Evolving journalism norms: objective, interpretive and fact-checking journalism

Jen Birks

Abstract:

This chapter will first query the various constructions of 'bad' audience responses to information and argumentation, and suggest an approach that neither expects too much of news audiences (and inevitably finds them wanting) nor patronizes them (and expects them to accept authoritative accounts 'just because'). Secondly I will evaluate journalistic epistemologies in terms of how they enable that audience response, in particular, comparing objective journalism and interpretive journalism. I will do so in reference both to ways of knowing (the facts) and ways of interrogating (what we do with those facts within arguments). Finally, I will argue that fact-checking journalism, as a particular form of interpretive journalism, demonstrates a positive model for enabling a reasonable audience, not as a sidelined genre as it currently stands, but as a central journalistic practice. Ultimately, 'objective' journalism cannot help audiences to make better judgements because it only takes responsibility for small facts and leaves its sources to fight it out – theatrically but unilluminatingly – over the big truths. A more effective direction for political journalism indicated by fact-checking journalism is to focus on how the factual assertions are used appropriately or misleadingly in arguments.

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Objective journalism in a post-truth era

Post-truth was the Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year in 2016, but it has been embraced more by journalists (Ball, 2017, Davis, 2017, d'Ancona, 2017) than by scholars (Carlson, 2018, Waisbord, 2018, Vos and Thomas, 2018). Journalists' enthusiasm for the concept can be explained in no small part as a growing crisis in reporters' own understanding of their institutional authority (Vos and Thomas, 2018). One aspect of that crisis is the apparent wane in the news media's influence over politicians' fortunes when holding them to account, and underlying that is journalism's waning influence over public opinion (Carlson, 2018, Waisbord, 2018, Vos and Thomas, 2018).

Whilst concern over this 'post-truth' condition is ostensibly over errant public belief, arguably the shock for journalists has not so much been their limited political influence over the audience – which has been long established by audience reception research on election reporting in particular (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), and acknowledged by publishers (Dowell, 2012) – but that *politicians* have stopped believing in that influence and therefore no longer feel hostage to securing a good press. The loss of this agenda-setting and accountability role leaves one fewer distinction between professional journalism and blogging (Vos and Thomas, 2018).

The nature of that crisis also highlights longstanding tensions between overlapping and yet conflicting notions of political journalism's social and democratic role – between 'objective' and 'interventionist' journalism. Influence over public opinion is overtly disavowed by proponents of objective journalism, in favor of neutrally informing them of events (the who, what, where, and when of what Salgado and Strömbäck (2012) call 'descriptive' journalism). In political journalism those events are primarily confected media events, so this description

amounts to stenography of each party's claims and counterclaims, and leaving the audience to 'make up their own mind' (Tuchman, 1978, Patterson, 2013). However, having refused to adjudicate between claims with increasingly wildly divergent grounding in evidence (for instance on climate change), journalists now find fault with audiences for failing to make their minds up *the right way*.

The ability of the audience to make "oppositional readings" of media texts based on their personal experience, alternative sources of information and political leaning was once celebrated as a limit on the definitional and political power of the corporate media (Hall, 1980). That same ability is fretted over now that their often flawed interpretations are shared and amplified on the internet, fueling conspiracy theories, rumors and hoaxes (Waisbord, 2018). Where once scholars identified healthy skepticism, now they see a crisis of distrust in the media, and in the experts and authorities they quote; where once they sought to puncture media power, now there is an impulse to defend professional political journalism from attacks by reactionary populists such as Donald Trump.

However, if we can agree that the central problem is "what people do with information rather than what journalism unilaterally decides are accurate portrayals of reality" (Waisbord, 2018), then we need to consider more carefully what it is that we *expect* people to do with that information. The concept of 'post-truth politics' may be analytically woolly, but it calls attention to the unresolved question of what a democratically functional audience response to contested political claims might look like, rather than simply calling attention to its dysfunctions, whether for being too credulous or too dismissive of authorities. The core critical task is therefore to identify how political journalism can better enable the audience to make a reasonable judgement on political claims and arguments.

The aim of this chapter is therefore threefold. Firstly, I will query the various constructions of 'bad' audience responses to information and argumentation, and suggest an approach that neither expects too much of news audiences (and inevitably finds them wanting) nor patronizes them (and expects them to accept authoritative accounts 'just because'). Secondly I will evaluate journalistic epistemologies in terms of how they enable that audience response, in particular, comparing objective journalism and interpretive journalism. I will do so in reference both to ways of knowing (the facts) and ways of interrogating (what we do with those facts within arguments). Finally, I will argue that fact-checking journalism, as a particular form of interpretive journalism, demonstrates a positive model for enabling a reasonable audience, not as a sidelined genre as it currently stands, but as a central journalistic practice.

Audiences for political journalism

The debate over what we can expect of public understanding of political affairs is at least a century old, having been exercised in surprisingly familiar terms by journalist Walter Lippman and philosopher John Dewey, (summarized adroitly by Allan, 2009). Where Lippman came to despair of the ability of journalism, let alone audiences, to determine the truth of complex matters of governance, advocating instead for a truncated democracy of experts, Dewey retained faith in the ability of publics to exercise judgement *if enabled to do* so, but without indicating what *would* so enable them (Allan, 2009).

Concern about an audience disengaged or disoriented by political news has never disappeared; journalistic attempts to address it remerged most prominently in the public or civic journalism movement (Rosen, 2000). However, much mainstream journalism preferred simply to assume that it knew what the public, or at least its audience, thought important and presumed not only to speak *to* them in ways that flattered their existing beliefs about the world but also to speak *for* them to politicians (Lewis et al., 2005, Birks, 2010).

Social media has disrupted that assumption. Whereas once, journalists in the UK and US were convinced that public opinion coalesced around the center-right values of suburban 'Middle England' or 'Middle-America' (Lewis et al 2008), social media has made a wider range of opinions visible and raised concerns about polarization (for example, Baum and Groeling, 2008). The notion that the voters are increasingly swayed by their emotions and instincts – and especially by heuristics such as trust and charisma – may also be based more on a myth of rationally instrumental voters than any significant change in popular epistemologies.

Political ideology as interpretive heuristic

The first concern is that audiences use their partisan attachments to party or political ideology as a heuristic to parse information and truth claims (Carlson, 2018). This anxiety is predominantly found in the US and UK, where partisanship is regarded in opposition to rationality, and rationality often equated with *instrumental* rational choice. In contrast, the northern European tradition of journalistic professionalism combines factual accuracy with partisan interpretation of those facts (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, Schudson and Anderson, 2009). Indeed, Schudson (2001) argues that even in the US, this was not only understood but taken for granted, If possible for journalists, then, it is entirely possible for audiences to similarly interpret information through a partisan perspective, without holding counterfactual beliefs.

Our political values have a valuable role to play when we are invited to make judgements on political controversies. They inform our sense of 'the good society' and therefore the goals of political action, they animate our sense of injustice, which may also be felt in political emotions such as outrage and informs our priorities for problems that should be resolved, and they help us to weigh up alternative options where they may involve unintended consequences. That is to say that values – even coherent political ideologies – are vital parts of political argumentation (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012).

Equally valuable, however, is a dispassionate evaluation of the effectiveness of current and proposed *means* of achieving those goals and resolving those problems. Here values should be set aside in favor of reliable observations and logical analyses, but given the human fallibility of experts, critical questions should still be asked of them (Walton, 2006). It may be that partisans are most motivated to ask those questions, but it does not invalidate them.

The key consideration, then is that politics is never simply about observable, empirical facts, but about arguments. Accordingly, we should also recognize that when audiences reject the conclusions drawn by journalists or their sources, if does not mean that they reject the factual evidence that underpins the argument, but may reject the logical inference of the argument, or doubt other premises. For example, they may doubt the claimed outcome of a proposed policy, which is a reasoned but non-factual claim about causal relationships and future probabilities (Birks, 2019a).

Conversely, they can choose to believe the jist of an argument, even if the premises are proven false. For instance, when Nyhan et al (2019) analyzed Trump supporters' responses to a fact-checking article that corrected an erroneous claim that crime was increasing, they found that people did broadly accept the factual correction but persisted in favoring tough law and order policies and supporting Trump. The authors interpreted this as irrational, but it is not illogical – disproving the factual premise for an argument does not disprove the argument, which could still hold true for reasons other than those presented (Walton, 2006).

Trust as a heuristic for credibility

Another heuristic that is potentially more problematic than political ideology is trust, or more specifically *dis*trust. Where audiences have little to go on in choosing between two conflicting truth claims *other* than trust, certain measures of credibility of the claim's author may be argumentatively relevant, such as being in a position to know, or recognized expertise, whilst likeability (or otherwise) is more likely to be an ad hominem fallacy (Walton, 2006). The personalization of politics has shifted the focus of political reporting toward the latter (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014), for which journalists must take some blame.

It is also possible that the muckraking news media have been hoist by their own petard – whilst Schudson (2008) has argued for the value of an unlovable press, audiences appear to have concluded otherwise. Where the public distrust both politicians and the news media they may disengage altogether. Vos and Thomas (2018) characterize journalists' invocation of 'post-truth' as an urge to "diffuse the blame - this was not a crisis of journalistic authority, but authority in general," including not only politicians but also experts. Meanwhile, in their analysis of journalists' reflections in the trade press they find that "truths about journalistic failings [...] were often conveniently ignored" in. One of the failings that is widely thought to undermine audience trust is an excessively adversarial press (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995, Patterson, 2013), which I will return to below.

However, we should not despair of audiences' critical faculties simply because they are distrustful of some mainstream news media and some scientists. Whilst selective perception of bias undoubtedly plays a role in audience distrust in a media outlet (Starkey, 2006), often critics raise quite reasonable credibility heuristics that are connected to media literacy. They include the political economy of media, especially ownership and funding interests, even if they tend to be more critical of state connections such as PSB than commercial interests (Birks, 2019a). Another strain of public criticism is that journalists' news judgements are influenced by their personal politics, which also has some academic support (Patterson and Donsbagh, 1996). So whilst audiences may be guilty of confirmation bias, they may also be aware that some journalists are just as capable of not letting inconvenient facts get in the way of a good story, whether motivated by personal or electoral ideology, commercial imperatives, or career advancement.

Epistemological differences

A contrasting explanation for increasing distrust in news media is that audiences reject not the subjective interpretation of journalists, but the claim to objective truth. Waisbord (2018) argues that the problem of widespread conspiracy theories and other demonstrably false beliefs is not a lack of information or the presence of misinformation, but a contemporary publics reject the epistemological realism of 'objective' journalism. Once again, in this interpretation, fact-checking cannot be a solution as it merely doubles down on the problem.

Accounts of post-truth politics invariably touch on the surprising embrace of postmodern relativism by reactionary populists – most obviously Kelly-Anne Conway's assertion of a patently counterfactual claim about turnout at Trump's presidential inauguration as "alternative facts" (Ball, 2017, d'Ancona, 2017). This radical relativism propounds the existence not only of multiple moral truths and interpretive truths, where human perception is most flawed and subjective, but also of multiple versions of observable, descriptive facts. This relativism is clearly strategic; it is based in the established propagandistic tactic of muddying the waters, as used by corporate interests and political powers (Oreskes and Conway, 2011). However, the proponents of post-truth suggest that audiences embrace this relativism.

In support of this assertion, Waisbord (2018) cites "belief communities" such as anti-vaxxers and climate change denialists. However, those conspiracy theories are not based in postmodernist relativism, but a belief that the *real* truth is being hidden from them by powerful interests. Audiences primarily judge mediated truth claims on the basis of professional journalistic claims to objectivity, but find them wanting. They may do so via flawed reasoning, poor evidence and overly cynical or even outlandish assumptions about vested interests, but much news reporting, and especially political reporting, offers them little else to go on.

In political debates on fact-checkers' social media posts, these (relatively engaged) publics appear to hold a critical realist epistemology – that there is a real world but our observations of it are flawed and manipulable (Birks, 2019a).   Publics are aware that power corrupts truth, but that doesn't mean that they don't believe that there *is* a truth. Of course, resorting to instinctive assessments of 'truthiness' is not a solution to the recognition that manipulative rhetoric and dissembling is common in politics. Nor is 'authenticity', especially now that unspun spontaneity is as much a strategic political performance as the slickly spun soundbite (Enli, 2015). However, these are understandable shortcuts in the absence of more compelling reasons to accept or reject political arguments. Compelling reasons are therefore what audiences need. If professional journalism is to be reformulated to take a more critically analytical stance, journalists need a more coherent notion of their epistemological role, not just in ways of knowing, but ways of enabling the audience to know[i].

Trends in journalistic professionalism – objectivity, interpretation and partisanship

From partisan to objective, 'fact-based' or descriptive journalism

The objectivity norm first arose in the US, in Schudson's persuasive account (Schudson, 2001, Schudson and Anderson, 2009), to facilitate social cohesion among journalists as a 'profession' and social control of them by editors, and also as 'boundary work' to define journalists in distinction to other groups. For 20th century journalists, when professional norms were first formally articulated by the first professional association in the 1920s, it was the rise of public relations (PR) that required such clear boundaries. The distinction drawn by the objectivity norm was therefore one of *impartiality*, rather than truth-telling in the mode of 'scientific realism' outlined by Waisbord (2018).

For 21st century journalists, Vos and Thomas (2018) argue, boundaries have been redrawn to exclude blogging and other forms of 'citizen journalism,' not least by doubling down on the claim to a public service roleii. Professional journalists have lost the claim to be first with important information, now that eyewitnesses' audio-visual testimony and authorities' statements can both reach the public directly through social media. Having also conceded the claim to political clout (as discussed above), factual accuracy and investigation are left as the most plausible, though not unassailable, social role that professional journalists alone can offer. This distinction is brought into sharper relief by journalists emphasizing or even overstating the amount of 'fake news' circulating on social media (though one study (Chadwick et al., 2018) found that in the British context, most misinformation on Twitter originated in the tabloid press). Objectivity as impartiality remains relevant in this form of boundary work, as does factual accuracy, but the interpretation of objectivity as passively balancing sources' truth claims is obstructive to the goal of truth-telling.

The limitations of objective journalism

Since objectivity in journalistic terms is primarily operationalized by practices of attribution that distance the journalist from the claims made by their sources, it is not well suited to verification. There are, of course, journalistic practices of investigation that more actively aim to corroborate sources' claims – not just because the claims are controversial but because they are typically made by powerless witnesses (Ettema and Glasser, 1998) – but they require significant investment of time and other resources rarely available in today's cash-strapped news organizations. In most day-to-day journalism practice, then, verification is limited to names, places and dates, and the accuracy of their stenography of sources' quotes (Shapiro et al., 2013).

This routine operationalization of objectivity has always been problematic, particularly in political journalism, because it assumes that credible sources' testimony can be taken at face value. In political reporting, however, sources appear in the news not because they are credible, honest or well-informed, but because they are powerful. The Trump presidency has presented a particular challenge to journalists' uncritically stenographic practices, but it is not the first. Schudson's account of "factual knowledge in an age of truthiness" was not about Steve Bannon but Karl Rove, remarking that "The Bush administration brazenly denies external standards of truth" (Schudson, 2009), though the 'Mission Accomplished' banner now looks like acceptable puffery next to Trump's barrage of blatant falsehoods. So professional political journalism also increasingly needs to distinguish itself by critically analyzing the wider narratives and arguments in which 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' are merely the arsenal.

Interpretive journalism - a return to partisanship?

In Salgado and Strömbäck's (2012) influential definition, interpretive journalism is contrasted with descriptive journalism and its operationalization of objectivity as direct quotation or audio-visual clips of sources, whilst recognizing this as a spectrum rather than a binary distinction. Instead, interpretive journalism features a greater or more explicit use of the journalist's own voice, often as a subject authority, including news analysis and commentary by political editors and other specialist correspondents.

Interpretive journalism has been criticized as a return to partisanship. Whilst Patterson (2000, 2013) accepts the central limitations of objective journalism as actually practiced, he is

critical of interpretive journalism for prioritizing the voice of the journalist over that of the politician. He argues that it is a way for journalists to take more (subjective) control over agenda setting and news framing, but in particular complains that "facts are used mainly to illustrate the theme chosen by the journalist", which is equally possible in the quote selection and framing decisions of objective journalism, but less transparently.

Most of all, however, Patterson (2013) associates interpretive journalism with the light and trite logic of television news, commercialization and the kind of adversarial journalism that amplifies insignificant weaknesses into major gaffes and scandals. At the same time, he implicitly acknowledges that interpretive journalism is not always, and therefore not intrinsically, sensationalist and entertainment-oriented, when he exempts the "genuine watchdog role" of investigative journalism with multiple sources and verification. Oddly, he makes no such exception for fact-checking journalism, which he seems to incorrectly assume to be exclusively negative and never to affirm the accuracy of a politician's claim[iii]. Patterson's complaint is not really about interpretation at all, then, but commercialization and cost-cutting, since hyper-adversarialism is often the only opportunity desk-bound journalists have to demonstrate a critical distance from their sources' PR (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995).

Most studies of interpretive journalism agree, therefore, that there is nothing *inherently* partisan about the practice – like other forms of journalism, it can be well-evidenced and logically supported judgement, or it can be based on irrelevant but salacious rumor. The instinctive sense of interpretive judgement as biased perhaps comes from its contrast with a dominant practice of objectivity in which not only opinions, but truth claims are routinely *balanced*, rather than *impartially* interrogated for their relative merit.

The relevant parallel with social scientific methodology is therefore not the positivistic, deductive model of hard science, but the reasoned hypothesis-generation of the inductive model. In other words, as Neveu (2014) persuasively argues, interpretive or 'narrative' journalists can fruitfully employ methods that are more like social science rather than less. Indeed, he argues that journalists could draw more on the social sciences for a "rich toolkit of methods for observation, investigation and reflective understanding of what is trustworthy or not in the data collected by legwork." The information the news audience needs to make sense of the competing claims and counterclaims varies according to the type of claim, but includes source credibility, supporting evidence, and possible alternative explanations for factual observations.

This is a useful framework within which to understand fact-checking journalism. Although the term 'fact-checking' might connote objectivity in the sense of verification (leading Uscinski and Butler, 2013 to accuse it of niave realism), because it often includes a verdict on the truth or credibility of a claim, fact-checking can be understood as part of the interpretive turn (Graves, 2016). Graves (2018) has found that US fact-checkers initially considered themselves to be objective journalists and rejected the notion that they could "improve public discourse," but as fact-checking became a global movement, encompassing "activists, political reformers and cause-oriented journalists" they began to recognize an impact on politicians' behavior. However, in Salgado and Strömbäck's (2012) definition, journalistic interpretation is a judgement or commentary "without support from verifiable facts," which would seem to align it more closely with opinion and exclude fact-checking.

Fact-checking as interpretive journalism: Identifying the line between facts, interpretation and opinion

Discussions of journalistic truth-telling tend to assume that the line between fact and opinion is obvious, or that it is spurious, and that journalists are similarly divisible into either camp (Hanitzsch et al., 2011), but disagreements between philosophical realists and social constructivists are narrower in practical application than in the abstract. All but the most ardent postmodern relativists agree on the existence of factual truths – specific circumstances or processes, as far as they are reliably observable. And even a hardline positivist would accept that other truth claims, such as predictions, are not factual (Uscinski and Butler, 2013), yet neither are they always simply opinion. There is a spectrum of informed judgement and interpretation that lies between the discrete, observable and widely witnessed fact and the value-based opinion about what ought to be.

Interpretation attends to *the relationship between* the observable facts, which is theoretical rather than factual because – again, taking a critical realist stance – our human ability to perceive the complex interactions between infinite potential variables is limited. And yet, in political journalism it is this relationship that is most pertinent, because politics is centrally about the impact that policies and legislation have had or may in future have on the world.

For example, in campaigning for the 2017 UK general election, Conservative politicians claimed that schools funding had risen since 2010, whilst Labour politicians claimed that it had fallen. Mainstream journalists considered their work done by allowing each side their 'opinion'. Meanwhile, fact-checking journalists found that both claims were factually true, based the same official statistics, but by different measures – the total amount spent and the amount per pupil, respectively. Whilst it is useful to know that both claims are factually defensible – avoiding the implication that one or both must be lying, or that truth is relative – in itself that knowledge does not help us to evaluate the political arguments over whether schools were able to deliver quality teaching and therefore whether funding should be increased.

If we want the audience to make an informed judgement rather than prefer the argument that accords with their presuppositions, then journalists need to offer the interpretive context for how the factual claims support the argument being made. In this case, further information about circumstances (that there are more variable than fixed costs in education and that pupil numbers had risen significantly) underpinned the interpretation that per-pupil funding is the more relevant measure and therefore Labour's argument was better supported by the factual evidence (see Birks, 2019a for further details and discussion of this example).

This is often what fact-checking journalists in fact do, but these efforts can be met with resistance because their verdicts adjudicating between parties breach the dominant conventions of objective journalism and can be interpreted, unfairly, as partisan (Birks, 2019a, Birks, 2019b). Critical audiences can reject the presumptuousness of fact-checking journalists to make such judgements, but most often when they encounter only the verdict without the analysis, as they do on social media.

From truth to reason – Towards argumentational political journalism

Whilst audiences certainly interpret information through the lens of their ideological beliefs and values, they also apply other heuristics such as judgements of credibility and trustworthiness that are valid critical questions in rational argumentation. If we agree that what the audience do with information is important, it also matters what contextual information they are given to inform their own judgements. Journalism needs to let go of its "ambition to be the arbiter of truth" (Waisbord, 2018), not because audiences reject the basis of journalists' judgement but because they doubt it for good reasons. Journalists therefore need to go further than publishing valid information and include reasons to accept that information.

Of course, objective journalists recoil from that implicit claim to be arbiters of truth and claim to 'let the audience make up their own mind' by presenting 'both sides' (whether or not there are only two perspectives) but accord them only a negative freedom – an absence of constraint or direction by leaving them to decide between conflicting truth claims without *any basis other* than heuristics of trust and ideology. Therefore, journalists also need to go further than making good credibility judgements in choosing their news sources and interrogate the evidence in support of those sources' arguments. This is especially true of political journalists, for whom source selection is more intrinsically related to power and authority than credibility, and conflicts between those powerful sources substitutes for criticality.

Ultimately, 'objective' journalism cannot help audiences to make better judgements because it only takes responsibility for small facts and leaves its sources to fight it out – theatrically but unilluminatingly – over the big truths. Various forms of interpretive journalism, including fact-checking journalism, suggest a more effective direction for political journalism. A particular approach indicated by fact-checking journalism is to focus on how the factual assertions are used appropriately or misleadingly in arguments, and to explore the unstated premises of those arguments, as well as asking critical questions of theoretical (non-factual) premises.

The strategic political bullshitting (Schudson, 2009) associated with the label 'post-truth politics' has seen the reactionary right pick up the critiques of elite media previously adopted by the progressive and radical left, and philosophical relativism from postmodernist theorists (Waisbord, 2018), but the reaction against this should not lead us to defend political journalism against reasonable doubts, but to consider how it can learn from this crisis in trust, not to pander to ill-informed prejudices but to serve the reasonable citizen in good faith. It may still fail but it would fail better.

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[i] A parallel could be drawn with education – more effective educational strategies involve the learner rather than simply imparting knowledge and expecting it to be absorbed.

[ii] However, US-based fact-checking journalists have welcomed non-journalists in other countries into the fact-checking movement GRAVES, L. 2018. Boundaries Not Drawn. *Journalism Studies,* 19**,** 613-631., where they are not a direct challenge to their authority. It is notable that media errors are not subject to fact-checking by external organizations in the US as they are elsewhere

[iii] In the 2017 UK general election, there were slightly more positive fact-checking verdicts than there were negative or mixed and unclear verdicts, though many positively fact-checked claims that were critical of the opposing party BIRKS, J. 2019a. *Fact-Checking Journalism and Political Argumentation: A British Perspective*, Palgrave Pivot..

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