

TRUTH, OBJECTIVITY AND JOURNALISM

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Abstract

There are variety of opinions and arguments to define truth and objectivity. Truth can be understood as related to reality, or depicting reality, or correspondence with facts and opposite of falsehood or misrepresentation of a thing or fact. Objectivity basically constitutes impartiality and universality. When these notions are discussed in the field of media ethics, it is basically understood as truthfulness and impartiality in the information disseminated by news media persons as news. Though these notions are important enough in a democratic media, these are not without questions and objections and these objections are very much influenced by the philosophical disagreement regarding the understanding of these notions. Media is a practical field, keeping the empirical attitude in mind, I will briefly explain the theory of truth that, in my opinion, provides criteria to determine whether a data presented as news is true or not.

Keyword: Journalism, Media, Objectivism, Realism, Subjectivism, Truth

"I tore myself away from the safe comfort of certainties through my love for truth ----and Truth rewarded me." ~ Simone de Beauvoir

1. INTRODUCTION

Truth and objectivity are the notions which immediately strike one's mind when we discuss about the features, virtues and foundations of a democratic media. Democrat media is supposed to follow these two standards: truth and objectivity. The former deals with the true presentation of facts or information and the

latter can be understood as the method which is to be applied in the act of presenting truth. Though, the field of media as a whole can be related to these notions, here, to confine the discussion, I would refer to the news media or journalism. Though, the concepts are important but usually important are the challenges, which are posted against the practice of objective truths in journalism which are influenced by the philosophical laymen's and journalists' arguments. There are questions like- is everything which is known as true in collecting news is presented as news? How much investigation should be enough to claim that the collected data is a complete truth? How to guarantee the complete truth of an event, where the data is collected by general public or witnesses? Many philosophical debates like – does the truth represent the whole reality? The belief in the idea of truth is subjective to individuals or objective in itself? Is the notion of truth free from social and cultural context? Further, can there be an opinion and interpretation free democratic journalism? Is journalism a mere impartial passive spectator of events?

It is important to understand that there is a difference between a just or fair interpretation and biased manipulation of events. It is argued that the western media tries to manipulate the truths about terrorism by portraying a particular group as terrorist who bent upon destroying everything that is dear to the 'liberal' West.¹ There are thinkers who have questioned the notion of truth and objectivity in itself. It is said 'truth doesn't mean just one thing.' Wolf suggests that judgments presented as universal purporting to tell us what is real are disabling particulars. Regarding the status of truth, she is very clear that values are socially produced and therefore liable to partiality.² These questions can be very well applied in the field of journalism too. Considering these types of arguments, I would explain the notion of truth and objectivity and the

¹ Daya K. Thussu, "How media manipulates Truth about terrorism", *Economic and Political Weekly* 32 (1997): 264

² Jonathan Arac, "Truth", *Modern Language Association* 115 (2000): 1085-1087

challenges which are raised for practicing these notions in journalism and comment on the influence made by these challenges to ensure a democratic journalism.

2. TRUTH AND OBJECTIVITY IN PHILOSOPHY AND IN JOURNALISM

When we discuss about the philosophical analysis of the concepts of truth and objectivity, it turns out that these concepts have been very important, elusive and debatable among the philosophers, from traditional to contemporary era. There are variety of opinions and arguments to define truth and objectivity. Truth can be understood as related to reality, or depicting reality, or correspondence with facts and opposite of falsehood or misrepresentation of a thing or fact. Objectivity basically constitutes impartiality and universality. When these notions are discussed in the field of media ethics, it is basically understood as truthfulness and impartiality in the information disseminated by news media persons as news. Though these notions are important enough in a democratic media, these are not without questions and objections and these objections are very much influenced by the philosophical disagreement regarding the understanding of these notions. The philosophical arguments can be understood as falling into these three forms of attitude:

- *Truth as a great and excellent practise.*
- *Indifference towards truth and falsehood.*
- *Abandonment of the idea of truth.*

As explained by Allen, philosopher's value par excellence is judged by the Truth. For Heraclitus, "Thinking well is the greatest excellence and wisdom: to act and speak what is true, perceiving things according to their nature". Plato says, "Of all things good, truth holds first place among gods and men alike". This evaluation of truth distinguishes the philosopher's kind of seriousness from poetry, theology and dogmatism and it has been woven into the western philosophy from Heraclitus and Hegel³. Further, an indifference that might be termed "sophistic" to the difference between the true and false belief is implicit in Protagoras' "Man is the measure of all thing". This statement appears to imply that there is

no valuable difference between true and false in belief.⁴ Last but not the least is Nietzsche's view on truth as he mentions the maiden part of 'Far off Good and Evil' to "The preconception of the Philosophers", all philosophers have spoken with respect hitherto about that famed candour", he questions the ethics of this will. It is possible that we desire truth but why not fairly untruth uncertainty and ignorance? Why is Platonic "enlightenment" superior to the credulity of myth? Why is truth, if not unconditionally, then generally preferred over its many opposites like error, lie, myth, etc.?⁵

Though these arguments are very important and relevant philosophically, it appears ethically inappropriate to be indifferent or to abandon the idea of truth by a journalist because presenting and disseminating true information is the primary aim of news media. The notion of Heraclitus appears to be an ideal situation for news media persons but as an empirical exercise, it is also not free from exceptions as we'll discuss in the second section of this paper. Media is a practical field, keeping the empirical attitude in mind, I will briefly explain the theory of truth that, in my opinion, provides criteria to determine whether a data presented as news is true or not.

Correspondence Theory of Truth or Realism: it is based on the idea that the test of truth is uniformity with fact. According to the correspondence theory of truth, True beliefs "fit" with or it is, in fact, resemblance to the world, false beliefs do not have such agreement. In the quotidian lives, while appearing philosophical doubt common sense is not intertwined then we are all natural realists. To relying on a simple form of the realist perception of truth has been inclined by the practice of journalism which emphasizes the precise inspection of outermost events.⁶ There are different versions of the realism theory available to us such as the transcendental realism of Plato, Aristotle's realism, common-sense realism and so on. Since the metaphysical versions are not very suitable to journalism, I agree that the common-sense realism suits best to the journalism, which is defined by Alston as "A statement, proposition, belief is true if and only if what the statement says to be the case actually is the case". What can be truer that

³ Barry Allen, "Nietzsche's Question, What Good is Truth?" *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 9 (1992): 225

⁴ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁶ Lee Wilkins and Clifford G. Christians, *The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 72.

grass is green if it is the occurrence that grass is green?⁷ As I said earlier, this 'cop on' form of correspondence can be applied in the field journalism to assure and verify the truthfulness of information disseminated to audiences. For example, if a news channel claims that the average no. of girls has increased by 50% in schools as the result of efforts made by a particular government this claim can be tested by verifying it with the data of actual attendance of students.

It is said that, to investigating what is truth in general the concept or property the question is parted by realist theories for knowing about what is true. Despite the varieties of realism, the essence of realism is that our beliefs are made true by an objective check on my beliefs. Since journalism is a practical craft covering ordinary events, journalists lean to suppose that a plain realism and set empiricism are ample to instruct their ventures.⁸

Now, the notion of Objectivity is an exceedingly complex and debatable issue in philosophy as well as in journalism. Many philosophers like Berkeley, Kant, Kierkegaard and many others were concerned with debate between Objectivism and Subjectivism. In the field of journalism, the latter can be understood as presenting information with an implied opinion and interpretation and the former as a presentation of facts without opinion and interpretation. Objectivity is traditionally regarded as a virtue of a democratic journalism but now, with an emergence of new media and citizen journalism the idea of objectivity has become considerably questionable and impractical. In journalism, Traditional Objectivity is nothing but idea that reporters ought to provide plain and impartial information. The idea can be summed up by an imperative to "stick to the facts" and to avoid "taking sides". One of the earliest known uses of journalism "objectivity" is presented by Charles G. Ross as: "*News writing is objective to the last degree in the sense that the writer is not allowed to "editorialize"*".⁹ Further it is maintained that Objectivity can be declared as a method for generating fresh, faultless, factual reports and better self sufficient non-manual journalists while going through growing scepticism about the press. Objective reporting, it was argued, was crucial to egalitarian

democracies.¹⁰ Turning towards the legal enforcement of objectivity in journalism as a formal practice which can be understood by these two laws of journalism, ASNE (Code of 1923) said that an objective report exceeding anything was "subversive of a fundamental principle of a profession." Impartiality meant a "clear distinction between news reports and expression of opinion." On the notion truth and objectivity the code for Sigma Delta Chi says (1926) "Truth is our ultimate goal", "objectivity in reporting the news is another goal, which serve as a mark of an experienced professional. It is the standard of performance towards which we strive."¹¹

Therefore, it is clear that the practice of objectivity was introduced to demise the scepticism raised about the function of media to act as the watchdog over state authorities and to ensure that the news media is not acting as puppet of state authorities and other powerful groups, to ensure a democratic press. So, it cannot be denied that truth and objectivity are among the features which form the bedrock of an honest journalism. After understanding what is objectivity the next question is how it is to be practiced? Is this notion of objectivity practicable at all? Is there no need of opinion and expression in journalism? Is this curtailment of opinion not an infringement of freedom of expression? In order to shed light over these issues, in the next section, I am explaining the challenges faced by these perceptions of truth and objectivity.

3. CHALLENGES AND OBJECTIONS TO THE NOTION OF OBJECTIVITY AND TRUTH

It is argued that the journalists should present the true information in an objective manner but with the elusive nature the concept makes it difficult to be practised. In the contemporary world the rise of internet technology in the form of social media which has taken the face of citizen journalism is founded on concepts which are contrary to the idea of objectivity such as subjective interpretation, personal opinion and lack of professionalism. The basic arguments against these notions can be explained in these three arguments.

⁷ Ibid., 72.

⁸ Ibid., 72-73.

⁹ Ibid., 73.

¹⁰ Ibid., 75.

¹¹ Ibid., 73.

The postmodern philosophers have played a very important role in questioning the nature of objectivity and bringing out the hidden problems and implicit assumptions of the pre-established conception of objectivity. It is argued that all knowledge was "socially constructed". Rorty attacked a "Platonism" that held objective knowledge was a true reflection of nature. Lyotard and Baudrillard, the well known Post modernists interrogated the ideas of untied truth and philosophical "meta-narratives"-large historical narratives that establishes consciousness of human experience. Objectivity is sketched by Feminists as an efficacy of a patriarchal fraternity that "objectifies" women. Media scholars treat objectivity as the dogma of corporate media. Objectivity routines protected journalists from criticism.¹² These arguments make us rethink and reconsider the notion of truth and objectivity. For example, the arguments raised by feminists show that objectivity ignores the subjective bias and discriminations faced by women. This argument shows that by not considering the subjective details, it turns out to be insensitive towards humiliation and discrimination. Similar accusations can also be made within the field of journalism.

Besides these postmodernist and feminist objections, there are many journalism specific objections which question the practicability of objectivity. It is said that Objectivity expects a lot, as an intention for journalism and thus, objectivity is "folklore". It is possible that Objectivity can be unwanted because it compels writers to employ handicapped formats. Even outermost reporting of official facts is advocated by it. Readers with analysis and interpretation are not given by it. The other functions of the press such as commenting, campaigning, acting as public watchdog and forces a free press are snubbed by the Objectivity. "A democracy is better by a diverse, opinionated press where all views compete in a market place of ideas."¹³

It is true that the principle of objectivity deprives journalists from expressing their views. There are certain issues which demand sensitivity in order to disseminate the real problem, for e.g. Issues like racism, sexism, child labour, etc. Information relating them can be presented

as bare facts but if personal opinions are also added to highlight the problem, it will do no harm, but will sensitize the issue more in society. Further interpretation cannot be rooted out from presenting news completely. It is the needed for common audiences who does know about the technicalities and consequences of these changes. What ethically matters here is that interpretation should be corrected and just, and not be misrepresentations of facts. Hence, accuracy and fairness should be the guiding factors of interpretation. It is debated that affairs are complicated and required to be explained and interpreted, Henry Luce, who founded 'Time' magazine in 1920s, dismissed objectivity: "Show me a man who think he is objective and I'll show you a liar", he declared. More personal forms of media were produced by the emergence of T.V and radio where a strict objective style struggled.¹⁴ This shows how it became difficult to survive with unimpressive objective presentation in a competitive market of media which gained profit by exploring personal forms of media.

News is no more the monopoly of professional journalists; the wide range of social media has taken the face of citizen journalism. In the final decade of the 20th century, further support to interpretive or opinion journalism was given by online journalism online journalism. Almost anyone was allowed with a computer to publish their thoughts, commentaries, or photos online with millions of participants by new media technology. The rise of the unprofessional or untrained "citizen journalist" and "blogger" make news media democratic and dedicate their service to the diversity of voices in the public spheres. The chief values of new media, however, were (and are) different from the main values of traditional journalism ethics..¹⁵ The new media is the most important, interesting and visible challenge to the notion of objectivity but it does not mean that any of these forms of media is unimportant and should be ruled out completely but the sense of accuracy and fairness should be the guiding factors for both of them. Now, the idea of truth seems unquestionable and unobjectionable when we discuss about the media ethics, especially, news media ethics because presenting truth is the primary aim of journalists. But even this idea

¹² Ward, Stephen J. A. *Ethics and the Media: an Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 132-133

¹³ Wilkins, Lee and Clifford G. Christians, *The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics*, 75.

¹⁴ Ward, Stephen J.A. *Ethics and the Media: an Introduction*, 132.

¹⁵ Wilkins, Lee and Clifford G. Christians, *The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics*, 76.

is not untouched by objections and exceptions. Sissela Bok has made a very important remark regarding the decision for presentation of truth in media. In favouring the need to respect veracity and to tell the truth, she rejects Kant's absolutist position against any lie. She acknowledges a lie can be warranted in some situations, especially "those where innocent lives are at stake, and where only a lie can deflect the danger." She uses the example of kidnapping to justify her arguments. But the question of whether one may lie and still be ethical is a topic for a different discussion, for which Bok provides some excellent insights.¹⁶ Bok has pointed towards some exceptional cases where a lie can prevent the serious harm or damage done by a truth. This also points to an important dilemma often faced by journalists, i.e. whether to present everything as news they know about or to filter it? What is to be presented and how it is to be presented? How will the traditional news media compete with the new media? Can the profit seeking attitude by gaining TRPs can be kept aside while preparing for presenting news? For e.g. Even if a journalist knows some secrets of his/her state's strategies to ensure national security, it can be harmful to completely unveil these strategies in news, this makes the state vulnerable to more terrorist attacks and increases the level of insecurity. In cases like this, the rigorous attitude can be harmful, but these exceptional cases do not mean that journalists should not bother about truth telling and seeking true information. Truth was, is, and always will be among the primary aim of journalists to ensure a democratic journalism.

It is rightly pointed out by Gordon that this turns out to be a problem of fair, just and accurate decision making. He says, journalists and their editors get under considerable burden because of it, they feel burdened to determine which item of information is worthy enough to the public that, at least, justifies the risk of personal harm resulting from its publication. This can be considered a situational ethics issue, because it one's duty to carry the importance against the chances of harm. Further adding, it is important to know whether the information is so eminent to the topic that the story can't be released completely without this particular

item.¹⁷ In order to deal with these situational issues, Michael Kittross suggests the need to emphasize over the concepts of accuracy and fairness as more attainable than truth and objectivity.¹⁸ In order to sort out this decision making problem, Stephen Ward has advanced the reanalysis in the form of pragmatic truth and pragmatic objectivity (or multidimensional objectivity). He says: "pragmatic truth provides a goal for active, interpretive inquiry, working through the meditation of conceptual schemes. The goal is true interpretations, or interpretations that comes as close to truth as possible. It is the result of successful enquiry by enquires employing their best available conceptual schemes to interpret the data. Pragmatic objectivity aims towards a more nuanced approach to truth and objectivity. It believes that journalistic interpretations can also be subjected to criteria of evaluation. It attempts to evaluate the many dimensions of a story with a plurality of evaluative criteria."¹⁹

4.CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude this paper by saying that the challenges and objections do not completely rule out the concept of truth and objectivity, but a reanalysis is needed in order to ensure a democratic and just media. There are other ethical ideas which must be there to guide the action of ethical and just media. As Kittross said, accuracy and fairness, and other ethical ideas like a sense of social justice, a sense of responsibility, all these ideas work together to deal with the decision making problems in a just and ethical manner. The development of citizen journalism also shows that mere abstract ideals of concepts like objectivity cannot survive: the ideals must be practical and the consideration of fairness, accuracy and justice must help to realise the ethical standards in a practical field like news media or journalism. Ward's idea of pragmatic objectivity and pragmatic truth considers the above arguments too because fairness and accuracy are modes of evaluation and both these conceptions can provide a reanalysis of the traditional model which can't be abandoned, but only redefined by media persons and other thinkers. I

¹⁶ David A. Gordon et al., eds., *Controversies in Media Ethics* (New York: Addison - Wesley Longman Educational Publishers Inc., 1935), 73.

¹⁷ Ibid., 78.

¹⁸ Ibid., 72.

¹⁹ Ward, Stephen J.A. *Ethics and the Media: an Introduction*, 146-153.

think considering the above arguments can develop a practical method to practice these abstract ideals to truth and objectivity.

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