

Journalistic Objectivity: “Getting the Best Obtainable Version of the Truth”

By [Kéllia Ramares](#)

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Objectivity does not exist, in journalism or in any other sphere. That is what quantum physicists have been telling us now for nearly a century. The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle tells us that what you know about a quantum particle depends on what you measure. You can measure its position, but you cannot determine where it is going at the same time with equal accuracy, and vice versa. You can't even call it a particle all the time because sometimes it acts as a wave. Experiments have shown that whether you see a particle or a wave depends on what you expect to see.

Seeing what we expect to see also explains the results of polls that elicit certain types of answers depending on how the question is formulated. Some people even believe that seeing what we expect to see explains our own experience of the world.

So if there is no such thing as objectivity, what passes for objectivity in journalism and, is it a good thing? Well, there are many definitions of journalistic objectivity; I'll offer a few of them here. Objectivity can mean not investing yourself in the outcome of a story. On my very first night at KPFA, news director Mark Mericle took the interns on a tour of the station. We stopped by a bulletin board on which there was a quote from NPR's Bob Edwards. He said, "I don't care about the outcome of my stories. That's Pacifica." He seemed rather proud of that position. But I ask you to imagine you are in a hospital and a doctor comes up to you and says "Hello, I'm your surgeon. I'll be taking out your tumor today...more or less..." Or you call a roofer and he says "Hello, I'm your roofer, I'll patch the holes in your roof ahead of the winter rains...or not." I ask you, in what other occupation is it a good thing not to care about the outcome of your work?

Objectivity can take the form of what I call "He said, she said" journalism. As New York Times columnist Russell Baker wrote, "In the classic example, a refugee from Nazi Germany who appears on television saying monstrous things are happening in his homeland must be followed by a Nazi spokesman saying Adolf Hitler is the greatest boon to humanity since pasteurized milk....The American Press has always had a tendency to assume that the truth must lie exactly halfway between any two opposing points of view. Thus, if the press presents the man who says Hitler is an ogre and the man who says Hitler is a prince, it believes it has done the full measure of its journalistic duty."

But the truth, even in the seemingly obvious case of Hitler, is neither simple nor objective. If you were Jewish diarist Anne Frank, Hitler was an ogre. If you were Prescott Bush, father and grandfather of two US Presidents and financier of the Nazi regime, Hitler was a prince.

To me, objectivity is best described as a group agreement on what a particular set of facts is telling us about a person or a situation. And all too often, that group agreement, like history itself, is written by the victors. Our duty as alternative journalists is to expand the public's subjective points of view beyond that group agreement written by the racist, sexist, ageist, classist, imperialist, militarist, corporatist, xenophobic, homophobic terror-mongers. (Did I get everybody? Mentally fill in the blank if I missed something). But first, we must first look at the blocks and limitations we face in such a task.

Watergate journalist Carl Bernstein describes the point of good journalism as "getting the best obtainable version of the truth". To me, the words "obtainable version" are key. We must realize that our ability to obtain the truth is compromised by many factors: some psychological, some economic. Among the economic limitations are the fact that many databases and expert reports are proprietary, and especially at the level of community journalism, we may not have the funds to access them. Government agencies may refuse us access to documents we ask for in a Freedom Of Information Act request, and we don't have the legal resources to fight the government in court.

Information is a commodity which is bought and sold, although the currency is not always money. Chris Hedges wrote, "When reporting depends heavily on access, it becomes very difficult to challenge those who grant or deny that access. This craven desire for access has turned huge sections of the Washington press, along with most business reporters, into courtiers. The need to be included in press briefings and background interviews with government or business officials, as well as the desire for leaks and early access to official documents, obliterates journalistic autonomy."

Indymedia has embarked on a new journalism that is not so dependent on access to officials because it recognizes that officials are not only source of news. Expanding one's viewpoint beyond the group agreement often means seeking knowledge outside the group. Experts are useful. Who is an expert should always be an open question.

Despite our 24/7 news cycle, we have time limits in broadcast journalism, and space limits in traditional newspapers and magazines, when they're there at all these days. Editors value breadth over depth, especially in daily news, demanding shorter and shorter stories, and news hook events that make the government, the corporation or the activist the determiner of what is a story. I'll make up my own mind on that, thank you.

The demand for brevity makes investigative journalism a very endangered species at a time when we need it most. It's very difficult in 3:00 minutes to put today's events into an historical context and to project out to what the possible futures might be if we continue down the current road or chose another, or what those other roads might be. Today's journalism often panders to the fast-paced ADD culture. News blogs often demand their writers not exceed 400-600 words. The public needs to look at past, present and an array of possible futures to be socially engaged and politically active in a meaningful way. That takes an investment of time by both the journalists and the public.

Web-based outlets like Indymedia have an advantage here as the Internet is practically infinite. However the downside is finding the information on the Web. We need Net neutrality and better search technologies.

We also must realize that every story, whether it is street crime or war, or science or sports, is in essence an economic story, because the power relationships described by money are

the basis of most human interactions, from the marriage between two people to the trade imbalance between two nations, to the injustices between Global North and Global South.

Having recognized the economic basis for all stories, we must then question the economic foundation of the world. Journalists, especially those who label themselves community, alternative or radical, should be among the first people to ask “Why must we pay to live on the planet we’re born on?” They must ask it repeatedly so that the public can imagine a possible future different than the one that is presented by current economic systems. And they must ask it even as they cover the NOW, that’s governed by a group agreement written by the financial class that says we must have a money-based world, there is no other way to organize the world, and if you can’t succeed in that world, well it sucks to be you, doesn’t it?

In Indymedia, we have today a model of a future world where information is not a commodity, where the expert is not always from a capital city or a major university, and where truth is not sacrificed to the false god of objectivity. It is a place where journalists can view the facts through a subjective lens that carries the moral filter of Anne Frank not Prescott Bush.

May history record that in Seattle, in December of 1999, a new journalism for a new world was born.

Kéllia Ramares is a freelance journalist in Oakland, CA, who has occasionally contributed stories to Indymedia. Her latest project is The End of Money: A Critique of Paying, Owing and Working “for a living” Her web site is <http://endmoney.info> and she can be reached at theendofmoney@gmail.com

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