‘Homo journalisticus’:
Journalism education’s role in articulating the objectivity norm

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Abstract
This study, building on an ideational theory of historical change, examines what role journalism education had in the articulation of objectivity as an occupational norm from the 1890s to the 1940s. An analysis of early texts of journalism education shows how objectivity was naturalized and legitimated. The texts rarely engaged criticism of objectivity and instead mythologized journalism by portraying it as a mechanical process overseen by professionals who are like judges, scientists and professors. The desires of audiences and advertisers did not complicate objectivity, as contemporaneous critics suggested – the texts conclude that market mechanisms were what made objective journalism possible.

Keywords
Education, journalism history, legitimation, objectivity, occupational norms

Journalism historians have long studied the origins of a set of practices and ideas that we generally refer to as objectivity. But to say that objectivity became an ‘articulate professional value’ (Schudson, 1978: 157) or a ‘great law’ (Mindich, 1998: 114) is to say that it became an institutional norm (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). How a practice or idea becomes a norm must be answered with the same theoretical and empirical rigor as how a practice emerges in the first place. Schudson argues that ‘the position that the wide distribution of social behavior naturally and normally gives rise to a norm prescribing that behavior and attributing moral force to its observation skips over a necessary step’ (2001: 150). That step is explored here; that is, the step of explaining the norm’s
articulation. This study examines how the rhetoric of key journalism texts cast the practices and ideas of objectivity as normative.

Colleges and universities have taught that objectivity is a central journalistic norm for nearly as long as those schools have offered journalism education (Keeler et al., 2002; Mirando, 2001). Simply put, objectivity has long been a ‘focal point of journalism education’ (Gant, 2007: 17). However, the role that journalism education played in the creation of this occupational norm has not received the attention it should. The history of objectivity has been told many times (e.g. Mindich, 1998; Schiller, 1981; Schudson, 1978), although each story typically stresses different characters, events, or processes. This study, building on an ideational theory of historical change, examines what hand journalism education had in the story.

Bourdieu and others (Benson and Neveu, 2005; Bourdieu and Johnson, 1993) have argued that occupational norms are central to the cultural capital that establishes journalism as an autonomous field. The objectivity norm is central to that cultural capital – it provides news workers a measure of autonomy from the political and economic poles of power and therein allows journalists to make independent truth claims (Ward, 2008). But as critics (e.g. Schiller, 1981) have noted, inherent contradictions in the objectivity norm have led to a kind of journalism that amplifies the truth claims of political and economic elites, thereby compromising journalistic autonomy. For good or bad, occupational norms are central to the constitution of the journalistic field. While objectivity’s normative hold has weakened in recent years, the nature of the cultural capital that will replace it is still very much contested (Singer, 2010). Thus, we do well to understand how new norms come to be articulated.

Objectivity and ideational logic of historical change

A potential source of ambiguity in any historical explanation is the definition of the outcome being explained. The definition of journalistic objectivity, as complex as it may be, seems remarkably consistent in the journalism history literature (Evensen, 2002; Kaplan, 2002; Mindich, 1998; Schiller, 1981; Schudson, 1978; Shaw, 1967; Stensaas, 1987; Ward, 2004). The defining characteristics of objective journalism include an emphasis on verifiable facts, a factual arrangement of the news, reporting that accurately reflects events, impartial and balanced reporting and writing, a detached and impersonal point of view, and the separation of news and editorial functions of the news organization. Thus, the objectivity norm holds these practices as ‘moral ideals’ or as ‘morally potent prescriptions’. This occupational norm, since it is prescriptive, must be ‘self-consciously articulated’ (Schudson, 2001: 151).

Schudson concludes that ‘objectivity seemed a natural and progressive ideology for an aspiring occupational group at a moment when science was god, efficiency was cherished, and increasingly prominent elites judged partisanship a vestige of the tribal 19th century’ (2001: 162). While Schudson’s (1978, 2001) arguments are largely satisfying, they stop short of showing the process of articulation – the journey from rhetorical experimentation to ‘rhetorical formalization’ (2001: 152). This surely must have been a difficult journey. As Schudson noted, practitioners have had a love-hate relationship with objectivity. ‘From the beginning, then, criticism of the “myth” of objectivity has
accompanied its enunciation. Objectivity in journalism seems to have been destined to
be as much a scapegoat as a belief and more an awkward defense than a forthright affir-
mation’ (1978: 157–158). How an occupational norm could be articulated in the face of
such conflicted feelings and open doubt is something of a mystery – a mystery this
study seeks to address.

Vos (2010) has argued that historical scholarship must make the logic of historical
explanation explicit, if we are to avoid functionalist or realist stories. While this study is
primarily interpretative, it does rest on a logic of historical explanation; that is, on an
ideational logic of explanation. According to this logic of explanation, institutional actors
put forward a set of ideas to solve a perplexing problem. These ideas may or may not be
coherent or logical; they only need to shape how actors will think about or justify their
actions in their environment. The ideas may be transported from some other institutional
setting or creatively invented (Parsons, 2007; Sewell, 1992). One kind of ideational logic
of explanation was used famously by Kuhn (1970) to account for the structure of scien-
tific revolutions – a paradigm shift occurs when a new generation of adherents embraces
a new solution to a persistent problem. An ideational argument for objectivity becoming
a collective norm would emphasize the legitimizing power of ideas to move an emerging
practice to a normative practice.

Ideas take on an added social force, Kuhn (1970), Ong (1991), and others (e.g. Hall,
1982; Westbury, 1985) argue, particularly when they are inscribed as text. Texts in gen-
eral, and textbooks in particular, represent a fixed body of knowledge; that is, a sense that
a definitive treatment of a subject has been rendered. The textbook, according to Ong
(1991), is a sort of final word. Kuhn (1970) and Westbury (1985) argue that textbooks
and other primers establish orthodoxy in a field. Hence, textbooks are uniquely suited to
establish occupational norms.

Meyer and Rowan (1991) argue that organizations adopt those new practices and
norms that increase their own legitimacy and their subsequent chances of survival.
Legitimacy and survival are dependent on how organizations respond to public opinion,
the views of important constituents, and ‘knowledge legitimated through educational
institutions’ (1991: 44). These practices or norms may or may not contribute to the
rational or efficient operation of the organization; but that was not really the motive for
their adoption in the first place. In fact, actual organizational practices may fail to match
the legitimizing rhetoric that accompanied their adoption. Meyer and Rowan argue that
these norms ‘function as powerful myths, and many organizations adopt them ceremo-
nially’; which is to say actual practices may be decoupled from the ideas they supposedly
embody. Nevertheless, the ‘myths (become) embedded in the institutional environment’
(1991: 41).

As Meyer and Rowan (1991) suggest, educational institutions are uniquely situated to
play a role in ideationally generated change; a point also noted by Schudson (2001) and
Bourdieu (1998). However, we must be careful to treat this suggestion with a historical
sensibility. Colleges and universities were newly emerging ‘educational institutions’ in
the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Veysey, 1965); but other societal entities, such as
presses, journals, and lecture circuits, also laid some claim to an educational mission and
influence (Rieser, 2003). Meanwhile, journalism education was an even more recent
arrival, emerging slowly in the opening decades of the 20th century (Sloan, 1990;
Winfield, 2008). Nevertheless, some see a valuable role for journalism education in the story of objectivity. Iorio notes that journalism instruction, which emerged in the 1920s at the same time that objectivity was emerging as an occupational norm, ‘moved toward an increasingly reified interpretation of journalism’ (2004: 8).

Historians have shown that some media professionals were very eager to establish university-based journalism education, not only to train workers, but to also improve the standing of the journalism profession. The Missouri Press Association had been the prime mover behind the University of Missouri School of Journalism (Banning, 1998) and Joseph Pulitzer had put his money behind a Columbia University journalism program (Boylan, 2003). Banning (1998) shows that the Missouri Press Association was strongly motivated by a desire to legitimate journalism as a profession. Ironically, prominent journalists had been early opponents of college-based journalism education, dismissing the idea out of hand (Crenshaw, 1969). Perhaps because of this early, loud resistance, educators did more to praise journalism practice than challenge it (Claussen, 2004). Mirando (1992) argues that the texts of early journalism education did little more than put a stamp of academic integrity on contemporaneous journalistic practices. This literature supports the notion that journalism education played a unique role in legitimating practices as normative. Salcetti argues that ‘(j)ournalism joined other occupations in the early twentieth century in affixing a college degree as the requirement for entry into the occupation’ (1995: 60). However, Sloan (1990) has argued otherwise – that many journalists did not attend college. Whether working journalists around the turn of the 20th century received university education may very well be immaterial. The key issue is the authority that journalism education held in crafting occupational norms out of occupational practices (Meyer and Rowan, 1991).

The sites of investigation for this study are some of the early texts of journalism education – sites that addressed the objectivity norm (Mirando, 2001; Schudson, 2001). While this study began with a comprehensive list of texts identified by Mirando (1992), analysis focused on a purposive sample of 23 texts that made it to at least a second edition or are mentioned in previous studies (Mirando, 1992, 2001; Sloan, 1990; Sutton, 1968) as influential in journalism education. While many of these texts were geared to college students, others claimed to be geared to working and aspiring professionals. Non-college texts – for example, journals that purported to offer an educational mission – are also examined. The time period for the study is driven by Mindich’s (1998) argument that objectivity arrived as a law of journalism in the 1890s and Schudson’s (1978, 2001) argument that objectivity emerged as an occupational norm in the 1920s and 1930s. The selected texts provide a before, during, and after picture.

This study examines how the texts of journalism education addressed the norm of journalistic objectivity, how the texts addressed objectivity differently over time, to what extent the texts engaged criticism of objectivity, what legitimating discourse the texts employed, and how legitimacy was conferred. Thus, this study engages in discourse analysis, a means of interpreting texts in their social (and occupational) context (Van Dijk, 1980). By noting the use of voice, metaphor, inclusion, and omission, discourse analysis opens up texts’ discursive themes and strategies (Foss, 2004; Hall, 1980). The aim, then, is to understand how the texts’ own words do or do not play a role in constituting a normative discourse. The description of the texts’ discourse that follows is arranged
thematically. Where the texts tap into a historically potent legitimating discourse, that context is noted. Where the texts use discursive strategies, such as naturalization, those are noted. The use of voice, metaphor, inclusion, and omission are noted as well, and addressed again in the conclusions.

**Journalism texts and journalistic objectivity**

The earliest journalism texts prescribed journalistic rules that bear many of the hallmarks of objectivity. Edwin Shuman’s 1894 book, published by the Correspondence School of Journalism, reprinted at least four times under two different titles, and eventually used in college journalism instruction (see Mirando, 2001), described the reporters’ job as gathering facts, information and data; avoiding inaccuracies; and keeping their opinions out of stories (Shuman, 1894). Facts were the bedrock of journalism. Journalism relied on ‘plain’ (Hemstreet, 1901: 13; MacCarthy, 1906: 62) and ‘unvarnished’ (MacCarthy, 1906: 62; Ross, 1911: 18) facts. News stories were simply answers to the questions of who, what, when, where, why, and how (Byxbee, 1901; Murphy, 1914). Willard Grovenor Bleyer’s 1916 text cautions that any ‘embellishment’, any use of ‘fictitious details’, or any ‘distortion or suppression of significant facts’ is inconsistent with the purpose of the newspaper (Bleyer, 1916: 8). Indeed, facts should be verified through investigation (MacCarthy, 1906: 16). The authors would also define news in terms of its accuracy (e.g. Black, 1911; Byxbee, 1901; Murphy, 1914). As one author put it in 1906, ‘genuine news implies exact and accurate information’ (MacCarthy, 1906: 88). A 1911 book called accuracy the ‘first essential of news writing’ (Ross, 1911: 6).

The texts also advised the reporter to ‘leave himself out of the story’ (Ross, 1911: 20). The news must be impersonal (Seitz, 1916). The advice to reporters was as straightforward as it was simple: ‘Be impartial, unprejudiced’ (MacCarthy, 1906: 12). One book invoked a familiar turn of phrase – modern journalism was the age of news, not views (Ross, 1911). Likewise, journalists were to practice ‘fairness’ to all beliefs (Ross, 1911: 18). A 1911 book that came out of the University of Missouri School of Journalism, quoting from a St Louis newspaper, said simply that the modern newspaper relied on ‘objectivity’ – the writer had ‘to keep himself, his prejudices, preferences, opinions, out of the story all together’ (Ross, 1911: 17).

While these early texts seemed to articulate an objectivity norm, they also instructed aspiring reporters to embrace a literary ethic. Thus Shuman portrayed the journalist as ‘local chronicler’ (1894: 7), but also as literary worker, whose job it was to ‘shape and color and breathe life into a great story or treatise’ (1894: 4). Sure, reports should hone to the facts, according to Shuman, but that is because the editor will reshape the story around his opinion. Shuman asserts that the reader will forgive some inaccuracy if the story is written in a ‘simple, sensible, breezy style’ (1894: 66) or as a ‘newsy narrative’ (1894: 81). Stories required facts, according to a 1901 text, but they also required ‘color’ (Hemstreet, 1901: 32). Some facts just needed to be played up (MacCarthy, 1906). Early articles in the trade publication *The Editor*, which referred to itself as ‘the journal of information for literary workers’, emphasized accuracy and focusing on the ‘details of the fact-material’, but they also emphasized the individuality of the reporter in the ‘journalistic art-form’ (Black, 1911; Murphy, 1914). Grant Milnor Hyde’s text stressed
Journalism 13(4)

both marshaling facts and good storytelling – advising writers to add ‘an imaginary thrill in a commonplace happening’ (1912: 35). Journalists should select facts that are ‘amazing’ (Seitz, 1916: 66). Granted, some texts (e.g. Ross, 1911) were more articulate than others, but the discourse in these early journalism texts remained an inarticulate expression of objectivity.

Nevertheless, the texts do produce a wide-ranging legitimating discourse about those constitutive elements of objectivity – such as factuality, accuracy, fairness, and impersonality – that are described and advocated in the books. The dominant discourse touted the business and organizational benefits of being factual, fair, accurate, and impersonal. Fact-based stories aided the writer rushed for time, streamlined the work of copyeditors, eased congestion in the composing room, and kept readers, thereby building circulation (Murphy, 1914). And newspapers were in the business of pleasing readers. News stuck to facts because those factual stories could quickly inform ‘busy readers’ (Ross, 1911: 194). Hyde stated a related reason for writing fact-based stories – ‘There are certain questions which arise in the reader’s mind when (an) occurrence is suggested, and these questions must be answered as quickly as they are asked’ (1912: 38). In other words, ‘objectivity’ met marketplace demands. ‘Business reasons demand fairness’, according to Charles Griffith Ross’s 1911 book. ‘No paper can afford to offend a large group of readers’ (Ross, 1911: 19). As Don Carlos Seitz’s text concluded, ‘One newspaper cannot hide what another prints and remain fair in the public eye’ (1916: 41). By heeding the marketplace, a newspaper produced fair and factual news, therein making ‘dividends for the capitalists who have invested in it’ (Shuman, 1894: 17). The texts gave little sense that a commercial enterprise might create problems for ‘objectivity’. Nathaniel Clark Fowler’s 1913 book acknowledges that the ‘whip of commercialism’ means owners can produce a biased product should they choose. But he assured readers that ‘the great majority’ of owners are ‘fair’ and ‘broad-minded’ (1913: 180).

The effort to professionalize journalism, at least in part, had been an attempt to tame the undue commercialization of the press (see Banning, 2008). The Progressive Era’s push for professionalization identified efficiency and coordination as central values for business management (Carpenter, 2001) and ‘received widespread publicity, especially after 1910’ (Blackford and Kerr, 1990: 237). By tapping into these Progressive values the journalism texts could push for the legitimate commercial goals of the journalism business. An efficient, coordinated business operation demanded objectivity. What’s more, objectivity made readers’ lives more efficient as well.

Some of the texts also advocated ‘objective’ journalism for the benefits it brought to the nation. As one textbook put it, ‘This is a truly democratic country to-day, and it is so because the reporter has banished mystery and made all men and all things appear as they really are!’ (Seitz, 1916: 75). To ‘give news colorless’ resulted in the ‘perpetuation of our democracy’ (Ross, 1911: 1). In the process, newspapers had rehabilitated their reputation, once tarnished by partisan animosities (MacCarthy, 1906: 13), and ‘reached a rank high in general esteem’ (Seitz, 1916: 20). Journalism practitioners had long asserted their legitimacy in terms of their service to democracy (see Christians et al., 2009). Here the texts cast objective journalism as displacing a partisan press, thereby reasserting journalism’s rightful place central to self-governance. Never mind that partisan journalists had
also justified themselves as an aid to democracy (see Pasley, 2001); democracy amounted to a powerful legitimating idea, regardless of who invoked it.

For the most part, the texts offer limited explicit rationale for ‘objective’ journalism – much of the legitimation was implicit. The texts legitimated ‘objective’ news by simply rendering its complications as uncomplicated. Factuality, accuracy, fairness, and impersonality might not come easily to the beginner, but modern journalists had devised a ‘perfect system’ for producing news (Hemstreet, 1901: 42). The discourse downplayed the human decision-making that went into crafting the news and portrayed the news as a naturally occurring feature of the social world. ‘News does not have to be created; it is there. It has to be gathered’ (Fowler, 1913: 84). In other words, the system took the guess work and human subjectivity out of the production of news. Reporting became ‘gathering news’ (Ross, 1911: 41) and journalists became ‘news-gatherers’ (Hemstreet, 1901: 36, 52, 57), whose job was simply to ‘collect’ (Hemstreet, 1901: 9, 41) or ‘get the news’ (Byxbee, 1901: 68). The discourse struck a difficult balance – the process was both automatic and had to be learned. Thus when discussing the details of the reporter’s work, educators such as Bleyer, who taught at the University of Wisconsin, acknowledged that ‘news gathering’ could be complicated (1916: 3).

Every good news story may be regarded as a solution of a difficult problem in gathering, selecting, and weaving together a number of details. The steps in the solution may be as carefully followed as the steps in solving a problem in algebra or in performing an experiment in physics (1916: 6).

Reporting news was a difficult, but not intractable, problem; indeed it was a problem that could be solved with mathematical or scientific precision. This was another means of legitimation – the texts tapped the authority of science to portray journalism as an objective enterprise (see Schudson, 1978). Likewise, the texts compared journalistic problem-solving to the methods of the legal system. Journalists avoided partisan advocacy – they were ‘impartial, unprejudiced’, like judges ‘charging a jury and summing up both sides of the evidence’ (MacCarthy, 1906: 12). The texts exploited early 20th-century perceptions about the legitimacy of the justice system (see Friedman, 2005) to suggest that journalists, like judges, could be trusted to be objective.

The texts also associated ‘objective’ papers with modern and urban sophistication. The objective newspaper was no less than the ‘mirror of modern life’ (Seitz, 1916: 17). The fact-based story, written in order of importance, was the product of a ‘new era’ (Ross, 1911: 21). ‘In the old days news stories were written in the logical order of events just like in any other narrative, but constant change has brought about a new form’ (Hyde, 1912: 36). Likewise, Shuman celebrated a factual newspaper style in stride with the teaming energy of urban America, evolved well beyond ignorant ways of the country papers still accustomed to ‘throwing their news together in the cumbersome old style’ (1894: 26). Ross noted the impersonal style of journalism was the urban style, but observed that even the ‘enterprising’ country papers were catching on to the city way of doing news (1911: 21). An appeal to urban modernity was an appeal to a sophisticated, sleek, and clear-eyed understanding of fact-based truth-telling (see Douglas, 1995). Reporters, according to the texts, had outgrown the parochial styles of newspapering’s past.
Early journalism education did not produce a coherent legitimating discourse about ‘objective’ journalism. Discourse that made fact-based stories the natural way to tell news conflicted with discourse that celebrated fact-based stories as the modern way to tell news. For example, ‘objective’ news was portrayed by Hyde as simply answering the questions all readers held; but he did not explain why readers did not have such questions in the ‘old days’ or why, if they did, journalists ignored them and wrote in a narrative style (1912: 36). Meanwhile, the same values, such as urban sophistication, that legitimated ‘objectivity’ could also be used to legitimate its opposite. For example, according to Shuman, ‘Nine readers out of ten in the cities want entertainment more than accuracy of quotation’ (1894: 81). It’s the country rube who thinks an ‘objective’ story is necessary.

The early journalism texts did not advocate objectivity fully or exclusively. But what is perhaps most remarkable about the pre-1920 journalism texts is the uncomplicated way in which ‘objectivity’ was justified. There is little sense that critics of any journalistic processes were being addressed. That changed in the post-1920 texts. Schudson (1978) noted the irony that objectivity as an occupational norm would arrive in a time when faith in an objective portrayal of reality was waning. It is also ironic that objectivity emerged as an occupational norm in the 1920s and 1930s given the growing presence of press criticism (see Christians et al., 1993). Writer and social reformer Upton Sinclair (1920) warned that the drive for profit made newspapers unreliable sources for news – journalists sold out the truth in the marketplace. Walter Lippmann (1922) argued that the press’s selectivity in the reporting process meant the news would not represent reality. ‘Every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections’ (1922: 63). Lippmann concluded that journalists were bound by the stereotypes with which they saw the world. ‘There are no objective standards here,’ Lippmann argued. ‘There are conventions’ (1922: 63). Lippmann and Sinclair emphasized the ‘constructed’ nature of news rather than an objective portrayal of reality. Post-1920 journalism educators seemed aware that crafting news was a problematic enterprise. This presented practitioners and defenders of objective journalism with a threat to objectivity’s legitimacy. How journalism education responded to this threat explains, to some extent, how objectivity could be maintained as a solution to a problem.

The post-1920 texts were more consistent in their articulation of objective journalism than their predecessors. For example, Casper Yost stated that news must be ‘unbiased’ (1924: 62). News must be presented ‘as fairly, impartially and accurately as possible, leaving the expression of opinions to the editorial department’ (1924: 63). ‘The reporter’s method is objective,’ concluded Dix Harwood (1927: 101). Ivan Benson told the aspiring journalist ‘to present his news in an impersonal, unbiased way’ (1937: 121). Bleyer’s 1932 text, unlike his earlier book mentioned above, was clear about the kind of journalism it was prescribing. ‘All good news writing is impersonal and objective, uncolored by opinions, beliefs, or prejudices of the reporter or the politics of the newspaper’ (1932: 134). However, these later texts addressed an imaginary interlocutor who was never far away – objectivity was being defended, even if newspapers’ critics were seldom explicitly acknowledged.

These later texts were more likely to air minor qualms with objectivity; for example, Chilton Bush’s 1929 book laments the lack of ‘vividness’ in objective journalism (p. 9).
But these books save their harshest criticisms for those flaws of modern journalism – such as exaggerating (Benson, 1937; Harwood, 1927; Yost, 1924), stereotyping (Bush, 1929), and passing along public relations (MacDougall, 1932; Robertson, 1930) – for which objectivity was the solution. Journalists who embrace objectivity as a normative standard recognize that exaggeration, sensationalism, or twisting facts ‘obviously, is unethical’ (Bush, 1929: 14). The closest the texts come to equivocation were passages that acknowledge the subjectivity of reporters (Yost, 1924). Harry Harrington and Theodore Frankenberg’s 1924 book stated that newsworthiness ‘must be apprehended by a sense faculty, and the sense faculties differ with the individual’ (p. 23). And Bush stated that ‘the news writer must present a picture of the event or situation that is not only objective but which also embodies his own sense impressions’ (1929: 9). Objective standards ultimately guide the senses and sense impressions add to objectivity, not subtract from it. ‘An observant eye and a questioning mind are a journalist’s greatest assets’ (Carr and Stevens, 1931: 18).

The issues broached by Sinclair or Lippmann received little hearing in these texts. The newspaper’s position in the marketplace is not a Faustian bargain, but an unproblematic advance leading to independent journalistic judgment. A wall of separation between reporters and the business department ensures that journalists will be objective (MacDougall, 1932; Williams and Martin, 1924). Free from partisan dictates, editors – elsewhere depicted as having little contact with audiences – divine a ‘subtle sense of all that concerns the public’ (Harrington and Frankenberg, 1924: 71). News selection ‘is based upon the editor’s judgment as to what purchasers of their papers want to read’ (MacDougall, 1932: 51). The editor’s ‘chief duty is to guide, to keep policies and news stories keyed to reader interest’ (Merriman, 1941: 219). Thus, newspapers need to please advertisers and readers, but a ‘newspaper may cater to these factors without sacrificing its integrity or proving false to its mission as a legitimate purveyor of news’ (Harrington and Frankenberg, 1924: 6). Because ‘American newspaper readers demand unembellished facts regarding controversial public affairs, news stories have been written impartially and impersonally’ (Bush, 1929: 9). As Stewart Robertson put it, ‘No paper can expect to hold the respect of its readers or of those who buy it advertising space if it does not build up, and strive constantly to maintain, a reputation for truth in its news columns’ (1930: 27). American discourse still celebrated the basic goodness of those markets that were undistorted by corporate monopoly (see Heilbroner, 1993; Marchand, 1998). Thus, the texts portray the marketplace as a sound regulator of journalistic behavior – markets ensured objective journalism.

In the face of Lippmann’s concerns about selectivity, news is naturalized (see Hall, 1982) by portraying reporting as simply ‘gathering’ (Harrington and Frankenberg, 1924: 64), ‘procuring’ (Williams and Martin, 1924: 152), or ‘getting’ (Harwood, 1927: 25) news (see also, Yost, 1924). ‘The reporter should remember that his job is to obtain news’ (Bush, 1929: 8). It is PR practitioners who ‘create news’ – their task, according to MacDougall, is to be ‘clever enough to manufacture news so important that it cannot be ignored’ (1932: 77). Journalists, on the other hand, obtain or gather news, which ‘springs up in the most unexpected places’ (Merriman, 1941: 2). Again educators straddled a line – they must teach what was described as natural. Casper Yost wrote in 1924 that events ‘do not report themselves’ – but this was an argument for the ‘news-gatherer’ to attend events (p. 69). According to Lee Merriman’s 1941 text, once students learn the principles
of objectivity, the key is ‘letting the story write itself’ (p. 10). Merriman continued, ‘once a correct start has been made, any news story unfolds naturally’ (1941: 11). Or as Ivan Benson put it, journalists only need to answer the questions that naturally arise (1937: 2). This discourse made objectivity a simple natural act.

Teaching prospective journalists about objectivity was the solution to journalism’s problems. The inherent limits to objectivity that Sinclair and Lippmann posited were left unnamed. Or, as Dix Harwood would have it, ‘news coloring’ is not the result of the problems that Sinclair and Lippmann identified, but of a reporter’s ordinary ‘carelessness’ (1927: 28). Journalism educators made it their mission to teach the habits of objectivity as the remedy to carelessness.

The texts also employed a range of institutionally grounded metaphors (Foss, 2004) to legitimate objectivity. Newspapers owe their ‘precision’ to the ‘machinery’ of news-gathering (Yost, 1924: 66). Harrington and Frankenberg highlighted the mechanical character of journalism by concluding that ‘(g)athering news is the result of a system and of a network of machinery stretching out from the editor’s desk to the remotest parts of the world’ (1924: 64). Walter Williams and Frank Martin described the editor as the ‘mainspring’ of the clock-like newspaper mechanism – ‘He makes the journalistic wheels go around’ (1924: 41). Harrington and Frankenberg lauded newspapers as ‘a sort of minute book of progress and civilization’. They contended that a journalist ‘is merely modern society’s secretary, writing up the minutes of the day’ (1924: 7). While other metaphors might be more ennobling of journalism as a profession, the assembly worker and secretary, like the journalist, are not burdened with subjective judgments. They can achieve objectivity by simply heeding what the ‘manual’ has to say (Bush, 1929: cover).

The objective journalist was also portrayed in heroic terms. He is the ‘general of an army’, a ‘diplomat’, and a ‘judge’ (Williams and Martin, 1924: 40). He is like ‘a university professor, he is a seeker of facts and an analyst’ (Bush, 1929: 14). The editor is

... like the scientist who cannot tell you what electricity is. The scientist is consoled by the fact that he can recognize electricity, he can harness electricity, and he can put it to work. So can the editor recognize news, weigh news in terms of how many persons a given story will interest, and harness news, making it sell newspapers. (Merriman, 1941: 1)

News is objective because reporters and editors work with scientific precision. Journalism ‘has an arithmetic and chemistry all its own’ (Metcalf, 1927: 12). Reporters ‘weigh the conditions’ of news (Williams and Martin, 1924: 145). ‘News can be weighed, but the editor’s mental scales do not register in pounds.’ The editor ‘weighs(s) the news value of each story which comes to his desk’ (Merriman, 1941: 2). Needless to say, comparing the objective journalist to judges, generals, diplomats, and scientists was to legitimate objective journalism as a worthy profession. And if the objective journalist was unlike other ‘professional men’, it was because he was better. He is, according to Bush, ‘homo journalisticus’. ‘His triumphs are measured by his achievements, not by profits’ (1929: 14).

The objectivity norm: Conclusions

The earliest journalism texts offer a different picture of journalism practices and norms from their later counterparts and generally support conclusions (e.g. Schudson, 1978)
that the norm of objectivity underwent a transition around 1920. The pre-1920s texts note many of the hallmarks of objectivity. Mirando has even concluded that early journalism texts were ‘consistent in their view that objectivity was not just an ideal for journalists but also a routine way of practicing journalism’ (2001: 31). However, these early texts also advocated subjective editorializing and literary invention that were at odds with objectivity. This early period is characterized more by rhetorical experimentation than rhetorical formalization. After 1920, the texts portrayed editorializing in the body of a news story and invention of colorful details as illegitimate practices. And while the texts acknowledged minor qualms with objectivity, they offered a full-throated defense of the objectivity norm.

While the texts purported to introduce novices to the journalistic field, readers were addressed strictly as future reporters, rather than as editors, copyeditors, or other journalistic workers. This is a break from pre-1900 attempts at journalism education, which focused on creating future editors (O’Dell, 1935). Thus the texts offered objectivity as an occupational norm to gain the assent, first and foremost, of reporters. It was reporters, as the texts themselves pointed out, who were being urged to give up their subjective, literary voice for the objective voice of journalism. This came at a time, as Schudson (1978) points out, that many journalists had looked to journalism as entry to a literary career. The texts offered an alternative vision – a vision of heroic greatness that could be achieved through objectivity.

An ideational logic of historical explanation trains our empirical inquiry to look for the articulation of occupational norms. The texts of journalism education during this nearly 50-year period offered objectivity as an answer to journalism’s problems and downplayed the new problems the norm created. The texts mythologized objectivity by portraying it as a mechanical process overseen by journalists who were like scientists and professors. Objective journalists were heroic figures – homo journalisticus – who had mystical connections to the needs and desires of audiences. According to the texts, the desires of audiences and advertisers did not complicate objectivity – market mechanisms were what made objective journalism possible. Another of the distinguishing features of the texts’ legitimating discourse was the way that objectivity was presented as natural. News was simply gathered, obtained, harnessed, or weighed. Journalists chronicled events by recording the minutes of society. Selectivity was barely a problem to be solved – objectivity was an achievable and unproblematic goal. News values naturally guided news selection and news wrote itself naturally.

What is remarkable about the post-1920 texts is that they were largely silent about the brewing misgivings about objectivity that Schudson (1978) says were such a prominent feature of the 1920s and 1930s. Oddly, this was central to how the texts conferred legitimacy on objectivity as an occupational norm. The texts maintained a tone of authority by generally not letting their doubts show nor giving a hearing to alternative practices or rules. While Stensaas (1987) and others have shown that some newspapers were slow to adopt ‘objective’ practices, the post-1920 textbooks treat objectivity as an exclusive occupational norm, breached only by a few partisan or sensational papers. In support of Meyer and Rowan (1991) we see that an occupational norm may not be completely coherent – the texts portrayed objectivity as a uniquely modern accomplishment, but also an eternal, naturally occurring phenomenon.
The texts were uniquely suited to portraying objectivity as natural and eternal. As Ong (1991) noted, textbooks have the potential to make the particular universal – they make universal claims while proffering a picture of how a subject is understood only at a particular moment. This is akin to what Hall terms the ‘reality effect’ whereby a phenomenon is severed from an historical moment and given authority for all times and places (1982: 77). As Kuhn (1970) and Westbury (1985) have argued, textbooks establish orthodoxy by relegating past practices to pre-scientific myth. This is exactly the tactic used by journalism texts – they made objectivity a natural feature of the modern age while portraying past, partisan practices as pre-modern. Long after partisan journalism held any legitimacy, the texts continued to raise it as a convenient foil.

Future study could include still more texts and could examine the actual curriculum of the schools that taught journalism. Nevertheless, the analysis presented here is sufficient to remind journalism educators that they not only describe contemporaneous journalistic practices, they are active agents in prescribing various practices. Journalism educators often point out that journalism education has followed, not led journalism practice. However, given the nature of texts (Kuhn, 1970; Ong, 1991) and the nature of higher education (Meyer and Rowan, 1991), journalism educators have a unique authority to construct and maintain morally potent occupational norms. Once norms are constructed, journalists face a strong stabilizing force. Indeed, these norms constitute the cultural capital that helps define the journalistic field (Benson and Neveu, 2005; Bourdieu and Johnson, 1993). Allen (2005) argues that objectivity has become an ideological catch-22. He concludes that ‘even as journalists discover the limits of the methodology for reporting the news, the public insists that they live up to their goals’ (p. 58). If this is so, the institution of journalism is caught in a trap that journalism educators have helped create. However, journalism educators may still provide an escape from that trap. As transparency has been posited as something of a contradiction to objectivity (Craft and Heim, 2008; Elliot, 2008; Singer, 2010), educators may have much to say on whether transparency emerges as a new occupational norm. Since transparency is likely to come with its own contradictions (Craft and Heim, 2008), we do well to understand how discursive strategies help constitute occupational norms.

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