a racial, ethnic or cultural context” (para. 1).

As journalists update their language to more accurately reflect the culture, sourcing is also a matter of style. An Indigenous journalist in the U.S., affiliated with the Pueblo Laguna tribe, said Indigenous media’s traditions inform her practices. “Its origins are deeply rooted in advocacy simply because there was no space, there was no advocate institution to tell the Indigenous narrative historically.” Although this tradition helps her navigate the journalism/activism dichotomy, being embedded in the communities that she covers poses other significant challenges to her journalistic credibility. “As a marginalized journalist of color, I cannot afford to be labeled as an activist,” she said. Therefore, she grounds her reporting in evidence and accountability, and is selective about where she publishes her work. Although alternative media outlets provide space for perspectives often unseen in mainstream media, these outlets, she said, are delegitimized by mainstream journalists as activist or left publications. “That’s why elite media matters in this regard,” she said. “Unfortunately, it matters because it matters. The problem with elite media spaces is that they’re just too white, and they need to diversify.” Representation in media means not simply a broader range of complex, nuanced stories about Indian country, but also “hiring people that are reflective of these realities on the ground.”

A freelance journalist in the U.S. that identifies as transgender similarly argued that the power dynamics within media shape journalists’ relationship with “the truth.” He said journalism must be understood as a “meaning-making process” in which power is negotiated in its historical and social contexts. Objectivity, he said, emerged in journalism during a period when “there were virtually no women, no Black people, no immigrants writing for any these supposedly-neutral outlets.” In addition, romantic notions of a



bygone era in which everyone was “on the same page” watching three broadcast TV networks ignores the fact that many cities had several daily newspapers and there were hundreds of alternative newspapers and zines in circulation.

Editing, narrating, and distributing stories to audiences, he said, are material social practices that reveal journalists’ biases. “I don’t think there’s any such thing as neutral raw information,” he said. “All information, when it’s communicated, is filtered through some sort of subjective lens.” Instead of adhering to principles such as objectivity or neutrality, he practices “liberated journalism,” which “is storytelling—or the creation of facts and news and information—that in some way contributes to more freedom for more people, and especially for people who have been targeted by our current systems of oppression, white supremacy, patriarchy, and transphobia.” Rather than viewing meaning as something that is negotiated at the edges of society and works its way into the mainstream, liberated journalism “is an orientation” that asks, “What if we actually have justice and equality, and what if the voices who are currently marginalized were at the center?” Redistributing power and resources within media would open up new possibilities for journalism, he said, because “oppressed communities have been the originators of some of the most free and liberated styles of storytelling.”

According to a digital producer working for a local TV news station, visual media also provide journalists with storytelling techniques that “reinforce the truth of the story.” Although journalists should strive to be “as objective as possible,” he said, ethical storytelling means “stylizing the truth in a way that looks to be engaging but does not deviate from the factuality of the situation.” He distinguished journalism from art and activism by arguing that journalism is about producing compelling, emotional stories while avoiding “manipulation.” “Journalism is when art is created using only elements of reality,” he said.

A photojournalist based in Paris, France, with more than 30 years of professional experience, agreed with the sentiment that visual journalism is a powerful medium through which to communicate “the truth.” He criticized objectivity by arguing that journalists use imperfect data collection and verification methods to produce news. “[Journalists] should be aware that this is *our* truth, which we found, and we may be totally wrong,” he said. “Someone may come up with a different angle, different questions, and get a totally different result.”

Identifying different angles is often about journalists’ perspective and orientation. A journalist with 8 years of experience said her reporting on labor issues shifted when she joined a major metro newspaper after several years working for an alternative weekly. “One of the things I miss about where I used to work was, I had more freedom with my voice,” she said. “Here at the paper, because of the tradition of print, it’s more sanitized.” In addition to questions from colleagues about her editorial decisions to frame labor from the perspective of workers, she is also mindful of the newspaper’s audience, which is broader and more ideologically diverse than the alt weekly. “I guess I’m afraid that someone would question my credibility and say that I was on the side of the workers or something like that.” The paper, she said, typically covers labor in the business section, and she did not view her reporting as advocacy or activism; rather, she simply altered the framing to center workers’ experiences. “What it means to be objective,” she said, “is presenting the viewpoint of a straight white centrist upper-middle-class man, which is what the majority of reporters have historically been.”

Newsroom demographics, she said, affect the paper's ideological orientation. "I've been thinking a lot about what does it mean to be fair in a world that's just not fair, and when the power dynamics are not equal."

As these journalists argued, narrative style and framing are social processes embedded in power relations. Recognizing how power influences their editorial practices forces journalists to answer *for whom* they are reporting and *to whom* are they accountable. It also requires that journalists consider how power is shaped by the sociopolitical and historical contexts in which journalists work. Journalistic power is shaped in another important way—"the truth" is negotiated and constructed within the political economy of digital media.

### ***Digital Disruption and Performing the Profession***

I spoke with 9 freelance journalists, and the contradictions they are facing regarding narrative framing, "the truth," and media power are especially pronounced. A freelance writer with 12 years of experience discussed how truth-telling is complicated during a time of increased political polarization and fractured online audiences. The "goal of media should be to inform the public of what's true," she said. But truth is a "deep philosophical question" that publishers often overlook in favor of audience analytics. Similar to other freelance journalists I spoke with, she expressed frustrations with editors who demand stories be framed in ways that satisfy the publication's small but passionate audience. Beyond this, she worried that producing news that appeases online audiences and subscribers affects journalism's role in the furtherance of democracy. "If we're not on the same page with some objective truths, then how can we govern as an electorate? How do we define ourselves as a people?"

A 32-year-old journalist, writing for a weekly newspaper in the U.S., questioned journalistic objectivity by critiquing how the concept is often used by news organizations to legitimize their authority and cater to a perceived audience. "The purpose of journalism for most outlets, especially ones that ascribe to the ideal of objectivity, is not to try to get to a truth or afflict the comfortable, but it's to sell a product to an audience that, you know, is going to buy it," he said. "And the best way to sell the most amount of a product is to package it in a way that is appealing to as many people as possible. *Ipsa facto*, objectivity is a magic tool."

Another freelance journalist said "one of the problems with our information ecosystem right now is that it is capitalism driven." As an independent contractor, he thinks about his journalistic brand by "filtering everything through what is sellable and how can I make money in this career." The partisan nature of U.S. politics creates a "cycle of trying to neutralize" journalism. "The economy of news media is affecting the ways in which journalists, as individuals, and journalism organizations feel they need to represent themselves," he said.

Staff journalists also discussed similar pressures to *sell* their individual and organizational brands on social media. Many described their online activities as a performance that constructs and maintains a professional identity (Zelizer 1993; Carlson and Lewis 2018). An investigative reporter for a local television news station in the U.S. said social media is part of his annual review. "I was required to double the number of Facebook interactions or impressions in one year," he said. The logic of social media, he said, favors funny or personal content that is unrelated to his reporting, and he navigates

political tensions on social media by avoiding appearing “too left or too right in any of my posts.” Rather than use social media to advocate for the issues he covers as a journalist, he uses social media to “advocate for people to watch my story.” Showing your “bias on social media,” he said, poses a threat to his journalistic credibility. This is especially true at protests. “Perception is everything. If you really want to make sure that people trust your reporting, you have to be very cognizant of that perception,” he said. “Putting yourself in a position that shows your bias, at a rally or at a march, will really hurt that.”

A reporter for a digital outlet in the U.S. similarly said she takes “extra precautions” when posting on social media from protests. While attending the Women’s March in 2017, for example, she said, “I had to tweet and I had to Instagram in a very reportorial way. Like, here are signs that I am seeing, these are some of the chants.” By simply documenting events and avoiding posts that may be considered editorializing or overtly political, journalists attempt to maintain their professional authority on social media by performing neutrality. An editor with 30 years of experience said that although she appreciates how social media provide journalists and citizens with platforms to express their personal and political views, journalists should remove themselves from the online “frenzy.” “If you are the face of a brand—as an editor or a correspondent—I think you have a wider responsibility,” she said. “I think you are undermining the trustworthiness of the reporting if you’re sharing these quick shares where you, like everybody else, run after feelings and things that have not been proven.” The desire to break a story has been a feature of journalism since its inception, but the speed of digital media is putting added pressure on how journalists construct “the truth.”

A media reporter with a major metro daily in the U.S. said that the “incentive structures” within media encourage journalists to be more opinionated, and there has been a “continued deterioration between the walls throughout the mainstream media.” The notion of objectivity when he began his career 30 years ago “has gradually eroded,” he said, because “it’s easy and there is demand” for opinionated news. Demand for journalists to discuss their reporting on podcasts, YouTube, and cable news is an expected part of journalists’ work. To have your work read in an increasingly crowded “attention economy,” he said, presents journalists with many contradictions. “There is just a tremendous amount of competition among the information providers,” he said. “If that forces [journalists] into sensationalism, into inaccuracy, distortion, that’s terrible, that’s wrong. We also have to be conscious of the world that we live in.”

A U.S.-based journalist that focuses on immigration said that although social media is pushing journalists to rethink the language they use, her words are guided by the people most affected by her reporting. “I let the people who are impacted form the language, and I use the language that they want to use and feel comfortable with,” she said. She said her personal experiences inform her journalistic style and how she uses social media to distribute stories and connect with audiences. After discussions with her editor about “what is the end goal with the reporting that we do,” she practices a solutions-based style of journalism that “humanizes the issue.” She said, “[We] really work to highlight strategies and responses and answers that are coming out of impacted communities and highlighting the resilience of communities and the ways in which they’re fighting back, instead of just a constant stream of stories about the horrible things that are happening.”

While social media incentivize sensationalism and opinionated journalism, these platforms also provide spaces for publics to challenge the framing of issues. A reporter for a digital publication in the U.S. described how Black Lives Matter activists leverage social media and force journalists to rethink their relationships with institutions and their orientation to power. “I think [activists] are pushing,” she said. “They’re pushing journalism to be less tied to upholding institutions.” She continued:

I don’t think they’re pushing us to be more activist. I just think that they’re really forcing us to ... talk to the people on the outside now, and I think that’s a really important change. That’s a really important shift in journalism, because the institutions serve themselves, they serve to protect themselves, and everyone else just gets left out.

Broadcasting videos of state violence against Black people, she said, means journalists cannot rely on official statements from law enforcement because “you have hundreds of thousands of people online with videos and testimonials.” Making injustices visible with video evidence has altered journalistic routines and pushed journalists to reconsider *for whom* they are reporting.

An editor for an alternative weekly in the U.S. with 20 years of experience, said that although objectivity is falling out of favor in mainstream journalism, this trend has been happening within the “alternative media world” for decades. The political economy of journalism, he said, is challenging the stability of legacy journalism outlets, yet at the same time providing freelance journalists with opportunities to specialize in particular areas and develop niche audiences. Although these new affordances are intriguing, he said, local publications like his are forced to cultivate an audience on platforms that collect users’ personal information and determine which posts are prioritized. “I always think about, ‘What is this technology doing to me and to us as humans?’ And I’m concerned,” he said. When Facebook changed its algorithm after the 2016 U.S. election to prioritize personal posts over political content, that decision “really screwed publications like ours,” he said.

Navigating social media analytics and online engagement is an especially difficult task for independent media outlets and freelance journalists. The sheer scale of these platforms compels journalists and news organizations to use these sites to reach audiences. The alt weekly editor asked, “How can we develop an audience and have it be a two-way or a multi-way conversation?” He continued:

[Can we] have that data, but we know who they are, and they know who we are, and we’re all there voluntarily? It’s not just a transactional thing. Can we have these networks in our control and have the individuals that participate have it be in their control. Can the next thing be distributed? Can it be democratic? Can it be, basically, what a lot of us thought it should have been all along?

Concerns over surveillance and privacy on social media are especially pronounced for journalists working in countries with authoritarian governments. A journalist in Egypt with 10 years of experience said she is careful about what she publishes on social media because, although social media has the potential to humanize stories and reach a large audience, “you are much more exposed and you can be attacked” for what you say on these platforms, she said. Social media accounts with at least 5000 followers, she said, are deemed media organizations by the Egyptian government, subjecting them to additional restrictions and oversight. “That’s a little bit dangerous,” she said,

“so I prefer to avoid it and maintain a low profile ... Right now there are many, many people in jail because of that. Because of a Facebook post.” Although this study is not comparative across geographic locations, a global perspective of journalistic power recognizes how journalists working in authoritarian states are increasingly facing threats of surveillance, intimidation, imprisonment, and murder, further complicating their role as truth tellers (Sözeri 2016).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Analyzing narrative framing, style, and objectivity through media power and the political economy of media is critical for understanding who journalism is for. Studying journalism’s rhetorical competition for epistemic authority through journalistic power matters for two primary reasons.

First, this framework situates journalism cultures within the networked power dynamics that influence how “the truth” is constructed and disseminated. A dialectical approach to journalism understands that journalists’ routines and the circulation of news are hegemonic processes that are constantly in motion. Shifting power relations among journalists, institutions, and publics reveal the tensions over journalistic ethics. As journalistic power is increasingly networked, visible on social media, and hybridized, journalists’ epistemic authority will remain unstable. Activist media makers, grassroots filmmakers, and digital news outlets will continue putting pressure on and expanding the journalistic field, forcing legacy journalism institutions to respond and defend their legitimacy. The future of journalism, many journalists said, is full of contradictions. On the one hand, remaining firm on concepts of objectivity and neutrality may preserve journalism’s institutional authority and credibility in the short term. But emphasizing transparency, collaboration, accountability, and justice revives journalism’s historic role as an adversarial institution committed to the furtherance of democracy.

Second, journalistic power highlights how journalism occurs within spaces of media power (Couldry 2000; Weiss 2015). These spaces are both digital and physical. As journalists perform objectivity online, and as newsrooms adapt their social media policies to offer journalists best practices, these efforts seek to balance credibility with marketability and engagement. Community pop-up news gardens and live events have emerged as important venues for journalists seeking to engage in dialogue with communities and repair the declining trust in journalism (Lakshmanan 2018). The spaces of media power reveal how journalistic power is flexible and hybridized. Rather than viewing publics or online actors as threats to their institutional authority and professional credibility, journalists must view knowledge production as a collective social process and work cooperatively with publics. Disagreement over “the truth” does not mean journalists need more facts and data to convince audiences of a story’s validity; rather, disagreement represents how perspective and orientation to power influence story reception. How journalists engage with those on the supposed boundaries of the journalistic field warrants further study.

As journalists experiment with new models for news—ones that are democratic and that prioritize transparency and accountability—the future of journalism is being written (Deuze and Witschge 2020). From hyper local and grassroots news initiatives, to journalism as community organizing (Schmidt 2019), journalists and media makers are reimagining what it means to do journalism and who can be a journalist. The

journalists I spoke with were eager to debate objectivity and think through questions of power and epistemology. Many wished that their newsrooms would create spaces for these conversations to occur, so they could discuss with their colleagues how networked news and digital media are affecting their practices.

Suggesting that *facts* will prevail in the rhetorical competition for “the truth” fails to recognize a key aspect of epistemology—justification, or *belief*. Examining why people believe the things they do and understanding why some truths resonate more than others may promote more empathic journalism grounded in an ethic of care. Evaluating belief asks journalists to constantly re-evaluate their reporting methods and grapple with the fact that multiple, often contradictory, truths co-exist. A power-structure analysis situates journalism within its sociopolitical and historical contexts, and encourages journalists to construct “the truth” through practices rooted in justice. Identifying the spaces of journalistic power is crucial for journalists and journalism scholars seeking to re-politicize their data and craft stories in solidarity with the most vulnerable and oppressed members of society.

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