

The Philosophy of Journalism

Julian Baggini

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Our debate on journalism and war has relied upon notions such as truth, objectivity and balance; but what are the philosophical foundations of these ideas? Here the editor of The Philosophers Magazine, against what you might expect, concurs with David Loyn's defence of the ideal of objectivity, and suggests that Loyn's critics have crossed the line from healthy scepticism to defeatist relativism.

If you want to look quaint and naïve in sophisticated circles, your best bet is to use the two words “truth” and “objectivity” without irony or scare-quotes. It is not surprising, therefore, that David Loyn's article “Witnessing the truth” has generated a number of critical responses.

Loyn advocates a rather old-fashioned sounding role for the journalist. “News is what's happening and we should report it with imagination and scepticism (where appropriate). Full stop.” He wants journalists to be objective and tell the truth. The cognoscenti must have choked on their sun-blush tomato *ciabattas*.

But the cognoscenti are wrong. While it is true (rather than “true”) that we have to reject certain naïve and simplistic understandings of what truth and objectivity are, both remain perfectly coherent ideas and for the journalist, proper ideals.

The problem with many actors in the debate over truth and objectivity in the media is that they slide too easily

from a healthy scepticism about the possibility of knowing the truth and full objectivity to a defeatist form of relativism. We need to be sophisticated about how we understand truth and objectivity, without being dismissive of either.

To show just how difficult it is to avoid sliding from healthy scepticism to unhealthy relativism, I want to first look at how Loyn himself describes his commitment to truth and objectivity. Having shown the problems that emerge, I'll then try and sketch a way out of the quagmire, rescuing truth and objectivity from the relativists without resorting to simplistic idealism.

Of course there is no truth

Although Loyn sets out to defend the journalist's commitment to truth and objectivity, he feels the need to make it clear that he doesn't buy into the idea that objective truth is possible. In doing so he reveals the confusions such a position entails.

“There cannot of course be a single absolute truth,” he wrote. Note the “of course”. This is surely what any sophisticated person believes. But it must simply be a *belief* – of course – because to claim to *know* would surely suggest there is an objective truth to be known.

He continues, “anyone who has ever interviewed two observers of the same incident knows that there is no perfect account.” Yet if there is (of course) no single absolute truth, how can anyone “know” anything? Knowledge and truth come together. If there is no truth there is no knowledge, only a variety of opinions, some of which we have more reason to believe than others.

Loyn seems to sense this and wants to resist it. To do so, he distinguishes between the truth and the pursuit of the truth. “Once we step away from *pursuing* the truth [his emphasis], then we are lost in an area of moral relativism which threatens the whole business of reporting.”

But this compromise is unsustainable. The pursuit of truth is impossible if there is no truth to pursue. Loyn seems to be suggesting that we have to act in a kind of bad faith, accepting that there is no truth but acting as though there is, in order to prevent a lapse into relativism. But if relativism is the true view (ignoring for the moment the problems of describing a denial of the possibility of truth as true) why is it so important to avoid lapsing into it?

Loyn maintains this unsustainable combination of denying truth and objectivity on the one hand while trying to hang on to a surrogate version of it with the other. Describing one British and one Russian journalist in Kosovo, he writes, “There is no objective truth – but both would search for objectivity in their own terms, and in the terms understood by their viewers, listeners or readers. And that objectivity has to remain a goal, the only sacred goal we have.”

Yet the very phrase “objectivity in their own terms” is an oxymoron. It’s like saying “what’s objective for you might not be objective for me”. Like “what’s true for you may not be true for me,” this is just a classic formulation of relativism.

Loyn, in his desire not to be seen to be committed to outmoded ideas about truth and objectivity, thus concedes too much. The logic of his acceptance that

“there cannot of course be a single absolute truth” and that “there is no objective truth” is the slide into just the kind of *de facto* relativism he abhors.

This plays into his critics hands. Hence Jake Lynch can upbraid him, saying, “Those who inspect the news from the outside, however, see things rather differently. They frequently complain that this clarion call for ‘truth’ begs the most important questions. There are many truths, they will say, and many stones [to be unturned].” Given what he has conceded, how could Loyn disagree? Similarly, Loyn’s argument simply invites the question of Des Freedman’s piece: “Witnessing Whose Truth?”

Objectivity, a matter of degree

Yet I think that Loyn’s core message is correct and his critics, though making many pertinent points, make too much of the impossibility of objectivity. To sort out the confusions of both sides, we could do worse than bring in two of our most important living philosophers: Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel.

Nagel, in his admirably lucid *The View From Nowhere*, explains what the sceptics have got right when they doubt the possibility of objective knowledge. The title is deliberately paradoxical. There can be no view from nowhere: every view has to be from somewhere, even if a god’s eye view. So if by “objective” we mean some kind of perspectiveless perspective, we cannot have it.

But this is not the only way to understand objectivity. Nagel explains his alternative by contrasting it with subjectivity. The purely subjective is that viewpoint which is entirely determined by the particular perspective of the individual. What happens when we get a less subjective, and hence more objective, viewpoint is that we expand our frames of reference and thus gain dimensions of understanding that go beyond our own perceptions of the world. Hence the physics of light wavelengths and reflection is much more objective than our perception of colour, because it is a mode of understanding that transcends our particular viewpoints. It is understanding that does not depend on experiencing the world as we do. A blind person can, for example, understand the physics of light as well as a sighted person.

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On Nagel's view, then, objectivity is a matter of degree and is about minimising the extent to which our beliefs and accounts depend upon our particular localised and subjective viewpoints. So while it is true that there is no pure objectivity, one can always try to get a more objective viewpoint. (I suspect this is what Loyn is trying to get at when he talks about the pursuit of truth being worthwhile even though there is no single absolute truth.)

How does this relate to the journalist's job? It shows how the idea that journalists should be striving for objectivity is neither anachronistic nor incoherent. Indeed, objectivity is precisely what they should be aiming for. They need to make sure their reporting removes as much as is possible of the particular, local perspectives they start out with.

Sceptics who retort that such biases can never be fully removed are simply stating a trite truism. Of course they can't, and that is why the ideal of pure objectivity – a “view from nowhere” – is chimerical. But that in no way undermines the idea that maximising objectivity is an achievable and worthwhile aim.

Nagel's account also has the merit of explaining how practices such as “peace-reporting” are bound to be less objective than alternatives, since they commit themselves to the adoption of particular perspectives, in effect giving up on the ideal of stripping away as much of these as possible.

Not Truth but truthfulness

While Nagel takes care of objectivity, Bernard Williams can deal with truth. Williams, in his *Truth and Truthfulness*, diagnoses what he sees as an unsustainable tension between our desire for truthfulness and our scepticism about truth.

Truthfulness, as an intellectual virtue, is something surely every reporter prizes, being “a readiness against being fooled and eagerness to see through appearances to the real structure and motives that lie behind them.” This could read as a perfect description of what is admired by many in the work of Noam Chomsky or Robert McChesney, just the thinkers Freedman invokes as part of his argument against the idea that there is an objective truth to be discovered. Truthfulness is cherished while truth is dismissed.

Williams, like Nagel, is keen to identify what the sceptics have got right. In this case, the real insight is that for anything that happens, there is no such thing as *the* true account. This is because any account has to be selective, not for any sinister reasons, but because you can't describe any event coherently without leaving out some details, such as the colours of the clothes worn by the protagonists. Nevertheless, there are many true accounts and they are made true by the fact that they comprise true descriptions of what happened.

If we add to this the requirement that the account be truthful, we can now see how truth in reporting is an attainable and just aspiration. The job of the news reporter is not just to tell us a string of true facts, since

by what they leave out, for example, they may nonetheless mislead us. They must also be committed to truthfulness, judging what facts need to be brought to our attention in order that we can “see through appearances to the real structure and motives that lie behind them.” Certainly this requires judgement and skill and there is more than one truthful account that can be given of

any event. But that does not mean some accounts are not more truthful than others and that a news reporter cannot aspire to be as truthful as possible.

The reporter's role

These are the reasons why I think Loyn is basically correct to defend the ideal of the objective reporter who is committed to telling us “what's happening [...] with imagination and scepticism (where appropriate).” Those who think this cannot be done are, to my mind, guilty of overstating the impossibility of truth and objectivity. There is no objective “view from nowhere” from which a journalist can report, but she can strive to eliminate as much partiality from her perspective as is possible in order to report objectively. There is no such thing as “the one true account” of what happens, but there is a world of difference between accounts that are built from truths and those that are built from lies, and between those that exhibit the virtues of truthfulness and those that don't.

We can and should defend truth and objectivity in news reporting, with the sophistication required to answer the legitimate doubts of the sceptic but without sliding from truisms about the limits of knowledge to misleading myths about relativism.

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Julian Baggini is editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine* and author of several books on philosophy, including *Making Sense: Philosophy behind the headlines* (Oxford University Press).

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