
Journalistic norms in multicultural societies: A critical evaluation of the social construction of realities through objective journalism

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In culturally diverse societies such as Pakistan, it is an important heuristic question whether journalists are applying the journalistic value of objectivity while reporting on culturally sensitive and complicated issues. This article will provide a detailed analysis of the relationship between multiculturalism and journalistic objectivity in the multicultural societies. It will also focus on the evolution of the concept of objectivity as an epistemology, a normative ideal, and an institutionalized ideological regime which is reflective of established authority. The idea of objectivity is based on epistemological assumptions of positivism and empiricism that believe in the singleness of reality. Whereas, the postmodernist position of recent times denies the possibility of valid knowledge of the world, opting instead for the eminently reasonable perspective of critical realism.¹ However, both journalists and academia speak of objective, neutral and informative journalism as a sacrosanct concept. It is generally believed that journalism sans objectivity is something detestable and condemnable (Dennis and Merrill, 1996; Lippman, 1922; McQuail, 2005; Schudson, 1978; Tuchman, 1978; Vivian, 2006).

As a set of beliefs, objectivity appears to be rooted in a positivist view of the world in which the preeminence of observable and retrievable facts runs supreme. History of objectivity in journalism reveals that objective reporting began more as a commercial imperative than as a standard of responsible reporting. With the emergence of a truly popular press in the mid 1800s - the penny press - a press tied neither to the political parties nor the business elite, objectivity provided a presumably disinterested view of the world (Altschull, 1995). Thus, objectivity is a normative ideal which believes in detachment, fairness and accuracy. "It means that sources supply the sense and substance of the day's news. Sources put forth the ideas while other sources challenge those ideas. Journalists, in their role as professional communicators, merely provide a vehicle for these exchanges" (Dennis & Merrill, 1996, p. 106).

On the contrary, position of journalists as professional communicators has been criticized by Glasser (1992) who argues that objectivity is not the best basis on which to make responsible journalistic decisions. Other researchers contend that no sophisticated student of journalism believes in objectivity any more (Zelizer & Allan, 2003; McQuail, 2005). Rosten (1937) wrote that objectivity in journalism is no more possible than objectivity in dreams. Interactionists have also contended that realities are socially constructed with the help of pre-existing images in the minds of the people and being objective is impossible for human beings (Berger & Luckmann, 1969 as cited in Horton & Hunt, 1984). Much has been written about objectivity in journalism and there seems a general agreement that it is both necessary and impossible.² Therefore, it is a pertinent issue to ascertain the relationship between the journalistic objectivity and multiculturalism.

Objectivity and Multiculturalism

The question of objectivity in journalism is directly linked to multiculturalism. Objectivity is considered a necessary trait of journalistic profession. The journalist is supposed to cover events of the day with detachment, fairness and impartiality. The pressure of

professionalism forces journalists to follow standardized and routinized patterns which run against the norms of diversity. Glasser (1992) highlighting the conflict between cultural diversity and professionalism argues that objectivity in curriculum of social sciences and journalism is a far fetched idea. In fact, professional values are enforced in the newsroom to control the conduct of the journalists by defining "legitimate arenas and sources of news" (Soloski, 1989 as cited in Glasser, 1992, p. 134). Wilson (2000) describing induction process of Black journalists in American mainstream media concludes that cultural pluralism that could ensure objectivity in media industry is a dream difficult to translate into reality.

Thus, under the guise of professionalism, dominant values are propagated and status quo is maintained (Altschull, 1995; Tuchman, 1972). In this way, objectivity operates as a mechanism of control. The journalists in multicultural societies have to face a great deal of difficulty in striking a balance between the dominant culture of majority and the cultural patterns of minorities. As there is always a conflict among values in such societies, the journalists prefer to advance consensual values of the dominant group in times of crises (McQuail, 2005; Zelizer & Allan, 2003). Hence, objectivity as a professional code of conduct and diversity run contrary to each other. This ambivalent relationship carries tremendous heuristic value that necessitates exploring the role of a journalist in a multicultural society. This article will examine whether or not a journalist can remain objective in a multicultural society. It will also discuss media-related issues in multicultural societies and alternatives to objectivity as a significant news value.

Issues in Multicultural Societies

Hall (2001) has defined multicultural phenomenon as a way to envisage the future of different societies composed of people having varying histories, backgrounds, cultures and experiences. Multiculturalism deals with the changing socio-cultural conditions of all stakeholders in the society where diverse communities refuse to disappear (Hall, 2001). There is no denying the fact that culture

takes diverse forms across time and space in dissimilar societies. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. There seems to be an emerging understanding within the increasingly diverse societies that it is essential to ensure harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities. Policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, vitality of civil society and peace. With a paradigm shift from Habermasian public sphere to a plurality of public spheres in the postmodern era, a resistance movement against hegemony of the elite culture is escalating. As Hall (1988) points out, there have been significant changes in the cultural politics of blacks in Great Britain, which he identifies as politics of representation due to an incessant negative portrayal and stereotyping of the black communities.

The multicultural issues are being discussed minutely in the European and the American societies. The issue of integration of minorities has gained considerable importance in the preceding decades. The European multicultural societies are concerned about the integration of the ethnic minorities into the mainstream politics and the role of media in facilitating the process of integration. Peeters and D'Haenens (2005) differently look at multicultural issue and establish a relationship between Putnam's concepts of cultural bonding and bridging. In both cultural bonding, where immigrants maintain relations with homeland, and cultural bridging, which is a desire to participate in the mainstream culture of host country, mass media are actors of enormous magnitude. At the same time, ethnocentric trends are escalating in the European societies. Stolcke (1993) argues that a cultural fundamentalism, resulting from xenophobia, is in ascendance in Europe under which the issue of immigration is construed as a political threat to the national identity and integrity on account of immigrants' cultural diversity.

The issue of multiculturalism is also directly linked to democracy. In fact, the concept of public sphere as envisioned by Habermas as an assembly of equal citizens to discuss important matters facing the society has had serious flaws because it had excluded certain significant strata of society from its domain. Fraser (1990) has noted that relations between bourgeoisie publics and other publics were always based on conflict and from the beginning counter publics have been contesting the exclusionary norms of the bourgeoisie while elaborating alternative styles of political behaviour and divergent norms of public speech. She goes on to say that public sphere can effectively function by eliminating inequalities from the society and a multiplicity of publics is always better for a healthy democracy to function. Thus, various scholars (Fraser, 1990; Rosaldo, 1994; Young, 1989 & 1991) agree that a deliberative democracy can function effectively if the cultural difference is acknowledged and multiethnic groups work together for the common good that has remained unattainable so far.

Journalists and the Multicultural Challenge

The mass media are directly related to and deeply affected by the issues discussed in the preceding paragraphs. The schema of cultural differences in media is a grave challenge for the journalists. Journalists are grappled with convoluted situations everyday where they have to engage in discursive activity about a culturally dissimilar individuals or groups. It is a significant question whether the journalists provide accurate coverage of the subjects they cover or vice versa. Fursich (2002) is of the view that scholars have divided opinion on the fair knowledge about other cultures. One group of scholars subscribes to the idea of "epistemological awareness of problematic othering" that will pave the way for a fair representation of culturally different people. Another group of scholars, according to her, advocates the need for "active systematic proposals" to introduce change in journalistic practices (p. 64).

However, objective journalism is the first casualty when there is a clash between the dominant and the minority cultures. "The

media professionals tend to overrepresent persons and professions with higher income as a general practice. In the content of news, this is managed by selecting source materials flowing from official sources, experts and leaders and in fiction by highlighting urban middle class locations and characters" (McQuail, 1983, p. 123). Thus, media tend to establish existing social and political order and symbolically punish those who are culturally different and not a part of the mainstream.³ Media content also employs negative stereotypes of minorities such as women, labour, militants, ethnic groups, the poor and the immigrants (Golding & Elliot, 1979). Mass media are deeply influenced by the culture where they operate and, in fact, "journalism is a cultural practice, led by a community of professionals who use their cultural and interpretative authority to shape cultural memory and the production of knowledge in general" (Zelizer, 1992 as quoted in Furisch, 2002, p. 59)

The journalists have to face a great deal of pressure while covering cultural difference. The advertisers are interested in a content that could attract a large audience or readership. This type of content would obviously be an over-representation of the majority at the cost of the ethnic minorities. Thus, media content has to pass through a variety of filters and journalists are at odds while reporting cultural difference. The editors and owners control the flow of content and operate as gate keepers. Sources available to the journalists are usually the elite who manage to have greater access to the media as they become providers of the source material. The political economy of the media forces journalists to follow an established pattern of reporting largely based on an ideology that aims at perpetuating the dominance of the elite.

On the other hand, the journalists in the field routinely select topics which are derogatory and far removed from factual situation. The journalists are unaware of the culture, traditions, norms and values of the ethnic minorities and their knowledge of the social practices of culturally disparate people is usually shallow. Realities are socially constructed and representations are always developed

within a hegemonic cultural system as an objective journalistic perspective is hard to find (Furisch, 2002). Van Dijk (2005) argues that most of the ethnic news can be described as problem news. He suggests that the dominant negative reporting of the ethnic minorities is a result of the dominant elite racism that results in other racisms and their discourses. Jessika ter Wal (2002) has also highlighted the process of framing employed by the journalists through which they construct realities about ethnic groups and minorities that ultimately produce racist sentiments in the society.

The recruitment of journalists belonging to ethnic minorities in multicultural societies is a serious problem. Diversity in the newsrooms emerged as a prominent issue after the publication of the Kerner Report in 1968. Although a kind of diversity among the staff of the news media that could satisfy all communities is perhaps impossible to achieve, there is still need to move in the direction of a fair composition of the newsrooms in order to have an adequate representation of the minorities. Uriarte and Benavides (2003) argue that the ultimate goal of newsroom diversity is to create an intellectually mixed environment where everyone holds firm to the idea of journalistic independence. Other researchers (Ouaj, 1999; Mellinger, 2003; Cottle, 1998) have found that minority journalists are marginalized and the working conditions are less than desirable for them. Consequently, the presentation of ethnic minorities in the mainstream media remains problematic which severely undermines the credibility of mass media as objective mirrors of the society.

The Myth of Objectivity in Multicultural Societies

Objectivity may be a worthy goal, but it seems unrealizable in multicultural societies due to the complex nature of the problems associated with multiculturalism. In no way can a journalist be detached, unprejudiced, un-opinionated, and unbiased because a journalist must select, organize, and manipulate facts according to the norms set by the editors and owners. "From beginning to end, journalism is a subjective enterprise" (Dennis & Merrill, 1996, p. 112). No reporter knows the whole truth about complex nature of

human societies; certainly he/she will have to contact his/her social associates with whom he shares culture, ideas and a common frame of thinking. This makes journalists subjectivists, personally conditioned, and able to provide audiences no more than superficial maps of the real territory.⁴ The following paragraphs will examine how objectivity is abandoned and converted into an evasive term by journalists in multicultural societies:

Objectivity as Strategic Ritual

Tuchman (1972) argues that objectivity is a strategic ritual that protects journalists from a lot of risks and it acts as a bulwark that stands between them and the critics. The journalists use objectivity as a strategy to prove that "they presented conflicting possibilities; additional evidence is there to support a fact; quotation marks have been skillfully used to detach the journalist; most important facts have been discussed; and news analysis have been used to separate facts from opinion" (Tuchman, 1972, p. 676). This strategy works and saves journalists from a lot of troubles that they may have to otherwise court while discharging their professional duties. Thus, objectivity is a mythical term used by the journalists as a strategic ritual to save themselves from any adverse fall out of their coverage.

Objectivity as an Epistemology

The sociologist Michael Schudson relates objectivity in journalism with a belief system about the type of reliable knowledge and identifies it as a declaration of what kind of thinking one should engage in while making moral decisions (Schudson, 1978 as cited in Altschull, 1995, p, 63). The ideal of objectivity, therefore, determines the nature of coverage that minorities will receive. Generally, this coverage will be routinized, stereotypical and decided from above. In this way, the so-called objective reporting has stripped reporters of their perspective, creativity and imagination. Objective reporting has transformed journalism into something more technical than intellectual. And most unfortunate of all, objective reporting has denied journalists their citizenship. As disinterested observers and impartial reporters, journalists are

expected to be morally disengaged and politically inactive. With neither the need nor the opportunity to develop a critical perspective from which to assess the events, the issues, and the personalities he or she is assigned to cover, the objective journalist tends to function as a translator - translating the specialized language of sources into a language intelligible to a lay audience (Rasul, 2004). Thus, objectivity has altogether altered the approach to know other communities and common citizens receive formulaic information about diverse groups living in the society. This type of information is expected to strengthen the stereotypes and lead the receivers towards cynicism.

Objectivity and the Coverage of Conflicts

A few researchers argue that the notion of objectivity is abandoned by media in times of war, crises, tragedy and threat to national interest (McQuail, 2005; Zelizer & Allan, 2003). Media launches vicious propaganda campaigns against real or perceived enemy nations caring little for the members of their own community who may originally belong to the targeted enemy. Coverage of Islam and Muslims in the mainstream American and European media is a glaring example of this phenomenon (Said, 1997). The case of objectivity while reporting conflicts from war zones is also interesting. Few media people want to discuss impartially while covering the conflicts and the resulting distortions. To do so would undermine the perceived integrity and objectivity of correspondents who report from battle zones. It would also challenge the motives of the organizations that print and broadcast their material in the name of objectivity and balance. The reporting of the American war on terrorism speaks volumes for the so-called objective reporting (Zelizer & Allan, 2003). In fact, truth is the first casualty in conflict situations. Because the multicultural societies are faced with an internal conflict of interest between majority and the minorities, the journalist abandon objectivity and support the dominant ideology.

Objectivity and Commercialization of the Media

In a world driven by the market forces, the concept of the objectivity helps the journalists to follow a social order that does not allow them to depart from ideological orthodoxy. Objectivity safeguards the system of status quo by skillfully avoiding the pressure of change and pretends representing both sides. Journalists allow both sides to have their point of view communicated through the media but the consensual values are never challenged. There are visible economic reasons for the rise of the cult of objectivity and the idea grew out of economic imperatives of the media organizations.⁵ In order to be truthful and credible, media organizations pretend to be objective by mirroring the facts so that they attract maximum number of viewers/audience who could be sold out to the advertising agencies latter on. The coverage of ethnic minorities in multicultural societies is not considered profitable. Although, a few large companies in America have tried to address the demand of the minorities, however, in the sister publications of the large media organizations for minorities, it is usually the dominant discourse which is highlighted because the content is simply the translation of the news and commentaries already published in the mainstream media (Husband, 2005). The interests of the ethnic minorities are sacrificed at the altar of objectivity to safeguard economic interests of the elite generally belonging to the dominant majority.

Therefore, it is extremely difficult to materialize the ideal of objectivity in a multicultural society. Economic pressure, ideological considerations, internal conflict in multicultural societies and use of objectivity as defence mechanism render it ineffective as a core news value. Objective reporting results in maintaining the hegemony of the elite and an ideological monotony supported by the people in the corridors of power.

Beyond the Myth of Objectivity

How can the media ensure a just representation of minorities in a multicultural society when objectivity remains a myth and a

strategic ritual? It may be impossible for a journalist to be truly objective as the conventions of the term objectivity suggest, but to maintain a certain degree of impartiality is not beyond the capability of modern journalists. This process can include strategic planning in the reporting process to analyze communities and clear delineation of presentation form used (Dennis & Merrill, 1996). In this way, the reporter will be able to properly distinguish subjective conclusions from facts while analyzing communities with systematic tools. The objective of this practice should be to present facts in multicultural societies in such a way that the readers would have had the same perspective if they had been themselves present on the occasion.

Another mechanism that transcends so-called objectivity and ensures fair representation of cultural minorities is the promotion of minority media and alternative journalism. The minorities can develop an alternative journalism which is different from the mainstream media in order to raise their concerns at the community level. Atton (2003), for example, says that public journalism stops short of explicit advocacy which is where its aims and those of street papers diverge. Husband (2005) examining the current situation of ethnic media production finds that a new public sphere is being shaped by the ethnic media. We can term this public sphere created by the alternative journalism as a participatory democratic model. Harcup (2003) and Davila (2000) also go deep into the study of alternative journalism and presentation of minorities in America and suggest that a receiver-oriented alternative media can prove a vital force in a democracy.

Thus, the central point of the minority media lies with the needs, interests and aspirations of the receiver in a multicultural society. It has to do with the right to relevant information, the right to answer back, and the right to use the means of communication for interaction in small-scale settings of community, interest group, and subculture. The idea of alternative journalism rejects the necessity of uniform, objective, centralized, high cost, highly professionalized and state-controlled media. It favors multiplicity,

smallness of scale, locality, deinstitutionalization, interchange of sender-receiver roles and horizontality of communication links at all levels of society. Media institutions constructed according to this ideal would be involved more closely with social life than they are at present and more directly in control of their audiences, offering opportunities for access and participation on terms set by their users rather than by controllers.

Journalistic objectivity in a pluralist society favours a politics that is based on a competition between private interests whereas in a multicultural society, it is an activity that leads towards consensus building (Glasser et al., 2006). In the multicultural societies, the role of the media should be engaging people in a dialogue. Pluralism considers groups in the society incommensurable and competing where media focuses on market-oriented policies while multiculturalism believes that group formation results from social processes and cooperation instead of competition should be the hallmark of the institution of media. Thus, journalists in the multicultural societies should spotlight an agenda of mutual understanding among communities instead of formulaic and standardized coverage in the name of objectivity that has served as a centrifugal force.

Conclusion

This article has scrutinized journalistic objectivity in liberal democracies where it is operationalized to safeguard the economic interests of the elites and serves to maintain status quo by highlighting dominant values in the society. Mass media, in this way, work as agents of the elite in the society and minority cultures are marginalized by manufacturing an ornamental consent on the value system (Altschull, 1995; Bagdikian, 1980; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 1999; Zelizer & Allan, 2003). The notion of objectivity is used as a strategy that protects journalists and functions as an epistemology through which journalists look at the world around them. Thus, reporting by the media is largely biased, especially when dealing with news of social controversy or conflict (Schudson, 1995). Edelstein (1966) considers objectivity as

a device for minimizing conflict in a community and works as a form of evasion.

The bias in journalism largely stems from the dominant culture and also originates from the journalists' education, religion, gender, social class, political ideology and a whole bevy of personal biases. The logic behind bias and propaganda in the news media is simple and it is the same the world over. Each society and culture has a unique world view through which they cultivate realities about others. News media generally reflect the world view of the culture they write for. But the truth of what is happening in the world is much more complicated than what appears to be true in any culture. The issue of bias in multicultural societies is especially problematic where a clash among cultures results in strife in the society. The issues of fair representation in media have attracted the attention of intellectuals who have denounced cultural fundamentalism and urged on a need to promote cultural citizenship in a deliberative democracy (Christiansen, 2004; Fraser, 1990; Hall, 2001; Rosaldo, 1994; Stolcke, 1995; Young, 1991).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the ideal of objectivity is impossible to achieve and it will be better if the journalists systematically cover the news related to minorities through coordination and cooperation by understanding and respecting the cultural differences (Dennis & Merrill, 1996; Glasser et al., 2006; McQuail, 2005). The ethnic media can also play an important role in bridging the gap among cultures. In fact, the concept of alternative journalism has been considered a solution to ensure equitable coverage for the minorities and as Husband (2005) suggests that it is working effectively in the Great Britain where a synergy between the minority ethnic media and the media system of dominant communities exists and ethnic media "is shaping a vigorous public sphere" (p. 461). Thus, objectivity does not seem to work in modern complex societies and the media will have to adopt a practicable approach in order to serve the interests of various segments of readers/ audience.

Notes and References

- 1 Robert Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao (1998) describe how objectivity is epistemologically used as a political concept to further the interests of the political elites. They are of the view that objectivity can be dangerous for a sustainable democracy as democracy is a dynamic concept while objectivity advocates the static notion of status quo.
- 2 Denis McQuail (2005) argues that objectivity is a mythical term which makes an equitable representation impossible. Quoting a lot of communication scholars, McQuail says that presentation of media content is highly biased and favours the middle class and elite values.
- 3 McQuail (1983) in an earlier version of his work on communication theories comments that minorities and other ethnic groups do not get fair representation. Even if they are represented in the media, it is usually negative and these underprivileged groups are not a part of the larger media landscape.
- 4 These lines have been taken from the work of Dennis and Merrill (1996) on media debates. Merrill argues that journalistic objectivity is impossible as a journalist is captive of his/her socialization process and frames the things as per his/her cultural experience. On the other hand, Dennis argues that journalists can be skillful and remain detached while performing their routine duties.
- 5 Altschull (1995) relates the notion of objectivity with economic interests of the media organizations. He says that media are agents of power and under the guise of neutrality; they further an agenda that serves the interests of the elite.

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