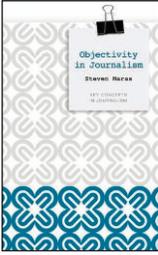


Review



Objectivity in Journalism. By Steven Maras. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013. 248 pp. ISBN 9780745647340.

Three years ago, in the essay “A Journalistic Revolution,” Neal Gabler argued that objectivity had got stuck with a bad rap, a victim of guilt by association with the false doctrine of balance and the intellectual gamesmanship of deconstructionism. Not every opinion deserves equal weight, he wrote, and there is such a thing as a clear, immutable, demonstrable fact. In other words, objectivity does not consist of simple stenography, of uncritically giving every blowhard with a head of steam the opportunity to vent; it involves examining all the available facts with the aim of arriving at a conclusion—not *the* truth or *my* opinion, but *a* truth or *an* opinion, as in a scientific investigation or a court of law.

Another way of putting it is: “What objectivity requires is an active mind that uses its mental powers in ways that reduce the distortion of reports caused by wishful thinking, bad reasoning, petty feelings and personal interests” (p. 100). This statement by journalism ethics expert Stephen J. Ward, quoted in Stephen Maras’ *Objectivity in Journalism* has arrived at a time when it is badly needed. Never have distortions been so widely distributed and opinions so readily mistaken for fact as in the age of digital communication and 24-hour news. For example, the thing that provoked Gabler to write his essay was a decision by Paul Thornton, an op-ed editor at the *Los Angeles Times*, not to run letters from readers contesting human involvement in global warming. This, Thornton wrote, is not opinion, but factual inaccuracy. He “held brief for neither impartiality nor skepticism, but rather for a belief that facts matter—that they can lead to conclusions whether you happen to like those conclusions or not” (Gabler, 2013). Thornton’s comments, Gabler wrote, “should have been the journalistic shot heard ’round the world, except not many people seem to have heard it.”

With *Objectivity in Journalism*, Maras has produced something that should amplify that journalistic shot, except—at least judging by how long it has taken us to get around to reviewing it—not many people seem to have noticed it, either. This is a shame, because it should be required reading for anyone who ever argued on either side of the classic newsroom debate: objectivity is impossible and it comprises an ideology of uncertainty that shackles creativity, enables con artists, muzzles honest journalists, and protects timid publishers; objectivity is balanced and fair, an “even-handed,” unemotional and scientific treatment of the facts, based on the Miltonian principle that Truth cannot “be put to the worse in a free and open encounter.” After reading Maras, that argument is as unsatisfying and hollow as it is simplistic. As a very wise journalist once said, “There are *at least* two sides to every story,”

and, as Habermas showed with the Ideal Speech Situation, you cannot expect Truth to prevail, unless you first make sure that the field is indeed free and open.

This book drags the dreary newsroom debate into a world of complexities and possibilities. As Maras writes, “Many figures have offered denunciations or defences of objectivity based on practical difficulties or concerns. Here, a different kind of gap emerges. An informed debate of the concept, even in practitioner contexts, falls short if we do not have a philosophically and historically nuanced view of how the concept has been defined and what it allows us to do” (p. 2).

Maras, a senior lecturer at the University of Sydney, does an admirable job of bringing that philosophical and historical nuance to the subject, presenting argument after argument, and wheeling out batteries of expert opinion and research to map out an informed debate. I use “map,” rather than “support,” because, to a large extent, the book is something of an exercise in its subject matter and proves that it is possible to be objective without being bland, equivocal, timid, or “morally passive.” Not only is *Objectivity in Journalism* a pleasure to read (it is blessedly free of poor grammar, misspelling, circumspection, cloudy syntax, and lazy abstractions), but it is extensively researched (23 pages of references), and meticulously organized. It provides so much that is compelling and thought provoking that it deserves a place in every journalism program in the English speaking world.

The book—part of a Polity series called *Key Concepts in Journalism*—explores the history, philosophy, ethics, and practical utility of a concept that has long been controversial, but rarely, if ever, explored in the kind of depth we see here. Maras organizes his examination around eight questions that cover: the history of objectivity in journalism; opposition to objectivity; defence of the concept; dispute over the nature of facts; the difference between passive and active objectivity; objectivity and ethics; challenges in the age of the Internet and the 24-hour news cycle; whether objectivity is the norm, or a regional aberration. He demonstrates that there is not, and probably never has been, a plain, straight-forward definition of objectivity, that news organizations from the penny press to broadcast news, to talk radio, to social media have always had varying degrees of respect for the concept, and that objectivity is not a synonym for neutrality. He offers no pat answers or simple prescriptions—in fact, though each chapter has one, the book lacks an overall conclusion, leaving readers to sort out the histories, philosophies, and arguments for themselves. As close as Maras comes to a definitive statement is to say that objectivity is a “culturally and textually negotiated *performance* [his italics] that is actualized according to the conventions of different styles of journalism, encompassing professional and regulatory issues, but also those to do with reader, audience or user expectations” (p. 228).

Brian Gorman, MacEwan University