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An Observer or a Participant? Two Approaches to Journalist Objectivism

Polityka i Społeczeństwo nr 9, 109-119

2012

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

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**AN OBSERVER OR A PARTICIPANT?
TWO APPROACHES TO JOURNALIST
OBJECTIVISM**

Objectivism is thought to be a constitutive feature of journalist reporting. However, it is variously interpreted. The principles of objectivism seem to be satisfied by impartial observation of events that is carried out at a distance, whereas they seem to be denied by the role of a participant in the events. We are going to try and prove that the roles of an observer and of a participant are both crucial. They are complementary even though there is some tension between them.

Three aspects of objectivism

Immediacy or currency constitutes a relevant feature of journalist reporting just as attempted objectivism. Betraying objectivism is treated as an infringement upon both press law and the related ethical standards.

The Polish press law speaks about an obligation to be especially accurate and reliable when collecting and utilizing the press material. Accuracy denotes thoroughness, scrupulousness, exactitude, carefulness, conscientiousness, paying attention to details. In turn, reliability means fairness, solidity, dutifulness, being specific, responsibility for one's own words (Sobczak 2000: 267).

Similar recommendations are found in ethics manuals. The first three points of „Karta etyczna mediów” [The mass media ethics charter] (www.radaetykimediaow.pl) refer to principles such as truthfulness (reporting information that is true, accurate and relating facts in their proper context), objectivism (reliable presentation of various points of

view irrespective of the journalist's own views) as well as the principle of separating information from comments.

Objectivism in the above interpretation is synonymous with truthfulness, fairness and political impartiality. The journalist should present the reality in an as accurate and impartial manner „as a human being only can”, which is a phrase authored by Frank Starzel – Director of the Associated Press in the 1940s and 1950s (Doktorowicz 1989: 29).

All these descriptions of journalist objectivism point to its three aspects. The first of them consists in the will to know which involves meticulous and impartial presentation of single facts. Michel Foucault (2006: 66) wrote about a drive to neutrality and transparency of language understood as a perfect system composed of arbitrary signs. Any sign is, however, inseparable from its analysis. In order for a perceived item to become a sign, it must be singled out of some general impression. Once singled out and defined, the sign may subsequently serve as a referent *vis-à-vis* new impressions.

Nevertheless, it does not suffice to simply see the analyzed object. According to Foucault (2006: 126), one has to distinguish relevant features that define the given object. Those features form the object's structure. Only then may one speak of getting to know the object, when the observer can point out and describe such features. In this manner some relevant features of journalist reporting might be derived from the theory of information validity (*teoria wartości informacji*) (Palczewski 2009: 191).

The second aspect of objectivism comes to the fore with the requirement to present journalist information in its proper context. And what else is the proper context if not the gradually mounting attempts to situate the described events relationally, to classify them, to correct earlier information, to remove messages that are less relevant or the ones that are unconfirmed, and subsequently to rearrange the information and to accompany it with ever fuller interpretations. Spontaneously shaped messages are re-worked and improved, a series of impressions gets transformed into an ordered table. This resembles methodology of scientific research: single reports following acts of observation (known also as basic or protocol statements) are subsequently situated within the framework of a given theory.

The third aspect of objectivism has to do with the theory adjustment which takes place when there is a need to accommodate ever new facts. In time, a new theory might emerge, which will be simpler and which will explain the observed phenomena better or else – which will allow

for better understanding of phenomena that had been earlier inexplicable (Grobler 2006: 121).

Simplifying a bit, one could say that the first aspect of objectivism could be applicable to activities that Max Weber called data collection (2006: 160). The act of collecting data is carried out from a particular point of view and is colored by respect for particular values. It is carried out at a particular historical moment and in the conditions defined by a particular state of knowledge. The second and the third aspect of objectivism are close to sense gathering (*zbieranie sensu*), which involves gradual construction and correction of ideal models. The ideal models are mental constructions which serve to analyze and systematically describe phenomena, which leads to acquiring some knowledge of reality.

Intentional data collection is possible on the condition that one has some idea about the sense one seeks to gather. Who claims that uses no such assumptions, uses them in an unconscious way or is immersed in a sphere of indeterminate feelings and imaginings (Weber 2006: 148). Making use of an idea of the sense allows one – to borrow Leszek Kołakowski's phrase (2006: 11) – to hide normative contents in apparently descriptive statements.

Five types of objectivism

Comments are free but facts are sacred – this principle, formulated in 1921 by the long-term chief editor of the British daily „The Guardian”, Charles Prestwich Scott (www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree), seems to demarcate the difference between journalist information and journalist comment. Information is part of the correspondence theory of truth, which is colloquially put as: „John tells the truth that it rains because it rains”.

Journalist comments are based on objectively presented facts, but the facts have been selected by the journalists and arranged to form a narration in accordance with some general conceptions. Therefore, the coherence theory of truth seems better suited to the journalist comment, as expressed by the phrase: Truth in its full meaning, without restrictions, resides only in a system as a whole, whereby the system is not a simple set of sentences each of which is true on its own and which therefore confer truthfulness on the system; on the contrary, those sen-

tences are true – but only partially true – because they are elements of a certain system. However, if there are no additional assumptions, there is no way to know how to evaluate the truthfulness of different systems (Kołakowski 2009: 282). Moreover, as already pointed out before, such systems undergo adjustments.

The above distinction between the two theories of truth could lead to a hasty conclusion that the requirement of objectivism may only be applied to reporting information, but not so much to journalist comments (*publicystyka*). The comment, in accordance with the daily „Guardian”'s definition, is free, even if based on objectively presented facts.

However, apart from that often quoted part of the sentence, C.P. Scott said something more: „Comment is free, but facts are sacred. »Propaganda«, so called, by this means is hateful. The voice of opponents no less than that of friends has a right to be heard. Comment also is justly subject to a self-imposed restraint. It is well to be frank; it is even better to be fair. This is an ideal. Achievement in such matters is hardly given to man. We can but try, ask pardon for shortcomings, and there leave the matter”.

As such, the principle of reliability and impartiality refers equally well to journalist comments even though it needs to be applied at a higher level – that of interpretation and evaluation and not only at the level of collecting facts. C.P. Scott imposed tough requirements on journalists. Facts which are not congruent with the journalist's *Weltanschauung* and may even make him (her) experience some kind of cognitive dissonance should not be omitted or twisted. The freedom to comment is limited by a voluntarily adopted principle according to which arguments given by different parties must be presented accurately and the presented issue must be viewed from many perspectives, and not only one-sidedly.

However, it is difficult to expect that in each single publication its author should take into account all possible conceptions that could inform its diverging interpretations, evaluations or forecasts. Even the most balanced text will only be one voice in a debate which might create an opportunity to view the discussed subject matter accurately and to look upon it from many angles. In the circumstances, the typology involving five types of journalist objectivism, as proposed by Wolfgang Donsbach (Kunczik, Zipfel 2001: 279), seems especially important:

– Functional objectivism: keeping to established professional standards which are treated as a basic measure of truthfulness of the

journalist material when elaborated according to the principles of accuracy and impartiality. The journalist presents arguments of both sides, searches for additional facts, quotes opinions, and starts the presentation of his/her information from the most important facts.

– Real objectivism: preparing the journalist material in such a way that it is possible to verify it empirically.

– Consensus objectivism: including the general experience typical of the message addressees and their cognitive horizons in the form and contents of the messages.

– Relative objectivism: striving to preserve functional objectivism, with a reservation that only by comparing and discussing various descriptions of reality may we gradually arrive at its better understanding.

– Ideological objectivism: presenting the reality through the prism of a selected ideology.

The two types of objectivism that have been put at the top of the list are applicable while collecting information (in accordance with the already mentioned M. Weber's distinction), whereas the two at the bottom of the list – to sense gathering. The notion of relative objectivism seems to soften the tall requirements that were imposed upon the journalists-commentators by C.P. Scott. The commentator (*publicysta*) should be aware that his/her interpretations are provisional and that they would need to be complemented with interpretations that follow from other vantage points. By contrast, ideological objectivism is close to propaganda, as it was understood by C.P. Scott, meaning comments that favor views of one side only. In this sense, it is not objectivism but clear partiality.

The consensus objectivism, which was put in the middle of the list, constitutes a general condition of felicitous communication. It provides a basis for such coding of the message contents by the message sender that its decoding by the message receiver will correspond with the sender's intentions the most.

A related interpretation was provided by Jerzy Topolski (1998: 32), who wrote about a difference between a chronicle and historical narration. Although on grounds of logics the conjunction of true statements produces a whole which is true, the chronicle – even if it does contain true facts – does not necessarily constitute a true historical narration. The truthfulness of narration is determined by truthfulness of the structure that organizes the selection and interpretation of the facts. Therefore, while the truthfulness of narration is subject of contention, it is easier to determine the legitimacy of a chronicle. It is enough if the

chronicle's author followed some accepted rules of conduct, that is – to come back to the notion of objectivism – fulfilled the requirements associated with functional and real objectivism.

Ostentatious subjectivism

Denis McQuail (2008: 209) listed an attitude of distancing oneself and neutrality *vis-a-vis* the reported object as the first among the features of journalist objectivism. He put impartiality in the second place and reliability in the third one. Similarly, Krystyna Doktorowicz (1989: 30) drew attention to those principles in the American codes of journalist ethics that forbid journalists to take additional jobs apart from their work for editorial teams, to accept remuneration or provide free of charge services or to be involved in political and party political activities.

The journalist is to be an observer only but not an actor. S/he participates in social life by means of her/his publications. However, s/he does not take any direct action. Even though publishing is acting, as proven by John L. Austin (1993: 644), it only amounts to illocution, and not perlocution which, apart from presenting the state of affairs, involves interpretation, value judgments, questions, suggestions, commitments and a call for action.

This is why journalist interventionism does not break the rules of objectivism on the condition that it has satisfied the condition of reliability. Teresa Bogucka (2002: 49, 73) has described numerous cases in which reliability was missing in journalist intervention programs broadcast by the Polish public television during the last decade of the XX century and the beginning of the XXI century. That missing reliability had been caused, in her opinion, by the journalists' privileging just one side of the given conflict and/or disregarding contexts of events.

However, what is one to treat like journalist provocations, in which the journalist is not at all neutral? Such a journalist-provocateur initiates concrete actions in order to describe their consequences aiming at attracting public opinion's attention to pathological or crime-related phenomena. Engaging in such actions, the journalist directly interferes with the course of the described events. S/he does it, however, only for the sake of a single act whose purpose is to reinforce her/his message, to increase its visibility and strengthen its impact. The expectation is

that in the future it will result in some predefined bigger scale perlocution effects.

Breaking with the principles of objectivism was a declaration by promoters of „new journalism” that had emerged in the United States at the beginning of the 1970s. That was a period of protests against the Vietnam war and, simultaneously, the time when trust in the press with its emphasis on objectivism was limited. A text created in accordance with the principles of the „new journalism” was to constitute a subjective testimony by an eye-witness who presented events just as s/he had seen and perceived them. The four principal techniques of the „new journalism” involved describing sequences of single acts, providing full transcriptions of dialogues, describing the world as seen through the eyes of the events’ participants, paying attention to characteristic details (Bauer 2011: 90). It was not fiction but neither was it an impartial look of a distanced observer. The author would clearly express her/his personal positive and negative biases, owing to which s/he could have a deeper insight and become more authentic than an objective observer.

That kind of „new journalism” constitutes more of chronicle-writing than narrating. The chronicle’s author participates in the described events and presents with passion her/his own experiences or else lets eye-witnesses speak who give testimony to what they have lived through.

The „new journalism” is material collecting, but it is also guided by some idea of a sense. The material has to be authentic and sincere, whereas the sense is determined by reasoning which offers an alternative to an official ideology. While less careful about the functional and real aspects of objectivism, the „new journalism” texts may exemplify ideological objectivism. Their authors seem to telling: this is how I see it, such is my conviction, here are the facts that confirm this conviction.

What decidedly differentiates „new journalism” from journalism faithful to the rules of objectivism is the role of a participant that is being juxtaposed to the role of an observer. The difference between the two roles is clearly demonstrated by the case of two well-known press photos that have been included in the icons of the XX century¹. We are turning to photographs here because they are easier to be decoded than texts and because they can deliver emotions and experiences more efficiently.

¹ The author wishes to thank dr Magdalena Hodalska for drawing his attention to the two photos.



Source: ww3.wm.pl



Source: www.swiatobrazu.pl

The first of the photos was taken in Vietnam in 1972. It was made by a photo-reporter working for the AP Huyngnh Cong press agency. Among the group of children one could see a 9-year old girl, Kim Phuc. After taking the photo, the photographer took the child to hospital and only later dispatched his material to his agency. The girl was thus

saved. Adult Kim Phuc became a peace ambassador for UNESCO and established a foundation to help children who were war victims.

The second photo was made in Sudan. In 1993 Kevin Carter photographed a child dying from hunger and a vulture that sat just next to it waiting for the girl to die. The author got the Pulitzer and his photograph had greatly contributed to increasing assistance for victims of famine in Africa. However, many people asked why the photo-reporter had not helped the child and – just as the vulture – was waiting for the child to die. Two months after he had received his award, Carter committed suicide. The reasons for this act were not unequivocal.

Let us add that the journalist role of a participant may take many different forms, which is evidenced by evolving works authored by Ryszard Kapuściński (Nowacka, Ziątek 2008: 190). Young Kapuściński, the one from the book entitled *Chrystus z karabinem na ramieniu* [Christ with a rifle on his arm] sided clearly with fedains and guerilla fighters. Older Kapuściński, the one from the period lasting from *Cesarz* [Emperor] until *Ten inny* [That other one] – kept a mature distance, understanding that each revolution is followed by an ideological burn-out. New authorities become helpless, change props and not so much the methods by which they govern. Kapuściński (2006: 14) tried to understand aspirations of his heroes, stating quite frankly that this was the way to understand himself.

A corporation or a community?

Does trying to be objective really require from the journalist playing the role of an observer and not a participant? We will try to answer this question basing on the distinction between two types of associations that had been proposed by Michael Oakeshott (2008: 231): *universitas* and *societas*. The first of them constitutes an association called into existence with a certain enterprise in mind, and therefore it is a corporation of intelligent agents who are united in their intention to reach a common aim or a common interest. Being part of a corporation is premised upon making a declaration and fulfilling certain conditions, as specified by the given corporation. The other type is a civil association, bound only by an awareness of certain principles that are binding all of its members and by their reciprocal expectations that those principles will be observed. This is an association that acts in the framework of some moral practice

whereby observing the rules is not a matter of choice or agreement. The rules, even when not observed, do not lose their validity, because they determine the norms of just conduct. In the conception of the modern European state – Oakeshott concludes – a tension between those two types of associations is inherent.

If we look upon society as a kind of space within which all kinds of corporations are active, then such a society cannot do without editorial teams and publishing houses – meaning corporations of journalists who perform functions such as informing, interpreting, forming value judgments, providing entertainment and exerting control. The journalist messages should be objective, meaning that they should be prepared in a matter-of-fact manner, just as observation that is carried out at a distance *vis-à-vis* the described corporations. However, these journalist accounts which are formulated in the interest of a given corporation – even if they are presented in a matter-of-fact manner but without keeping the distance – should be classified as instances of public relations.

Society conceived of in terms of a civil association requires from all of its members help to one another when in need. An awareness of the commonality of fate that follows from natural law or derives from divine providence constitutes a foundation for solidarity in good and bad times alike. Each individual practices this solidarity as s/he can, irrespective from her/his profession or social position. The journalist is a participant of such a community, too.

The tension between the two types of associations finds its expression in a tension between the two roles of the journalist: this of an observer and that of a participant. Both of these roles are needed in modern society, as they are mutually complementary. Restricting oneself to only one of them might generate some threats.

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