Opinion Newsrooms that move beyond 'objectivity' can build trust

By Leonard Downie Jr.

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Amid all the profound challenges and changes roiling the American news media today, newsrooms are debating whether traditional objectivity should still be the standard for news reporting. "Objectivity" is defined by most dictionaries as expressing or using facts without distortion by personal beliefs, bias, feelings or prejudice. Journalistic objectivity has been generally understood to mean much the same thing.

But increasingly, reporters, editors and media critics argue that the concept of journalistic objectivity is a distortion of reality. They point out that the standard was dictated over decades by male editors in predominantly White newsrooms and reinforced their own view of the world. They believe that pursuing objectivity can lead to false balance or misleading "bothsidesism" in covering stories about race, the treatment of women, LGBTQ+ rights, income inequality, climate change and many other subjects. And, in today's diversifying newsrooms, they feel it negates many of their own identities, life experiences and cultural contexts, keeping them from pursuing truth in their work.

Something like this occurred during my early years in the field in the 1960s and '70s. Under the leadership of a few editors, including especially The Post's Ben Bradlee, our generation of young journalists moved away from mostly unquestioning news coverage of institutional power. I was one of the editors on The Post's Watergate story, which spawned widespread national investigative reporting that continues today. Colleagues at The Post, other newspapers and broadcast networks reported skeptically on the unwinnable Vietnam War.

Throughout the time, beginning in 1984, when I worked as Bradlee's managing editor and then, from 1991 to 2008, succeeded him as executive editor, I never understood what "objectivity" meant. I didn't consider it a standard for our newsroom. My goals for our journalism were instead accuracy, fairness, nonpartisanship, accountability and the pursuit of truth.

Nonpartisanship was particularly important for a paper that was a national leader in covering politics and government. As the final gatekeeper for Post journalism, I stopped voting or making up my own mind about issues. As Bradlee had, I insisted on noninvolvement of Post journalists in political activity or advocacy of any kind, except voting. I also worked to make The Post newsroom more diverse, and encouraged everyone to have a voice in our decision-making.

Now, the mainstream news media is coping with economic and digital disruption, along with increasing competition from misinformation on cable television and the internet. Meanwhile, American society itself has been in upheaval over discrimination against and abuse of women; persistent racism and white nationalism; police brutality and killings; the treatment of LGBTQ+ people; income inequality and social problems; immigration and the treatment of immigrants; the causes and effects of climate change; voting rights and election inequality; and even the very survival of our democracy. Reporting reliably on all of this has critically challenged newsrooms, calling into question their diversity, values and credibility.

To better understand the changes happening now, I and former CBS News president Andrew Heyward, a colleague at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism, investigated the values and practices in mainstream newsrooms today, with a grant from the Stanton Foundation. What we found has convinced us that truth-seeking news media must move beyond whatever "objectivity" once meant to produce more trustworthy news. We interviewed more than 75 news leaders, journalists and other experts in mainstream print, broadcast and digital news media, many of whom also advocate such a change. This appears to be the beginning of another generational shift in American journalism.

Among the news leaders who told Heyward and me that they had rejected objectivity as a coverage standard was Kathleen Carroll, former executive editor of the Associated Press. "It's objective by whose standard?" she asked. "That standard seems to be White, educated, fairly wealthy. … And when people don't feel like they find themselves in news coverage, it's because they don't fit that definition."

More and more journalists of color and younger White reporters, including LGBTQ+ people, in increasingly diverse newsrooms believe that the concept of objectivity has prevented truly accurate reporting informed by their own backgrounds, experiences and points of view.

"There is some confusion about the value of good reporting versus point of view," said current Post executive editor Sally Buzbee, who noted that many journalists want to make a difference on such issues as climate change, immigration and education. "We stress the value of reporting," she said, "what you are able to dig up — so you (the reader) can make up your own mind."

“The consensus among younger journalists is that we got it all wrong,” Emilio Garcia-Ruiz, editor in chief of the San Francisco Chronicle, told us. “Objectivity has got to go.”

Garcia-Ruiz is among a vanguard of print, broadcast and digital news leaders who have increased their newsrooms’ diversity and created new avenues of communication among their reporters and editors to discuss issues and coverage. Some have assembled affinity groups or caucuses of staff members — for women, Blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans and LGBTQ+ people — and involved them in newsroom decisions.

At USA Today, editor in chief Nicole Carroll told us she seeks a diversity of staff participants, experiences and views in daily brainstorming sessions about news coverage. In these discussions, Carroll said, she and her editors “have found more value in diverse people’s lived experiences.” She has no prohibitions against staff members working on stories involving their identities or life experiences unless they demonstrate a strong bias.

At the Los Angeles Times, reporters and editors have many personal identities, explained editor Kevin Merida. “We find ways for our journalists to share more of that,” including first-person essays on the front page. He cited a Latina reporter’s story about the low vaccination rate in her community and a gay police reporter’s story about his own marriage and a potential U.S. Supreme Court threat to the legality of same-sex marriages.

Some local television stations owned by broadcast networks are trying to increase their coverage of real life in their communities. ABC-owned stations have, for example, sent journalists from recently created “race and culture content” teams into local neighborhoods. “We have to be able to use the voices of people whose neighborhoods we don’t normally go into and tell these stories from their vantage point,” Maxine Crooks, a vice president of ABC-owned stations, told us.

Claudia Milne, senior vice president of standards and practices for CBS News, pointed out that decisions about which news to cover can reflect an organization’s values, whether or not these are stated publicly, as The Post has done with its slogan, “Democracy Dies in Darkness.” Sometimes, the language used in news stories also can reflect such values.

“I don’t want to throw labels like ‘racist’ or ‘lying’ around willy-nilly; the evidence should be high,” Joseph Kahn, executive editor of the New York Times, told us. “But I think it’s true that, when the evidence is there, we should not default to some mealy-mouthed, so-called neutral language that some people see this as a falsehood, while others do not. When the evidence is there, we should be clear and direct with our audience that we don’t think there are multiple sides to this question, this is a falsehood. And the person repeating this falsehood over and over is guilty of lying.”

Newer, nonprofit news organizations often have launched with stated missions. The national digital news site the 19th, for example, aims to “elevate voices of women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community.”

Elizabeth Green, co-founder and chief executive of Chalkbeat, whose news websites across the country cover education, said it adopted antiracism as a core value. “We talk about it a lot,” she told us. “Is this what an antiracist news organization would do?”

Should journalists go outside their organizations to express their own opinions on social media or take part in advocacy or protests? In these rapidly changing times, it has become a difficult question to answer.

“You can’t be an activist and be a Times journalist at the same time,” Kahn said flatly. “All of our newsroom journalists should act as if they are representing the institution that they’re working for when they’re making public comments about major issues in the news.”

Noah Oppenheim, the president of NBC News, pointed out that there are many ways to influence people and leaders, and journalism is one of them. “Our position is that, if you choose journalism as your route, you are giving up some other options that are available to the general public,” he said.

At the Los Angeles Times, Merida is open to the possibility that reporters might cover issues on which they actively engage. “We’re trying to find that line,” he said. “We’re trying to create an environment in which we don’t police our journalists too much. Our young people want to be participants in the world.”

Both Heyward and I continue to believe that allowing journalists to express opinions on controversial social and political issues erodes the perception of their news organizations’ fairness and open-mindedness. As representatives of news outlets, they give up some personal rights to free expression. But some mission-driven operations might well choose to allow social media and political activity with their core values. It’s best for each newsroom to have a clear and consistent policy.

We urge news organizations to, first, strive not just for accuracy based on verifiable facts but also for truth — what Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward have called “the best obtainable version of the truth.” This means original journalism that includes investigating and reporting on all aspects of American life.

Newsroom staff diversity should reflect the communities being covered — not just gender and ethnic diversity but also diversity of economic, educational, geographic and social backgrounds. Inclusive newsrooms should encourage their journalists to speak up and be heard by their colleagues and leaders in making decisions about coverage.

News media should also be as transparent as possible about their newsgathering decisions and processes. When possible, they should hire or designate an editor to field and act on reader complaints and questions.

Responsible news organizations need to develop core values by having candid, inclusive and open conversations. Making these values public could well forge a stronger connection between journalists and the public.

One essential value for all Americans is the survival of democratic institutions, which are under attack on multiple fronts. Trustworthy journalism by a new generation of journalists and newsroom leaders can ensure that the news media continues to do its part to protect democracy.