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## The Case of Social Responsibility: An Ideal of Objectivity

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THE CASE OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY:  
AN IDEAL OF OBJECTIVITY

A Thesis Proposal  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
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## Introduction

2008: a year of political excitement, economic fear, and social debate.

The status of the international world is one of unrest and unpredictability. When countries are at war, valued resources are scarce, and new leaders campaign to take over; the whole world must watch. People around the planet must gain information regarding current, past, and possible future events so that they may understand their immediate surroundings as well as the world as a whole.

To learn about the world, one may always turn to news media. Be it print, radio, television, or internet, news information is a common and often easily accessible method to educate oneself about current events. These four media forms offer differing benefits and differing failures. Some are quick, some are slow. Some offer consumer control while others require only listening. However, they are all accessed.

The news media serves a purpose in the world today. It plays a crucial role in updating people with pertinent and entertaining content. The roles that media play vary in different countries, different governments, and different cultures. Each country has a press system which operates using different goals and theories in mind. Governments place differing requirements and restrictions on their press systems. Citizens have varying expectations of their news media. Some publications offer only material approved by their governmental leaders. Some broadcasters only have the capabilities to provide material to their listeners provided to them by international news agencies.

American journalism is unique. It is a form of journalism that is perceived by its consumers as free. It is largely allowed to make claims, provide data, and assert facts without prior governmental clearance. American journalists have a wide degree of freedom that many journalists in other nations never experience.

Yet, American journalism does not enjoy complete freedom. News reporters and editors must always keep in mind various powers that be. From governmental regulations to economic pressures to quick reporting, American journalism is not liberated to operate as it pleases.

News organizations do not operate without cost – financial cost. Equipment, staff, property, and broadcasting rights all add to the economic stress that news agencies endure. To pay these abundant fees, news organizations must rely on various sources. Commercial advertisers, product placements, and investors all help to foot the bill. No contributors blindly toss around money, in news or other industries. Rather, investors are wise to ensure that their money is used wisely and will return to them in the form of profit. If this is not the case, the investors may very well go elsewhere.

Therefore, to maintain operation in a news organization, operators must keep the money providers happy. To keep the money providers happy, operators must attract consumers to view and act upon advertisements. Without profits due to advertisements, advertisers will not be satisfied.

When producing news content, news producers must keep their financial needs in mind. American journalists are not able to operate void of external

pressures. Rather, they are under constant strain to maintain investor security or face the possibility of ending their operation.

Also at the forefront of American journalists' minds is ethics. Not only do consumers demand material that is interesting and often entertaining, but also accurate. If a news agency provides erred material, it loses credibility. Without credibility, it stands to lose consumers. Without consumers, it will eventually lose funding.

American news agencies maintain their credibility by following rules set by the public. The public in the United States expects its news information to be easy to understand, immediate, interesting, pertinent to each individual, and, of course, accurate. Doing so much is a difficult if not impossible task. Not all material lends itself to all of the public's categories. Therefore, news reporters are forced to decide: sacrifice following through on an expectation, or alter the story from its purity.

A pure story is portrayed by its writer without change. It represents every side of an issue and does not worry about making money, entertaining, or easy comprehension. This type of story is objective, and therefore void of distortion due to the reporter. This story is a dream of journalists who wish only to inform the public without altering their content. The pursuit of an objective story is crucial to American journalism.

Journalism in America is based upon the Social Responsibility Theory, which promotes a press system of truthful, honest reporting that is free from bias. This bias can be impacted by financial stress, political affiliation, or desire to

attract consumers. Even while journalists must operate under these strains, consumers are often oblivious. Because journalists try to operate under the Social Responsibility Theory, Americans have grown to expect that the news media encountered in the United States is information unadulterated by journalists, news agencies, political attachments, or financial greed. Readers anticipate objectivity in news media.

The expectation, however, is a difficult if not impossible one to attain. Objectivity is an ideal in journalism that is impeded by many forces. However, these forces are not going away any time soon. Advertisers must pay for American news agencies, or governmental agencies may step in and further distort information. Consumers must be free to choose what to consume, but not forced to do so. Therefore, it is crucial that journalists continue to balance their many pressures. It is also crucial that the public critically analyze news media content. Just because journalists attempt to achieve objectivity does not mean they attain objectivity.

This thesis seeks to show that the current status of media is one of conflicting goals and pressures. It will prove that objectivity is a worthwhile attempt. Lastly, it will show how consumers can critically analyze material from the news media because the public understands that news media is not perfect.

## Literary Review

Journalistic objectivity is a phenomenon that has only recently become an obsession in American news reporting. Its importance has become crucial due to the assumption of Social Responsibility in news reporting. Previously, American journalists accepted the fact that no news production could possibly be perfectly objective. This mentality was embraced (Kaplan, 2006). By not misleading the public to believe that journalists were providing only pure, uninterpreted facts, journalists felt that they were being ethical and honest. Accepting that the pursuit of unbiased news was ultimately impossible to complete, journalists did not try. This mentality continues in Europe, though not in the United States (Kaplan, 2006). Objectivity's place in society has grown beyond news coverage, and now has been shown to promote cultural ideals (Schudson, 2001). Objectivity gives members of society a feeling of solidarity and safety as it allows dominant culture to continue (Schudson, 2001). Journalism's objectivity also tries to remind reporters that there are many sides to each story, often more than two (Lehrman, 2007). A story is not necessarily objective, even if it is balanced between two viewpoints (Lehrman, 2007).

True, objectivity is unattainable. Yet, it is an ideal the journalists must strive for in American journalism (Ryan, 2001). Using textual analyses and case studies, evidence has shown that consumers expect journalists to limit their subjectivity to present cold, hard facts (Berry, 2005). The debate surrounding pursuing objectivity versus accepting subjectivity has raised the question: Do journalists have the right to interpret information to make it more easily



understood by the public? Textual analyses and case studies have found that interpreting data may still contain facts, but is often misleading (Klotzer, 2005). Interpretation may be intended to make content more palatable by viewers, but in the end it distorts the content so that it is wrongly received.

War time coverage of news, politics, and military actions are especially difficult for the journalists on location. Journalists often may find themselves torn between reporting true, honest facts, and loyalty to one's country (Zandberg, 2005). There is also a great demand for instantaneous, quick news reporting, which has been shown through textual analysis to deter objectivity (Zandberg, 2005; Shen, 2005). War coverage is often found to be misrepresented. While battles and fighting are bloody, graphic, and difficult to view, reporters provide viewers with a sanitized version (Aday, 2005). Textual analysis has shown that war coverage by most news organizations is close to the objective ideal, although, Fox News is not (Aday, 2005).

Journalists are also challenged by a growing need for immediate news coverage of events, often published on line. This demand for quick, instant news is detrimental to objective journalism because it removes time to investigate multiple view points surrounding a story (Shen, 2005). Electronic news, studied through textual analysis, has been shown to combine hard, literate news with more personable, oral news (Shen, 2005). Power held by news corporations and money gives journalists a feeling of loss of control over their reporting (Quill, 2007). Journalists blame external forces for their loss of objectivity, shown in interviews and surveys (Quill, 2007).

Lastly, according to the cornerstone of journalistic ethics, the Society of Professional Journalists, objectivity is crucial. The Society lists four main purposes of journalism in the current American system. These are:

1. Seek truth and report it (Code of Ethics).

A cornerstone of journalism is obviously stated here. A reporter's duty, particularly in the social responsibility system is to investigate, inform, and to do so truthfully.

2. Minimize harm (Code of Ethics).

A reporter's duty is never to harm those whom the reporter investigates or those consuming the material. However, harm can easily befall someone who is attacked by the media. This was the case for Princess Diana. Many press journalists have raised the issue that Princess Diana's death may be blamed on the members of the paparazzi who were aggressively pursuing her photograph.

3. Act independently (Code of Ethics).

This can be a concern if a broadcaster is owned by a politically affiliated media house. It can also be a challenge if a report is produced about the advertisers of a media organization.

4. Be accountable to readers (Code of Ethics).

The purpose of the press in a social responsibility society is tied to serving the public. Therefore, consumers must be able to voice their concerns with the press so that the press can be accountable to the public.

Nowhere in the code of ethics does the Society list allowing bias, seeking to entertain, or reporting along allegiance lines. To seek truth and report it, a journalist must be sure to report the true facts void of need to entertain. To minimize harm, a journalist must be sure that the information in news content will not mislead readers. To act independently, journalists must strive to operate without ties to outside sources, even if those outside sources have advertising contracts with the news organization. Lastly, journalists can be accountable to readers only if they offer readers the option to provide feedback and use the feedback to improve their reporting.

Research shows that objectivity is met by many challenges. From patriotism to corporate pressure to consumers themselves, journalists have many opposing loyalties to answer to in regards to subjectivity. Also, the current need for immediate news deters quality research and investigative reporting. Textual analysis, surveys, case studies, and interviews all show the complicated views surrounding objectivity. Journalists themselves, in the code of ethics, admit that objectivity and fairness are essential to quality news coverage. While objectivity is a utopian goal that journalists can never fully achieve, it is still a worthwhile quest to conquer.

## Central Themes to Be Addressed

The central themes which this thesis will address surround current news coverage. In America and around the world, news organizations emphasize balanced, unbiased, objective news coverage. Whether or not this emphasis is followed through upon or not is a matter of debate after considerable research. The real issue is if consumers assume that their news content is objective, then they have no reason to critically analyze the content they consume. Therefore, news agencies may alter content with abandon and consumers will absorb their news without question.

This thesis will analyze whether or not American news today does pursue unbiased coverage, and the degree to which the pursuit is effective. Using that information, the research will then investigate what factors detract from objectivity and what factor is the most to blame. These factors will be shown as financial pressure, ratings competition, need for immediate coverage of events, and entertainment in news coverage. Finally, the thesis will offer suggestions based upon its findings to more effectively seek unbiased reporting. These suggestions will focus not on news agencies themselves, which are already balancing many stresses, but on consumers to be active members of their news media viewership.

## Methodology

This thesis will use two methods to reach its goal. First, I will use published articles and critiques of media today to learn about objectivity in journalism today. I will research what experts view as the main deterrent of unbiased reporting. I will look for themes and similarities in the causes for biased news coverage. I will analyze audience satisfaction and expectation data for news coverage. This will tell me what the consumers want and the possible role that may play in dictating the content of news coverage. Second, I will analyze news articles from today's media covering one national news story.

The research is clear as is shown in the literature review that news media in America are faced with a conundrum of competing loyalties. A reporter has to eat, and therefore must earn money to put food on the table. Also, a reporter must have a media through which to convey a message. This medium is often protected by governmental blocks, such as licensing for broadcast stations.

To select a news story applicable to my research, I looked for a national news story that had both clear cut facts and also room for bias in reporting. I had to choose a story that was important nationally so that news organizations would have assigned staff writers to the event, and not use a wire agency for their coverage.

I selected the news story regarding Senator Hilary Clinton's victory in the Florida Primary which occurred in the end of January, 2008. This story is laden with political nuances, both along party lines and campaign opinions. The story is

also of enough importance that most news organizations assigned staff writers individually to the story.

The news organizations which I studied are all internationally known and internationally consumed. They all have strong reputations for news coverage. The first is the Associated Press, which was used by MSNBC.com. The Associated Press is one of the world's top news agencies. The Associated Press is the largest commercial news agency and has one many Pulitzer Prizes for its work. It is known world wide, particularly for its photojournalism. The Associated Press sends its stories internationally, which are then used by news organizations which have not assigned staff writers to the content, or do not have access to close information. From small community papers to large international news agencies, the Associated Press's work holds great power in the international news coverage.

Second is FoxNews.com, which offers immediate coverage of worldwide events. Its television and internet reporting are popular for many news content consumers. FoxNews has a reputation for biased coverage, and this research tests that assumption.

Lastly, this research examines the New York Times, one of the top newspapers in the entire world. The newspaper is read internationally and is one of the most respected and consumed news organizations. Policymakers routinely access this newspaper as it is ranked among the top newspapers worldwide. Other news organizations look to the News York Times as an example of successful reporting.

## A Critical Analysis

### **Event to Consider: The Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton Victory in Florida Primary**

I will examine articles from three different American news sources covering the same national news story. These sources include The New York Times, FoxNews, and the Associated Press as seen on MSNBC.com. I will search for signs of bias and objectivity. These signs include comparing and contrasting descriptions of people, places, and events as well as descriptive language which belies opinion of the news agency. Also, possible indicators of bias include entertaining jargon or overly simplified wording. I will investigate possible causes for each article's bias or lack of bias, based on news ownership, political affiliations, immediacy in reporting, and customer satisfaction numbers.

Ultimately, this deep look into these three powerful news organization's coverage of a major national news story will serve as an example of all the inner workings of news media operating in America today. As I serve to examine how and why stories are not objective, as they never truly can be, I will also serve to show how consumers must be made aware of the bias in their news media.

*The New York Times:*

The article is titled “Clinton Wins in Florida, but Without Any Delegates to Sweeten the Victory.” It is written by John M. Broder and published on January 30, 2008. The article addresses Senator Clinton’s win in the Florida primary. It does so with what appears to be clear cut facts, numbers, and data. The story is backed up by quotes and first hand experience.

In the latter half of the story, however, the journalist takes a turn for entertaining, biased reporting. A reporter’s choice of words holds great power to sway an unquestioning reader. Mr. Broder cited the disagreement between the Democratic Party as a “spat.” Such a word holds connotations that are not backed up by his facts. Using the term “spat” could connote jealousy, silliness, or frivolity. The problems listed in the story do not necessarily fit any of these descriptions. The word usage serves not to portray information in an unbiased or fair manner. It serves only to entertain readers, which ultimately could result in a deceptive article.

Quotes also hold weight in depicting a situation to readers. The last quote of the article is from a voter, and states: “What tipped me was the way Bill Clinton was going after him [Barack Obama]...that just put the icing on the cake for me. I think he did more damage than he did good. He should have let her run her own campaign” (Broder). The issue with this quote selection is that there is no balanced quote to support Senator Clinton. There is not a contrasting view.



The quote brings in a completely new issue of the campaign supporters, which was not addressed earlier.

Furthermore, the quote holds little journalistic value and does not give concrete information to consumers. It only serves to entertain and create drama in the situation. Therefore, the reader is possibly left with a sour impression of Senator Clinton, which makes the article ultimately biased and unobjective.

*MSNBC.com*

*Associated Press*

The article is titled “Clinton gets most Democratic votes in Fla.” It was posted on-line on January 29, 2008 at 10:41 pm. This story shows again how word choice is a difficult task to undertake, because it can easily cross the line between interesting, descriptive language to altered entertainment. The reporters use words such as “collide” when referring to primary competitions between Senator Barack Obama and Senator Hillary Clinton. The article describes Senator Clinton as “winking” at a pledge made to her political party, and then describes her as though she broke the party’s rules, without stating as a fact that she did. Using vague language can also misinform the public, because it may lead to assumptions.

The Associated Press is an international news agency which releases its articles and photographs worldwide to news organizations. Its articles can be found on large news networks, such as is the case here, and in small community papers. The Associated Press is made to be clear for all consumers, because it serves a wide range of people. This is a difficult if not impossible task to complete. A person in Cedar Falls, Iowa will not read a news story the same way that a person in London, England or Paris, France or Baghdad, Iraq or Conraky, Guinea, or Sidney, Australia. However, the Associated Press must try to inform all of these readers well. When one consumes content from the Associated Press,

one must remember that such content is not targeted only to one demographic of consumers, but to an entire world.

*FOXNews:*

The article is titled, "Clinton Claims Win in Florida Primary." It is written by an Associated Press writer, Mike Glover. The story was posted on January 30, 2008. The article's post on-line again shows the true economic driving force behind news media. Pasted into the text is an advertisement for a Home Depot sale. The journalist had no say in whether his article would be added to a commercial advertisement, yet it was. The news agencies have to find a way to survive financially, and apparently FoxNews does so by placing advertisements in the middle of its on-line news stories. This is a matter for the company as a whole to deliberate and act upon, and is clearly out of the hands of the individual reporter. All that Mr. Glover can work on is the success of his reporting through words.

Mr. Glover organized his coverage in a surprising way. First, he tells of the logistics of the Florida Primary. He states the activities by both competing politicians. He then elaborates not on the victor, Senator Clinton who is mentioned in the headline, but on the loser, Senator Obama. This could possibly serve as campaigning for Senator Obama, and is not a balance or even covering of the Florida Primary. Rather, he appears only to serve Senator Obama and leave an impression of Obama's charisma and interesting background.

This organization certainly could serve to entertain and interest the public. However, Mr. Glover's choice to focus on the appealing aspects of Senator Obama while ignoring his competition is risky when pursuing objectivity. Mr.

Glover in the end could very easily use his position as a journalist not in a socially responsible manner.

*Themes of All Three Articles:*

In studying all three articles, they each show individual weaknesses in objectivity. One shows word choice that could impress falsehoods on readers, one is entertaining to the point of being deceptive, and one is ridden with advertisements. Although these articles all cover the same event in national news, their writers all find different ways to convey their message to the readers. All three articles display the impossibility of truly objective reporting. Regardless of how diligently a reporter works to ensure the most accurate, fair, and complete news coverage, there will always be a lack of objectivity. These three articles display this phenomenon.

Even in their differences, these articles also show one predominant similarity that could potentially show bias in reporting. All three articles were posted on their news agencies' websites within moments of the conclusion of the primary. Therefore, the reporters must have either prewritten their coverage in anticipation of results or written their articles rapidly. In either case, there was limited time to research the event or the atmosphere around it with any depth.

Without enough time to ensure that all information is correct and that all bases are covered, there is increased chance for not only blatant errors in facts, but also more pervasive errors in avoiding bias. Reporters may not have ample opportunity to choose the best fitted word for a situation if their articles need to be posted within moments of an event. Therefore, bias may sneak in even if the

journalist has the best of intentions. Immediate reporting provides opportunity for errors to erode the quality of news reporting.

## Results

In pursuing these two methods of analysis, the research shows that journalistic objectivity is an elusive phenomenon. Without the pursuit of unbiased reporting, news coverage would be open to excessive, unstoppable deception by which the public may be easily swayed. Although objectivity appears to be impossible to attain, news reporters need to work diligently to aspire to objective reporting. Objectivity is a worthwhile pursuit.

Objectivity is ultimately impossible. Reporters do not operate in a vacuum void of influences, allegiances, or ulterior motives. There are numerous factors impeding objectivity in American journalism. These factors include financial greed, need to entertain using news content, a demand for immediate coverage, an inundation of advertisements, outside alliances, and a quest for ratings. The truth of the news media is this: news agencies must make a profit. Agencies do so through advertising, subscription sales, or broadcasting. The presence of these influences makes true objectivity impossible.

The outside factors which affect journalism are not going away any time soon. In fact, if they did, there may be terrifying repercussions for the freedom of the press. If the American press system operated under a different philosophy, the government or large corporations may take over. If this were the case, both commanders stand to control the news content to the point of using it as propaganda. A situation like this would be a drastic regression in news media. Therefore, the factors which hurt objectivity are unavoidable, even as reporters must work to ignore them as they continue their quest.



Even though the news media does not stand a chance to achieve truly objectivity, consumers often expect it. Therefore, readers may not critically analyze or question their news media. Rather, they may take news coverage at its word, without further inquiry.

If this remains the case, news organizations may cease to inform the public, but rather to misinform the public.

## Recommendations

To deal with the American press system's inability to provide objective news content, three steps need to be taken: journalistic ethical behavior, news organizations' confession of lack of objectivity, and consumers' critical analysis.

There are multiple journalistic codes of ethics. All seem to point out the need for objectivity. If journalists are honest with themselves that their reporting requires an attempt at honest coverage, they stand a chance to greatly improve their work. If not, their news coverage will not fulfill its duty to society.

Additionally, the American press system stands to benefit from an admittance by news organizations of their dependence upon advertising revenue. For example, news agencies could provide web pages attached to their websites disclosing their investors and advertisers. This would remove any question of the capitalist nature of news media. Transparency would eliminate any question of who pays for a news agency to operate. News organizations could also openly provide information about ownership to allow consumers to analyze their news content accurately.

Journalists can take charge of their profession from the start by providing ample instruction to their new members. This means that new, aspiring journalists need to be taught well in the practices of journalism as well as the ethics. Instruction in the classroom before a reporter is hired for a newspaper may help the new reporter to pursue objectivity and fair reporting throughout the reporter's career. A strong profession of journalists must begin with adequate instruction and education.

Professional journalists can also improve the news content in America by evaluating their own performance. To evaluate, two practices need to be adopted: a national committee to police content and a board of editors in each news organization to police its individual content. The national committee should hold the power to warn and even eventually sanction reporters and news organizations found to be violating journalistic standards. In the individual news organization, the editors must have routine meetings to reflect on the quality and objectivity of their reporting. The news organization can then improve itself accordingly.

These first recommendations are a great start, but will do nothing to aid the American press system without the involvement of consumers. Not only is the press responsible to take social action regarding journalism, but also the public is as well. Consumers need to understand the nature of the media which they consume. Using this information, consumers of media can analyze the information provided by news agencies. Readers can examine the backgrounds of their news reporting, such as financial goals, ownership, and political affiliations. Consumers can easily scrutinize the time and date of an event compared to the time and date of the news coverage. Using this information, the reader can then absorb the report knowing how much time elapsed for the reporter to investigate facts and discover all sides of the story.

At the end of the (news) day, media outlets must earn a profit and make money to continue to operate. They must attract more viewers or readers than their competition to remain in business. Therefore, ratings, audience satisfaction,

and not offending powerful people may become more important than providing unbiased, truthful, investigative reporting.

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