

Objectivity revisited

Objectivity in Journalism, by Steven Maras

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Objectivity in Journalism, by Steven Maras, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, 260 pp., \$16.25 (hbk), ISBN 978-0745647340

‘Objectivity *weakly* revisited’ could be the synthesis of this huge effort to rehabilitate objectivity; an effort made by Steven Maras, Senior Lecturer in Media and Communications at the University of Sidney on 2013, a very few years before the now almost burned-out debate on fake news and post-truth had ignited. The book has been published in the collection of ‘Key Concepts in Journalism’ of Polity Press, a well-known publisher of valuable and critical books regarding journalistic and media issues.

The structure of Maras’ book is very clear, especially in its first part. I will summarize it briefly:

It opens with the history of objectivity as a journalistic paradigm and/or ethical rule, until it was attacked and rejected in the 90s – for example, by Mindich in 1998 – and later on (Chapter 1).

Then, in Chapter 2, the author presents the main objections to the notion of objectivity, objections well-articulated and displayed in an apparently irrefutable way.

In Chapter 3, the author goes into to the philosophical sources of the debate, that is to the diverse epistemologies underlying the contrasting versions of the problem and their correlative answers: the model of correspondence and coherence, empiricism, positivism, pragmatism, realism, naturalism and postmodernism. Although Maras’ book is not a book on the history of epistemology, his account is good enough ... for the theories of knowledge of the Enlightenment.

This is, in my view, the main objection to the book, as it is the missing point of any Modern attempt to establish a sound basis for connecting journalists’ work with the world outside, if those attempts want to avoid arbitrarily falling into limitless subjective points of view, or even into more limited overarching ‘narratives’, or on the other hand to giving up to the changeable consensual truth imposed by the tyranny of the majority. Maras goes back no further than the Enlightenment. Moreover, he even forgets to present the origin of the fact/value divide: it was Hume’s epistemology, whose defining division is between is-judgments and ought-judgments that shaped the terms of the debate from then on. Needless to say, the great father of the Modern objective-subjective epistemological break—for there are other pre-Modern versions of the break, such as medieval nominalism against realism—is also missing: Descartes, whose *cogito ergo sum* is the turning point in the Copernican revolution in the theory of knowledge of Modern times.

Chapter 4 offers the grounds on which objectivity has been defended, poorly defended as the title clearly shows: ‘has *been* defended’. The chapter mirrors the previous one and echoes also the very same deficiencies. In my view, the conclusion of this chapter could have also been the conclusion of the book: ‘What is evident [this is after his account of the arguments in favor of objectivity, arguments whose *effectiveness the author does not measure*] is that any simple dismissal of objectivity as impossible has been complicated. *Objectivity needs not to be tied to an idea of a reality that exists independent of our mind*’ (emphasis is mine). Right, objectivity needs not to be tied so; truth does need it, desperately. The point is that objectivity was (and is) a poor surrogate in the place of truth. After

so many years of deconstructionism, we have learned this. The question is whether we will have the courage to go further, that is to go back to the sources: Aristotle and the recovering of Aristotelian epistemology in twentieth-century authors, departing from analytical philosophy, missing in Maras' account: Anscombe, Searle, McIntyre, etc. McIntyre in particular cannot be ignored, since he is the first one in the English tradition to strongly confute from the inside the Humean is/ought epistemological divide.

The rest of the chapters, from 5 to 8, in my view, add erudition and bring the debate up to date, yet with some unavoidable reiterations. An example would be the falling back into historical arguments in chapter five, where the author presents some journalistic attempts to overcome the simplistic view of the primitive objectivist model, such as the interpretative reporting formula of Markel and others. Chapter six presents more recent attempts to overcome the limitations put on a committed journalism by the objectivist model: the countercultural movement of the sixties, civic journalism, peace journalism and other attempts. Chapter seven offers an overview of the objectivity issue in a professionally and technologically changed environment, where 24/7 news and blogs shape the context, and where other international news influences, such as Al-Jazeera, have presented new voices to the old 'news order'.

Finally, chapter eight puts the final and relevant question: is objectivity a universal journalistic norm? And it does so while broadly exploring other non-Western cultural contexts (which Maras calls 'Asian' values). But, to say it all, it relapses again into the well charted territories apart from the US: Europe, BBC and Australia, which show no real difference in the understanding of objectivity and the always innominate and lurking *truth issue*.

Yes, 'objectivity is a key concept in journalism, media and communications studies' (p. 2), even after it was cancelled from the code of the Society of Professional Journalist in the US in 1996; even if it does not appear in the 2006 Charter of the BBC, and even if it is no longer shared by professionals as a consequence of such a lengthy 'deconstruction' in media scholarship. That scholarship, originally written in English, is well presented by Maras. Unfortunately, he ignores most non-English scholars who have dealt with the issue long before, and even contemporary ones, such as Bettetini (1984, 1985) and Fumagalli and Bettetini (1998) in Italian; and Brajnovic (1978, 1979), García-Noblejas (2000, 1996), Galdón López (1994), González Gaitano (1989) and Muñoz-Torres (2002) in Spanish, the last is also available in English, in an article of *Journalism Studies* (Muñoz-Torres 2007).

Overall, Maras is right. Objectivity matters, it still matters for professionals: more than 80% of journalists from the US, Australia, UK, Germany and Italy said that 'it was very important to them being as objective as possible' according to surveys carried out under the Media and Democracy project of the 90s (p. 206–7), although they do not have a clear picture or definition of what objectivity is. And it matters also for scholars, as Maras himself points out: '[Objectivity, nevertheless, is] an unpopular ethical touchstone'.

In the last 60 years, we have witnessed heavy and persistent academic dissembling of the notion of objectivity, in the wake of Nietzsche's breaking down of the *great narrative of the Enlightenment* accomplished by the heirs of the German genius for suspicion (constructivists, deconstructionists and various relativisms...). Nevertheless, after that huge undertaking, *something* pointing out to the 'world outside' is still longed for by journalists, as former BBC director Thompson, quoted by Maras, says:

critical (objectivity is needed) because we accept that the facts come to us mediated through complex narrative and assumptions and that each of us need to use both sophisticated analysis and individual judgment to make sense of them, but *realists* because we believe that it is still possible –indeed it is our duty– to get to the facts and to form as objective and accurate view of the world as possible. (p. 182)

Now, I think that the problem with *objectivity* is that the traditional account of it is so loaded with positivistic epistemology, meaning the ‘experimental science paradigm’, that we are no longer able to recognize its correct epistemological dimension: in order to get to the core of the facts, the truth, one must first be *impartial*, fair, honest, which is quite different from being *neutral*, that is presuming that one is ‘speaking from nowhere’. In other words, we have to distinguish objectivity from *objectivism* (Galdón López 1994, 1999). In fact, Maras admits it and recognizes that there are, broadly speaking, two traditions of understanding objectivity as a professional practice or as a prescriptive guideline: one American-British version more linked to the scientific paradigm, and another more continental European one linked to the fairness model (see chapter 8: ‘Is objectivity a universal journalistic norm?’). Nevertheless, I do not think he arrives at the core of the debate, which is the unsolved issue of the articulation between *theoretical* and *pragmatical* dimensions of truth (in *my* reading of the *truth question*) for he assumes ‘as a starting point, to decline at the outset of his work any simplistic binary of objectivity and subjectivity’ (p. 18) (*his* reading of the *truth question*). For sure, the person *who* knows and the *thing known* are not a simplistic binomial pair, but they are related, intertwined, mutually influencing each other ... and *can* be differentiated. In fact, we do differentiate them constantly in everyday life, especially when judging others’ grasp of facts, or even our own grasp whenever we correct our supposed certitudes that were based on lack of evidence. Good journalists usually do it without too much seeking for epistemological rules or guidelines: it is the spontaneous grammar of journalism.


Going back to my previous criticism, the debate on objectivity is, after all, a problem within the boundaries of positivism, in the Enlightenment matrix that has characterized journalism from its birth until today. Galdón López (1994, 1999) had already demonstrated this before the dawn of the Internet, and the diagnosis is valid still, since technology has simply limitlessly multiplied the holders of power to inform ... or misinform.

Maddalena and Gili (2017) have sufficiently proved that the recent post-truth and fake news debate, having arisen as a result of unexpected events (Brexit, Trump’s election, the Colombia referendum on the peace process, etc.) is but a new disguise of the very same problem. The debate on fake news and post-truth, like the debate about objectivity, if it wants to be serious and fruitful, and not a simple instrumental weapon to delegitimize the adversary with ad hominem arguments, must return to focus on truth, on our ability to reach it and tell it, whether we speak of philosophical or religious truth or of the more minute and humble journalistic truth.

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