

Objectivity in Journalism: A Search and a Reassessment

By Richard Streckfuss

Journalists did not begin to use the word "objective" to describe their work until the 1920s. The term originally represented a rigorous reporting procedure growing out of the broader cultural movement of scientific naturalism. Rather than serve as a vehicle of neutrality, the objective method was seen as an antidote to the emotionalism and jingoism of the conservative American press.

►When journalistic objectivity is attacked today for "producing not neutrality but superficiality"¹ for forcing reporters to balance "the remarks of a wise men with those of a fool"², the writers are flaying but a shadow of the original concept. During its brief moment in the sun, objectivity was viewed not as something simple-minded and pallidly neutral, but as a demanding, intellectually rigorous procedure holding the best hope for social change.

In today's attacks on objectivity, no one seems to have sought out its birthplace or checked into its parentage. That may be because writers have assumed that objectivity equates with neutrality. The assumption is understandable. As used today, the two terms probably are interchangeable.

But *objectivity* once meant more than mere neutrality, as can be seen by going back to the 1920s and watching its birth. A general reading of the trade magazines, *Newspaperdom* and *The Journalist*, from the 1890s into the 20th century demonstrates that the word *objectivity* was not yet in the vocabulary of workaday journalists or media commentators. Instead, they used the words *unbiased* and *uncolored*. To one interested in journalistic currents and practices, the omission raised questions: When did journalists begin to apply the word *objective* to their work? What meaning did they give it? What arguments did they make for its adoption as a journalistic norm?

Those questions led to a search for the word. The results were rewarding, if somewhat puzzling. The reward came in joining a vigorous debate of the 1920s on problems of journalism and problems of democracy. If one listens to the voices that first called for the objective approach to news writing, one learns that modern critics are missing the message. Whatever objectivity may mean now, it had a particular and important meaning at its outset, a meaning created to cope with

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new information and new conditions. Those conditions, though now mostly ignored, are with us still. To review the birth of objectivity and the conditions that brought it forth, then, is to discuss present problems of democracy and journalism, but from the different perspective of hindsight.

Objectivity was founded not on a naive idea that humans could be objective, but on a realization that they could NOT. To compensate for this innate weakness, advocates in the 1920s proposed a journalistic system the subjected itself to the rigors of the scientific method.

That much seemed clear, and will be developed. The puzzle came in a failure to find thoughtful, formal and full debate on that idea. The search uncovered no articles, either in trade or scholarly journals, with titles such as "The Case for Objectivity in Reporting" or "Objectivity Defined." Its birth could be noted clearly, but its development remained clouded. By the time the word *objectivity* came into general use among journalists, it had lost its specific meaning.

This essay will report on the search for the word, give its definition, show its birthplace and, more importantly, discuss the affairs that spawned it.

The search revealed that the words *objective* and *objectivity* were not used with any regularity until late in the 1920s. The search encompassed all of the published proceedings of the annual meetings of the American Society of Newspaper Editors from its founding in 1923 into the 1930s. In sessions dealing with matters of fairness, balance and the like, the word *objectivity* did not appear at all until 1928.³

Nor is the word to be found in any of the *Journalism Bulletins* (later renamed *Journalism Quarterly*) published between 1924 and 1929, nor in the titles of any of the numerous theses listed there.

In *The Conscience of a Newspaper*, published in 1925, professor Leon Nelson Flint includes codes of ethics from 19 news organizations. Almost all of the codes had been adopted since World War I. None contains the words *objective* or *objectivity*.⁴ Nor does Flint himself ever use the words in his text. Neither does Casper S. Yost, editorial editor of the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, in a 1924 book on journalistic ethics, *The Principles of Journalism*.⁵

Of four textbooks on news reporting published in the 1920s, three did not include the words, but a fourth, by Gerald Johnson, contains the line, "It is easier to pass the buck if one assumes the objective view of news."⁶ Others checked were: Walter Williams and F.L. Martin, *The Practice of Journalism* (Columbia, Mo.: Lucas Bros. Publishers, 1922); Talcott Williams, *The Newspaperman* (New York: Charles Scribner, vocational series, 1922); and Dix Harwood, *Getting and Writing the News* (New York: Doubleday Doran & Company, 1927).

In this general omission of the words *objective* and *objectivity*, there is one notable exception, a book that apparently was the first to define

1. George S. Hage and others, *New Strategies for Public Affairs Reporting* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 16.

2. Don R. Pember, 2nd ed., *Mass Media in America* (Chicago and other cities: Science Research Associates, Inc. 1977), p. 94.

3. Vernon Nash, "Chinese Journalism," *Problems of Journalism: Proceedings of the American Society of Newspaper Editors*, Vol. VIII (1928), p. 122.

4. Nelson Flint, *Conscience of a Newspaper* (New York: D. Appleton & Company), 1925, p. 427-61.

5. Casper S. Yost, *The Principles of Journalism* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1924).

6. Gerald W. Johnson, *What Is News?* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926).

objective reporting in a specific way. The author was Nelson Antrim Crawford, and his work will be discussed at length later.

In turning to the definition of the word, it is important to understand that objectivity was a child of its time and a creature of its culture. It was inevitable that it should be discussed in the 1920s, the question only was, with how much vigor and to what result? For the decade of the 1920s saw the flourishing of scientific naturalism, a school of thought holding that there are no *a priori* truths, that attempts to explain the universe in metaphysical terms foster not understanding but ignorance and superstition, and that only knowledge gained by scientific investigation is valid.⁷

As social scientists talked excitedly about harnessing the scientific methodology to their subject matter, it was inevitable that some thinkers would urge harnessing the new social science techniques to journalism. The term *objectivity* described this effort. In its original sense, *objectivity* meant finding the truth through the rigorous methodology of the scientist.

Such methodology was the central tenet of faith of the social scientists of the 1920s. It is inscribed in stone over the entryway of the social science building at the University of Chicago, dedicated in 1929: "When you cannot measure your knowledge is meager and unsatisfactory."⁸ And it was written on paper by a whole school of new social scientists: "Science begins when man learns to measure his world or any part of it by definite objective standards."⁹ This, as will be seen, was the approach urged for journalism by some significant figures in the 1920s. They did not see the system as sterile; instead it was viewed as a counter to dangerous forces that threatened to undermine democracy, both in its practice and its theoretical framework.

The cultural attitudes and forces that together created the call for an objective journalism can be summarized as follows:

—A distrust of human nature and of people's inclination to gather facts before making judgments. This doubt stemmed from the work in psychology by men like John B. Watson and Sigmund Freud.

—A realization that even if the humans were fact-gatherers and users, propagandists were manipulating facts and clouding issues, making the "facts" delivered by the press a tainted commodity, thus tainting public opinion.

—A realization that if people did not, in actual practice, use facts in making judgments and if they failed to get a trustworthy supply of facts anyway, then democracy as traditionally defined was deeply flawed: The omniscient citizen-ruler was a myth, as was the idea that the truth would win out in the end.

—A belief that the scientific method, applied to human affairs (including journalism) via the comparatively new social sciences (chiefly sociology, psychology, political science and economics) could open the door to human betterment.

Giving urgency to all the foregoing was the jingoistic, America-first mood of the country and its press just after World War I. Objectivity

7. The definition is taken from Edward A. Purcell, Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism & the Problem of Value* (The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, Ky., 1973), p. 3.

8. Purcell, *ibid.*, p. 31.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 36, citing L.L. Bernard, "The Concept of Progress: III The Scientific Phase." *Social Forces*, 4 (September 1925), p. 36.

was an antidote to what liberals saw as newspaper emotionalism and sensationalism.¹⁰

An expansion of the points just enumerated will help in understanding how objectivity became the hope of many intellectuals of the 1920s. Intellectual historians say the onset of World War I chastened the optimistic outlook of the intellectual progressives, who, in its aftermath, began to focus on the darker side of the facts being uncovered by the scientists and the social scientists. The assumptions of the progress of the human race fell before the new ideas.

Psychology stood at the forefront. John B. Watson, the father of the behavioral school of psychology, was a major influence. He denied that man had an inner nature, let alone any divine spark or soul. Watson defined the hollow man, one who is merely a product of his culture.¹¹

Add to this view the ideas of Freud: Man was at center irrational; his actions must be explained not by reason but by his unconscious drives.¹² As a young intellectual, Walter Lippmann (who will play the central role in this essay) was excited by the ideas of Freud, but saw at once that such a view of human motivation challenged some basic ideas of man-as-voter. On reading Freud in 1912, Lippmann wrote to a friend, "Its political applications have hardly begun, though there are a few stray articles here and there."¹³

With Lippmann as one of the leaders, more and more articles and books were to come, including many dealing with the problems raised for democratic theory and the role of the press as informer and shaper of public opinion. For the findings of the psychologists — and the gradual secularization of public debates — had undermined the philosophical foundation supporting the First Amendment. The concept of free speech had rested on a notion that, in the end, truth will win out over falsehood. In 1644, John Milton had been among the first to say it: "Let her (Truth) and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter."¹⁴

By the time of the American Revolution, this durable quality of truth was a given, and it had so remained into the 20th Century. A free press *should* be allowed so that truth could get into the field of battle, and a free press *could* be allowed because the falsehood that would certainly enter too would be too weak to cause harm. But if the ideas of the psychologists were valid, then most of the assumptions underlying the belief were invalid.

To Milton, for instance, Truth came to earth directly from God, and its discovery by men was part of God's plan ("Truth indeed came once into the world with her Divine Master"¹⁵). Once thinkers discarded the idea of a divine plan for mankind, that much of the argument became dust.

In Milton's world, also, truth was strong because humans were both rational animals and moral ones. Thus, they were able to intuit moral

10. A good popular account of the intellectual currents of the 1920s is found in *The Nervous Generation: American Thought, 1917-1930* by Roderick Nash (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1970). In particular, see Chapter Three.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

13. Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), p. 46.

14. John Milton, *Areopagitica*, John W. Jales, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1875, Impression of 1964), pp. 51-52.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

truths and rationally determine other ones. While Milton's sectarian view of religion faded with time, the idea of divinely given intuition did not. For instance, traces of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism ("We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth..."¹⁶) can be found in a 1922 editorial by the famous Kansas journalist, William Allen White: "...folly will die of its own poison and wisdom will survive... It is the proof of man's kinship with God."¹⁷ But by the definition of the intellectuals of the 1920s, such ideas did not stand the test of objective analysis. The human race was neither allied to the truth through a kinship with God nor was a fully rational fact-gatherer. Instead, human beings saw things as they were stereotyped for them by their culture, and were moved to make conclusions based on their emotions, prejudices and desires. Thus truth was no better armed than falsehood in any public grappling. Its status was summarized with cynical certitude by psychology professor Albert T. Poffenberger of Columbia University in 1925. "The truth," he wrote, "is not a primary factor in determining belief." Instead, belief is determined by "feeling and emotion" and by "desire." "We believe what we want to believe," he concluded.¹⁸

In his 1922 book, *Public Opinion*, Lippmann applies that belief to the American system of government:

It is no longer possible, for example, to believe in the original dogma of democracy; that the knowledge needed for the management of human affairs comes up spontaneously from the human heart... It has been demonstrated that we cannot rely on intuition, conscience, or the accidents of casual opinion if we are to deal with the world beyond our reach.¹⁹

Without such reliance that truth will win out in a free marketplace of ideas, attention focused on the market itself. And there, the intellectuals found that the contents were tainted by propaganda. During World War I, propagandists, harnessing the new psychology, had been active — and successful — in marshaling public opinion. That success "had brought psychologists, political scientists, and sociologists to a new emphasis on human irrationality and the manipulative procedures employed by dominant social groups."²⁰

In 1922, Lippmann observed that "persuasion has become a self-conscious art and a regular organ of popular government." This new "knowledge of how to create consent," he wrote, "will alter every political calculation and modify every political premise."²¹

The fear that industrial and government publicists, working through a press with a capitalistic bias, were poisoning the wells of information pervaded media discussion in the 1920s. John Dewey, probably the leading intellectual of the time, stated flatly that through the publicity agent "sentiment can be manufactured by mass methods for almost any person or any cause."²²

16. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, text established by Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 23.

17. William Allen White, "To an Anxious Friend," *Emporia (Kansas) Gazette, Modern Essays of Various Types*, Charles A. Cockayne, ed. (New York: Charles E. Merrill Company, 1927), p. 315-316.

18. Albert T. Poffenberger, *Psychology in Advertising* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1925), p. 544-545.

19. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, Paperback Edition, Second Printing, 1961), p. 248-249.

20. Purcell, *op. cit.*, p.25.

21. Walter Lippmann, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

22. John Dewey, "The United States, Incorporated," *Essays in Contemporary Civilization*, C.W. Thomas, ed. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1931), p. 9.

Truly, the view of the 1920s had moved a long way from the Jeffersonian view of the omniscient citizen, the one who could and would gather facts and who was further graced with the mysterious (and probably God-given) ability to intuit truth. Now the citizen had no way of intuiting truth — he was only a creature of his culture. He was not a fact gatherer and user. Propagandists, using symbols, could play on his emotional nature. And publicists could control and taint what few facts he might use in arriving at an opinion.

As Lippmann wrote in 1922, "The practice of democracy has turned a corner."²³ The concerns were not academic ones: They were spurred by the Red Scare of 1919 and 1920. In a setting of labor unrest and anarchist violence, the country reacted with "hysteria and superpatriotism."²⁴ In a single night in 1920, the government arrested more than 4,000 persons suspected of being communists.²⁵

In response, Lippmann — who termed the period "a reign of terror"²⁶ and "the blackest reaction our generation has known"²⁷ — wrote a set of essays central to this study. For those essays, published under the title, *Liberty and the News*, contained the blueprint for objective reporting. In them, Lippmann concentrated on press performance, not on the competence of the readers. Concerned that the press was whipping up a jingoistic, right-wing fever in the country, Lippmann wrote that "under the influence of headlines and panicky print, the contagion of unreason can easily spread through a settled community."²⁸

Lippmann argued that public opinion is formed by propaganda created by special interest groups and that government "tends to operate by the impact of controlled opinion upon administration."²⁹ Thus, the sources forming public opinion must be accurate. Making them so was "the basic problem of democracy."³⁰

Everything else depends upon it. Without protection, against propaganda, without standards of evidence, without criteria of emphasis, the living substance of all popular decision is exposed to every prejudice and to infinite exploitation.³¹

He then sets down the training for a new sort of journalist. In doing so he forms what is apparently the original definition of objective journalism.

With this increase of prestige must go a professional training in journalism in which the ideal of objective testimony is cardinal. The cynicism of the trade needs to be abandoned, for the true patterns of the journalistic apprentice are not the slick persons who scoop the news, but the patient and fearless men of science who have labored to see what the world really is. It does not matter that the news is not susceptible of mathematical statement. In fact, just because news is complex and slippery, good reporting requires the exercise of the highest of scientific virtues. They are the habits of ascribing no more credibility to a statement than it warrants, a nice sense of the probabilities, and a keen understanding of the quantitative importance of particular facts.³²

23. Walter Lippmann, *Ibid.*, p. 248.

24. Steel, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

28. Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), p. 56.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 62-63.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

Lippmann's use of the words *objective*, *science*, and *scientific* are significant. Adapting the scientific method to human affairs — including journalism — was central to the thought of the decade. As Lippmann wrote, "Only the discipline of a modernized logic can open the door to reality."³²

"Reality," to Lippmann, meant radical social change. Objective reporting, as he envisioned it, would not create a passive justification for the status quo, as is often assumed now. Those advancing the idea of applying scientific methods to human affairs — in all areas, not just journalism—were political liberals. They attempted to create a system of values using the scientific method, borrowing from the philosophy of pragmatism expounded by William James and its variant, instrumentalism, set forth by John Dewey.

Dewey argued that the practical consequences of believing in an idea should determine its value.³³ The concept — an important one to grasp if one is to understand the impetus behind the creation of the theory of press objectivity—was stated well by Harold D. Lasswell, a leading political scientist:

...those who commit themselves to human dignity, not indignity, are concerned with operating in the present in ways that increase the probability that coming events will conform to their preference profile... If a large degree of freedom of communication is postulated as a long-run goal (as a partial realization of human dignity), scientific work can proceed by searching for the "myths" and "techniques" that work for or against freedom. All the available tools of theory formation, and of data gathering and processing, can be mobilized to accomplish the task.³⁴

If one applies that same principle to "scientific" journalism, it becomes both value-laden and fact-based. Lippmann had addressed *Liberty and the News* to those embracing "organized labor and militant liberalism."³⁵ He urged them to pay less attention to publishing "gallant little sheets expressing particular programmes"³⁶ and instead to join forces in creating a news service that would give the facts. "We shall advance...when we have learned to seek the truth, to reveal it and publish it; when we care more for that than for the privilege of arguing about ideas in a fog of uncertainty."³⁷

This belief³⁸ in the power of objective fact to bring about social change is echoed in the closing passage of a 1924 book on journalistic ethics:

The process of attaining this condition of affairs (of testing opinions rather than preconceiving them) may not be a short one; it will doubtless seem unnecessarily long to those who believe that righteousness will immediately triumph if but given the aid of a few new laws or at most a new social and eco-

32. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

33. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 6 (Micropadia), (Chicago, etc. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1988), p. 334.

34. Harold Lasswell, in 1969 Introduction, "Propaganda and Promotional Activities, an Annotated Bibliography," Lasswell, Casey, and Smith, eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1935, reissued 1969), p. xviii-ix.

35. Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, p. 101.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

38. By 1922, when *Public Opinion* was published, Lippmann had lost some of his faith in the power of fact to shape public opinion. Taking a Freudian view, Lippmann questioned the fact-gathering and fact-using abilities of citizen-governors, and pointed out that the complexities of the modern world made it impossible for even the best fact-gatherer to be well versed enough on issues to make sound decisions. Even so, his thoughts on the way journalists should do their job did not change.

onomic system. Yet, when one considers the progress made in the natural sciences in a relatively brief time against great odds, one may well wonder if perchance the accomplishment of similar ends in journalism may not come sooner than is commonly expected."

The author of that passage, Nelson Antrim Crawford, was an early proponent of harnessing the scientific method to journalism. The head of the Department of Industrial Journalism at Kansas State Agricultural College, Crawford published a book titled *The Ethics of Journalism* in 1924. The citation above is typical of his approach. He quotes liberally from Lippmann's works (seven citations and numerous segments under "recommended reading"). His second major source appears to be *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War* by W. Trotter.

One more citation from Crawford will round out the picture of the new journalism, as seen by a professor:

In a school maintaining professional ideals, there must also be such a curriculum as will still further develop the natural intelligence and objective-mindedness of prospective journalists... It must supply the scientific basis for understanding the vast technical developments of contemporary civilization. It must furnish training in what constitutes evidence, in order that the future reporter may not be misled by intentional or unintentional attempts to deceive him."

A few other professors picked up the theme. In a 1927 article, for instance, Eric W. Allen, journalism dean at the University of Oregon, wrote:

If journalism means anything more than a mere trade and a technique, it must be based upon some depth of understanding. If it is, or is to become, a real profession — one of the learned professions — the thing the competent journalist must understand is the scientific bases of current life... The chance for our young senior to integrate his knowledge into a social philosophy, to use it as material for developing habits of accurate thinking, and to acquire the technique of bringing scientific principles into his daily handling of current events is entirely lacking."

The new ideas that newspapers should downplay emotionalism, cut out opinion and adopt the scientific method were spread to working journalists in a variety of ways. For illustration, the following messages were delivered to editors attending the annual meetings of the American Society of Newspaper Editors between 1925 and 1930.

1925. Lippmann himself addressed the group, as did a magazine editor who said that the newspaper practice of having a "policy" (a stated platform of its beliefs and aims) had done "more harm than good." He charged that too many editors approached their jobs "from the point of view of the moralist rather than the point of view of the engineer or the scientist."

1926. A Washington correspondent for the London Times told editors that their readers are "emotional rather than intellectual."

1928. Famed attorney Clarence Darrow stated that a human being

39. Nelson Antrim Crawford, *The Ethics of Journalism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1924), p. 178.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.

41. Eric W. Allen, "Journalism as Applied Social Science," *Journalism Bulletin*, Vol. IV (March 1927), p. 1-7.

42. Glenn Frank, untitled remarks, *Problems of Journalism: Proceedings of the American Society of Newspaper Editors*, Vol. III (1925), p. 150.

43. Wilmont H. Lewis, "The Political Job of Old World Newspapers and How They Do It," *Problems of Journalism: Proceedings of the American Society of Newspaper Editors*, Vol. IV, p. 48.

"is nothing but an organism that acts and reacts according to the stimuli applied."⁴⁴ And a Methodist minister, saying that his generation wished to be free of dogmatism, said that the past's great editors, such as Horace Greeley, "could not hold their reading public today any more than... Jonathan Edwards and Peter Cartwright could retain their parishioners."⁴⁵

1929. A Kansas editor and lawmaker, Sen. Arthur Capper, told editors, "It is not the time for dogmatism or the closed mind. The old-time editorial writer, however effective for another age, would not fit well."⁴⁶

1930. Ray Lyman Wilbur, secretary of the interior, told editors that in a complex, technological world, decisions must be made on the basis of fact, not emotion. "The question is how are we going to train the people of a democracy so that they will look to the man who knows for decisions, rather than simply to someone who yells the loudest..."⁴⁷

Apparently, the repeated message had an effect. By 1931, Walter Lippmann, who had been serving as editor of the *New York World*, thought that journalism had changed dramatically — and in his opinion for the better. Writing in the *Yale Review*, he called the move toward objectivity a "revolution:"

The most impressive event of the last decade in the history of newspapers has been the demonstration that the objective, orderly, and comprehensive presentation of news is a far more successful type of journalism to-day than the dramatic, disorderly, episodic type.⁴⁸

The latter type, Lippmann argued, made newspapers the slave of the reader, adapting copy to reach the highest circulation figures. Because the new type of journalism seeks "the approximation to objective fact, it is free also of subserviency to the whims of the public."

In the following passage, Lippmann sums up his idea of objective journalism, his hopes for it and the means for achieving it:

The strength of this type of journalism will, I think, be cumulative because it opens the door to the use of trained intelligence in newspaper work. *The older type of popular journalism was a romantic art dependent largely on the virtuosity of men like Bennett, Hearst, and Pulitzer. It succeeded if the directing mind had a flair for popular success; it failed if the springs of genius dried up. The new objective journalism is a less temperamental affair, for it deals with solid realities...*⁴⁹ I do not know much about the schools of journalism, and I cannot say, therefore, whether they are vocational courses designed to teach the unteachable art of the old romantic journalism or professional schools aiming somehow to prepare men for the new objective journalism. I suspect, however, that schools of journalism in the professional sense will not exist generally until journalism has been practiced for some time as a profession. It has never yet been a pro-

44. Clarence Darrow, "This is What I Don't Like About the Newspapers," *Problems of Journalism: Proceedings of the American Society of Newspaper Editors*, Vol. VI, p. 63.

45. Ralph Sockman, "This is What I Don't Like About the Newspapers," *Problems of Journalism: Proceedings of the American Society of Newspaper Editors*, Vol. VI, p. 77.

46. Arthur Capper, "Is the Editorial Page on the Way Out?" *Problems of Journalism: Proceedings of the American Society of Newspaper Editors*, Vol. VII, p. 69.

47. Raymond Wilbur, "What Changing Conditions Confront Us," *Problems of Journalism: Proceedings of the American Society of Newspaper Editors*, Vol. VIII (1930), p. 140-42.

48. Walter Lippmann, "Two Revolutions in the American Press," *Yale Review*, 20:433-441 (March 1931), p. 439.

49. Italics added. That Lippmann was seeking to harness the scientific method to journalism can be heard in the way his words in the italicized segment echo the writings of the man often called the father of the scientific method, Sir Francis Bacon: "But the course I propose . . . leaves but little to the acuteness and strength of wits, but places all wits and understandings nearly on a level. For as in the drawing of a straight line or a perfect circle, much depends on the steadiness and practice of the hand, if it be done by aim of hand only, but if with the aid of rule of compass, little or nothing." *Novum Organum*, from *The Works of Francis Bacon*, James Spedding, et al., editors (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1869), p. 89.

profession. It has been at times a dignified calling, at others a romantic adventure, and then again a servile trade. But a profession it could not begin to be until modern objective journalism was successfully created, and with it the need of men who would consider themselves devoted, as all the professional ideally are, to the service of truth alone.⁵⁰

Clearly, Lippmann believed that journalistic practice had changed dramatically since the end of World War I, and that the concept of scientific objectivity was a chief agent of that change. It is difficult to assess the accuracy of that view. Certainly change had occurred as journalists struggled to adapt from the Progressive Era with its moral certitude to an era when, in the words of Senator Capper, "uncertainties have replaced certainties" and "diversity and complexity have succeeded general optimism on religious, political, social, industrial, moral and economic questions."⁵¹

In measuring the change, it must be remembered that when the decade began, many papers still aligned themselves with a political party and that almost all newspapers had policies — issue positions that were to be reflected in the news columns. As one writer and editor of that day observed, when Pulitzer's *New York World* took on an issue like the formation of the League of Nations, "Every department was called into action."⁵² And Henry Watterson, editor of *Louisville Courier-Journal*, wrote, "The leading dailies everywhere stand for something. They are rarely without aspirations."⁵³

As for party affiliation, as late as 1931, in an article titled "The Party Flag Comes Down," an author writes in wonder, "How strange a day it will be when this, of all nations, finds the partisan newspaper the exception and no longer the rule! That day is coming though."⁵⁴

With such examples, it can be shown that journalism norms were changing during the decade covered in this essay, and that the cultural climate had played a part in creating them. But an economic force was at work as well. It was in the 1920s that merger of newspapers began in earnest. Whereas only about 55% of American cities had only one daily in 1920, the figure had climbed to 71.5% by 1930.⁵⁵ When a Republican and a Democratic paper in a city were merged, editors had to find a substitute for the partisan approach to journalism. The objective approach provided such an alternative.

But the Lippmann-espoused objectivity, which was seated in the broader cultural movement of scientific naturalism, was rigorous and difficult. By the time *objectivity* became enough a part of the working vocabulary of journalists to make its way into textbooks, its meaning was diluted. A 1935 text deals with the subject this way: "Reporters for the most part write entirely objectively and keep themselves and their opinions out of their stories."⁵⁶

Objectivity had shrunk from a methodology needed to preserve

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 440-441.

51. Arthur Capper, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

52. Allan Nevins, *American Press Opinion*, (Boston, New York, etc.: D. C. Heath & Company, 1928), p. 454.

53. Henry Watterson, "The Personal Equation in Journalism," in *The Profession of Journalism; a collection of articles on newspaper editing and publishing taken from the Atlantic Monthly* (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1923), p. 104.

54. William Preston Bezell, "The Party Flag Comes Down," *Atlantic Monthly*, 147:366-672 (March, 1931), p. 367.

55. Edwin Emery and Michael Emery, 4th Edition, *The Press and America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), p. 430.

56. Philip W. Porter and Norvan Neil Luxon, *The Reporter and the News* (New York and London: Appleton-Century Company, 1935), p. 61.

democracy to a practical posture of day-to-day production. As the same textbook pointed out, "Editors have realized that readers... are likely to be distributed among all parties."⁵⁷

57. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

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