Existential Objectivity: Freeing Journalists to be Ethical

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Journalists enjoy unprecedented freedom from government interference to gather facts from sources, but journalistic tradition and custom restrict the freedom of journalists to report facts as they see them. This study critically examines the concept of objectivity and proposes an alternative philosophy for encouraging ethical behavior. The first section of the article focuses on the ideological and occupational origins of objectivity and identifies the conflict between these two perspectives. Next, the study reviews contemporary literature in regard to objectivity, showing how the concept has evolved, and why objectivity as a journalistic norm needs reevaluation. Third, the study proposes linking the occupational norms and standards of objective journalism with a "subjective existentialism," which is more consistent with the ideological definition of objectivity. Finally, the study proposes that journalists improve ethical behavior by developing an existential ethic emphasizing individual responsibility.

Michelle Caruso had covered enough crime news for the Boston Herald to recognize that the Stuart murder case was a bit too unusual (Lydon, 1990). From the beginning, she noted that it did not make sense that a gunman would shoot and kill Carol Stuart and then shoot her burly, ex-football player husband in the side and leave him alive. Her doubts increased as she listened to the 13-min tape of Stuart's emergency call to 911. "I said to myself, 'Buddy, there's something wrong here'" (p. 57). More investigation convinced Caruso that Charles Stuart should have been the lead suspect in the killing. But law enforcement officials apparently bought Charles Stuart's story and arrested Willie Bennett, a Black man identified by Stuart. Boston papers reported that Bennett was the chief suspect. Quoting unnamed police officials, Boston Globe columnist Mike Barnicle trumpeted the police's case against Bennett (Barnicle, 1990). He also would later defend the police investigation after Bennett was exonerated.

Meanwhile, Caruso failed to find evidence that the police investigation had considered the husband as a suspect. Without a credible source, the Herald refused to publish her story. "We came one inch away from writing a story about all the doubts I had" (Lydon, 1990, p. 59). Caruso wanted a
The public doesn’t understand, she lamented, that “a reporter can’t write his own opinions” (p. 58). In essence, the rules of objectivity moved Caruso from actor to spectator. Guided by group norms, Caruso was relegated to what existentialists would term an “inauthentic existence” (Copleston, 1985, p. 347). Glasser (1984) said the rules of objectivity create amoral journalists because those rules prohibit them from making decisions based on their moral obligations to humanity. This is equivalent to asking journalists to relinquish their individuality and humanity. “To fail to be human would mean to slip into nothingness,” declared Karl Jaspers (1975) in a 1941 lecture (p. 168).

Caruso’s humanity—her own instinct to perceive objective truth—proved accurate. On January 4, 1990, after Stuart’s brother linked him to the murder, Charles committed suicide. Caruso still questioned her own ability to draw conclusions based on the evidence she had gathered. She said, “What if we’d been wrong?” But she admitted that the Herald probably would have printed her suspicions if an official source, speaking on or off the record, had backed up her story. The official sources, however, bought Stuart’s story and the press passed that information on to the public. The accuracy of the information was measured by the credibility or official status of the source and not on the individual investigation of the journalist. Journalists may enjoy unprecedented freedom from government interference, but they restrict their own freedom to report fact as they see it.

The Origins of Objectivity

In the 1830s, the emergence of the Penny Press changed the face of journalism. Penny papers appealed to the masses with affordable prices, innovative distribution techniques, and snappy writing. Editor-owners, such as James Gordon Bennett, recognized that news helped to sell newspapers (Mott, 1961). The Penny Press planted the seeds for the separation of fact-based stories from editorials. By the end of the century, news moved to the forefront, and opinions retreated farther back in the paper.

The introduction of the telegraph, press associations, and professionalization of journalists influenced the development of objectivity as a guiding norm for news coverage. Schudson (1990) noted that, in the 1890s, reporters began priding themselves in their devotion to the facts.
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Reporters, Schudson said, “believed that facts of themselves, once revealed, would lead to right thought and right action” (p. 25). By the late 1800s, Stenssaas (1986–1987) found one third of the news stories in a sample of metropolitan newspapers adhered to the tenets of objectivity. After World War I, that number doubled. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, 80% of the news stories reflected objectivity.

The compatibility of objectivity and improved news coverage was reflected in the transformation of The New York Times. In 1904, Adolph Ochs gave Carr Van Anda a free reign over the paper’s news operation. Van Anda expanded the newspaper’s coverage of new technologies and science (“Carr V. Van Anda,” 1945). Irwin (1942) said Van Anda also applied an empirical, scientific approach to news gathering and reporting. Van Anda said too much literary quality, including humor, blurred the reader’s confidence in the “reliability of what he was reading” (p. 114), and Van Anda suppressed “all traces of witty or humorous writing” (p. 114). It was said that the Times employed copy readers for the sole purpose of ruining good copy” (p. 114). The Times became known as the world’s greatest dull paper. Testifying before a Senate committee, Van Anda said reporters are not allowed to express their opinions or take sides in news copy. “They may state the facts, but inferences are to be left to the editorial page or to the understanding of the reader” (Fine, 1968, pp. 74–75). The success of the Times, combined with its position as a trendsetter for the U.S. press, helped validate objective reporting.

During the 1920s and 1930s, however, two distinct definitions of objectivity emerged—one based on theory and ideology and the other on rules and pragmatism. Two of the most influential opinion leaders of these disparate definitions were New York World’s editorial editor Walter Lippmann and journalism educator and textbook writer Nelson Crawford. Lippmann (1931) described reporters as well-trained professionals who did not serve any cause, but used objective realities to explain and interpret the news. Crawford (1924), on the other hand, labeled the dissemination of objective facts as the primary role of journalism. Crawford said that no matter how objective people try to be, they are likely misled at critical moments by their own philosophies and private interests unless “guided by some definite standard” (p. 101). Thus, to ensure fairness and balance, Crawford wrote, news organizations should establish and maintain “specific rules as to what sort of news must be printed” (p. 101).

In contrast, Lippmann (1931) expected objectivity to emancipate journalism “from hidden control” and “subserviency to the whims of the public” (p. 440). Thus, objectivity would place more responsibility in the trained intelligence of reporters and editors. This implies that the individual jour-
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nalist would have the freedom not only to uncover the facts but also the intellectual tools necessary to make objective judgments. Objectivity also would protect journalists from the increasing influence of public relations practitioners, whose numbers multiplied greatly after World War I. Schudson (1990) said, "Public relations threatened the very idea of fair reporting" (p. 252). Lippmann’s mentor, Frank I. Cobb (1919), editor of the New York World, said postwar newspapers became tools of the public relations people and propagandists. Newspapers, he added, skim the surface, failing to drive to "the heart of things," and a reporter rarely "gets under the skin of great events" (Cobb, 1919, p. 147).

In Public Opinion, Lippmann (1922) compared reporting to "the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision" (p. 229). This definition focuses on the individual obligations and responsibilities of the journalist to give the reader background, evidence, causes, interpretation, and explanation. This definition is espoused but not necessarily practiced in America’s newsrooms. Argyris and Schon (1974) found that what managers say they do is often unconnected to their actions. Newspaper editors may perceive objectivity as rational, open, and democratic, but the concept is more often governed by competition, control, and self-protection. Streckfuss (1990) explained that Lippmann’s perception of objectivity was based in the broader cultural movement of scientific naturalism. This type of objectivity proved rigorous and difficult. By the time it became generally adopted by the press, the meaning had been diluted to the point of saying that reporters should keep their opinions out of stories.

Contemporary Objectivity: An Organizational Defense Against Critics

Contemporary journalists use objectivity as a bulwark between themselves and critics. Objectivity is a "strategic ritual" used to defend the profession against criticism (Tuchman, 1972, pp. 676–678). For example, when former Wall Street Journal reporter A. Kent MacDougal claimed that he had incorporated his socialist views into stories, Dow Jones and Company, Incorporated officials responded by emphasizing the organization’s control. The officials said the “editing process succeeded in making sure that what appeared in print under his byline met Journal standards of accuracy, newsworthiness and fairness” (quoted in Reese, 1990, p. 398). New York Times’ reporter John L. Hess violated objectivity to expose a nursing home scandal. He leaked information to other papers, wrote advance and follow-up stories to increase drama and focus the debate, and cultivated an official source to respond to his stories. Hess compromised his objectivity until “only the appearance of objectivity remained” (Miraldi, 1989, p. 17).
Appearances play a critical role in the drama news organizations portray to journalists and the public. According to symbolic theory, organizational structure, activities, and events are just part of an organizational drama "that entertains, creates meaning, and portrays the organization to itself" (Bolman & Deal, 1991, p. 274). Bolman and Deal explained that structure reflects the prevailing values and myths of society because "the goals are multiple and elusive" (p. 275), the linkages between means and ends are poorly understood, and the organization's effectiveness is difficult to determine. Organizations maintain legitimacy by conforming "to the way society thinks they should look" (p. 275).

Hackett (1984) said many journalists doubt that objectivity is attainable but believe that individual subjectivism is the problem and not organizational or structural factors. Epstein (1973), however, found that the organizational constraints of television news limited the individual's influence in the process. Original reporting, such as scoops, exposés, and investigative work, represented the highest form of reporting for television journalists, but network news organizations are not "set up for this form of reporting" (p. 34). Journalistic values did not prevail when they ran counter to organizational constraints.

Members of media organizations portray their primary function as news gatherers. In reality, they operate more like news processors—packaging and publishing information, some of which happens to be news. Processing information reflects spectator behavior. This fits into Epstein's (1973) appraisal that the traditional constructs of news as a "mirror of society," the reporter as an "autonomous professional" (p. 40), and the press as a government watchdog have limited power in today's news organizations. Instead, these organizations are generally designed to use wire copy, cover routine and predictable events, and fill a predetermined amount of space or air time. The rules of objectivity ensure the flow of information from bureaucracies to the media and then to the public. As Hackett (1984) observed, the rules of objectivity themselves introduce a bias into the process—a bias toward the sources that provide a steady supply of information.

Media chain owners work hard to give customers the impression of local autonomy and objectivity, but to do this they must emphasize local news, which is expensive and requires reporting all sides of an issue (Mayer,
Thus, to maintain an illusion of covering local news, chain papers (and independently owned newspapers) churn out stories from dependable sources, such as city council meetings, political rallies, speeches, press conferences, and so forth. Fishman (1988) explained this phenomenon using the principle of bureaucratic affinity. Only other bureaucracies can satisfy the input needs of a news bureaucracy. They provide news in a scheduled and predictable way. Brown, Bybee, Wearden, and Straughan (1988) found that national and local newspapers relied heavily on government sources and routine channels of information, such as press conferences and press releases. This process serves as an alternative for journalists lacking the time or the background to become experts on the variety of issues they cover (Klaidman & Beauchamp, 1987, p. 37).

Objectivity assists those in power to maintain social order and fix limits for behavior deemed deviant by the prevailing orthodoxy (Altschull, 1987). Objectivity, according to Altschull, is anything but scientific—"it hallows bias, for it safeguards the system against the explosive pressures for change." So long as 'both sides' are presented, neither side is glorified above the other, and the status quo remains unchallenged" (p. 128). News has become more of a myth than truth, because it is based on "false truth" or "truth to the extent that the actors were correctly quoted and their statements adequately summarized within the constraints of the narrative form" (Koch, 1990, pp. 171-172). Koch explained that the function of journalism is institutionalized narration. "There is no real attempt to balance the official version against the contextual evidence" (pp. 174-175).

Thus, objectivity presents journalists with a moral paradox. On one hand, the standard minimizes the journalists' moral responsibility to gather, interpret, and present the facts. On the other hand, objectivity promotes fairness, balance, impartiality, and attribution. Problems arise when the facts supplied by official sources conflict with the journalist's own interpretation of the evidence. The question, "What if we are wrong?" paralyzed Caruso and her editors at the Herald. However, in the Stuart case, the more appropriate question was, "What if they [the police] are wrong?"

Indeed, objectivity has become the moral imperative, universalized in its application to every reporter in every reporting situation. It has standardized the guidelines for the gathering and reporting of information.
Objectivity, however, also relegates journalists to a subservient, spectator role in serving the public interest. They have lost some of their power to act on behalf of the public interest. As spectators, journalists surrender their independence as moral agents. An analogy by 19th-century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1846/1992) helps illustrate the nature of the problem. There are two carriages pulled by horses. In one carriage, the man lies in the wagon drunk or asleep allowing the “horses to shift for themselves” (pp. 311–312). The driver of the other carriage actively controls and directs the horses as he strives to reach his destination. Copleston (1985) said Kierkegaard used the analogy to emphasize “that the term ‘existence’ . . . is specifically a human category which cannot be applied, for example, to a stone” (p. 347). In the analogy both men may qualify as drivers, but only one man actually drives his horses. The “existing individual,” Copleston explained, “commits himself and so gives form and direction to his life” (p. 347).

Caruso’s focus on the potential inaccuracy of the results of her action shows the inherent weakness of objective thought in journalism. In contrast, the existential individual concentrates on the process

and omits the result; partly because . . . as an existing individual he is constantly in process of coming to be, which holds true of every human being who has not permitted himself to be deceived into becoming objective, inhumanly identifying himself with speculative philosophy in abstract. (Kierkegaard, 1876/1941, p. 68)

Thus, objectivity dictated that Caruso divorce herself from her perception of truth and search for a truth defined or confirmed by a credible source other than herself. First, she deceived herself into believing that finding a willing source to state her opinion would eliminate the fact that she was writing her opinion based on the evidence. Second, she would deceive the audience into believing she had obtained her story by remaining objective. Thus, in this case and others, the rules of objectivity did not emancipate journalists, it emasculated them.

Journalists must assume the role of actors in the process and relinquish their subservience to objectivity. This means empowering journalists to define responsible journalism by giving them more freedom to interpret, clarify, and explain the facts. More important, it means returning to the ideological roots of objectivity and freeing the reporter to write the truth without interference from external or internal influences. This approach would require a moral philosophy that both frees and constrains individual journalists. Existentialism is that type of philosophy.

Existentialism

John Merrill (1989) said that “without freedom, there is no creativity, no pushing toward progress in journalism” (p. 147). Merrill proposes an ex-
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Existential journalism that allows journalists to expand freedom not only for themselves but also for others. Existentialism means that people assume responsibility for creating their own individual self-identities. They then must use this free will to oppose the uncertainty, lack of purpose, and a potentially hostile environment. Critics often condemn the doctrine of existentialism because it “is too gloomy a view of things” (p. 347). French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre (1975) contended, however, that existentialism alarms critics because of its optimism. Existentialism, he said, empowers individuals with the possibilities of making choices, and this freedom to choose implies the obligation to take responsibility for one’s choices.

Existential journalism focuses on the journalist as an autonomous moral agent who can choose to promote the overall welfare and freedom of others. Merrill (1989) admitted that this type of journalism is subjective, but he also argued that it does not ignore the objective world of reality. He explained “that the perception of this objective world is emphasized, with substantial attention given to the journalist as the creator of the verbal or symbolic world that reflects the real world” (p. 147). This modifies and tempers subjectivism in that it “endows journalism with a personal perspective” (p. 147), and retains honored journalistic qualities of reasoned disinterest and concern for factual veracity.

Existential journalism also would demand journalists to look deeper into the texture of events to determine context and human nature. It would not be enough to just interview the participants and allow the reader to draw conclusions. The existential journalist would want to know the intent of the participants, their personal agendas, and the circumstances affecting their actions. There is a strong interpretive element involved in existential investigation because journalists would consider their own subjectivity as well as that of the participants and the unique effects of the situation. This is the very nature of understanding the human condition. Sartre (1975) said existentialism renders human life possible and “affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity” (p. 346). In other words, one cannot separate truth from context and human subjectivity.

In existentialism, ethics is not a social imperative but a personal obligation. Indeed, the “existing person,” as Kierkegaard (1876/1941) refers to
the existential individual, expresses his or her ethical view of life through
an "ideal of persistent striving" (p. 110). In the ethical sense,

the persistent striving represents the consciousness of being an existing
individual; the constant learning is the expression for the incessant realization,
in no moment complete as long as the subject is in existence; the subject is
aware of this fact, and hence is not deceived. (p. 110)

In other words, individual journalists would accept more responsibility
for their behavior while constantly striving to do their jobs better, gather
information more effectively, and report more accurately. In developing an
ethical personality, an individual "would strive to develop himself with
the utmost exertion of his powers; in so doing he would perhaps produce
great effects in the external world" (p. 121). In Kierkegaard's view, the ethi-
cal journalist would ignore the results of his or her work and continue to
focus on striving to be a better journalist. For Kierkegaard, success means
nothing unless the individual freely chooses this course of action.

Ethics and the ethical, as constituting the essential anchorage for all individual
existence, have an indefeasible claim upon every existing individual; so
indefeasible a claim, that whatever a man may accomplish in the world, even to
the most astonishing of achievements, it is none the less quite dubious in its
significance, unless the individual has been ethically clear when he made his choice,
has ethically clarified his choice to himself. (Kierkegaard, 1876/1941, pp. 119-120)

Because objectivity tends to define truth as the product of reporting both
sides of an issue, the journalist often determines the ethical quality of a
story by its impact. This places more emphasis on the results than the pro-
cess. For every act there are a number of intended and unintended conse-
quences. Indeed, predicting consequences could paralyze a journalist's
ability to make individual choices about the rightness or the wrongness of
an act. Thus, expecting truth to win out in every battle with error reduces
individual responsibility and provides justification for irresponsibility. In-
stead of producing ethical clarity, this act of utilitarianism creates moral
ambiguity and blind conformity.

In trying to become objective observers or mirrors of society, Merrill (1989)
contended that journalists assume a false nature and become inauthentic
persons. Sartre (1975) defined this inauthenticity as self-deception or acting
contrary to one's true self. The opposite of this self-deception is authenticity,
one of existentialism's three pervasive themes. The other themes are anxiety
and alienation. Authenticity conquers the negative themes of anxiety and
alienation. Journalists hold anxiety and alienation in check when they re-
spect themselves, act "honestly and forthrightly," and choose "positive and
self-satisfying action" (Merrill, 1989, pp. 149-150).
Three Pervasive Themes of Existentialism

Anxiety stems from the “traumatic nature of freedom, a freedom that at once is prized and feared” (Merrill, 1989, p. 150). According to Merrill, anxiety serves to help journalists deal with the uncertainty of freedom, and causes them to consider whether their actions will promote harm or good. Although journalists cannot know for sure the consequences of their actions, they can feel a sense of responsibility for the act itself. Sartre (1975) referred to this anxiety as the despair arising from one’s limitations to control outcomes outside one’s realm of influence. Despair “means that we limit ourselves to a reliance upon that which is within our wills, or within the sum of the probabilities which render our action feasible” (p. 357).

In other words, the individual considers only the possibilities within the range of his or her capability for action. An atheist, Sartre said this was a reason for not having hope, particularly not having hope for divine intervention. On its face, this stark ideology does imbue a feeling of hopelessness. However, it also points to the futility of utilitarian ideals that judge the rightness of action by whether the greater good will be served. Basing decisions on predicted outcomes opens the door to inauthentic action. Using the consequences as a barometer for measuring ethical behavior offers post hoc justification for making unethical choices within the realm of one’s influence. Again, Kierkegaard’s (1846/1992) analogy of the drivers—one actively driving and the other passively waiting for an outcome—applies in making ethical judgments based on outcomes. The emphasis centers on actions under one’s control and not those consequences that lie outside the realm of one’s capabilities. In sum, journalists do not wait for truth to win out in the battle over error but rely on their talents, training, and intelligence to uncover the truth.

Anxiety in its various forms can serve as the ethical justification for the committed crusader and the conservative community journalist. Kierkegaard (1956/1975) and other existentialists have referred to this type of anxiety as dread or despair. Kierkegaard’s dread places more emphasis on the term’s dialectic combination of angst and opportunity. One is at once overwhelmed by the dangers of freedom, but exhilarated by the possibilities for action. The journalist, confronted with freedom and his or her possibilities for action, experiences both the child-like alarm and fascina-
tion of adventuring into the realm of uncertainty and of finding the solution to a mystery.

The second theme, alienation, reflects journalists' feeling of isolation—not only from the community but also from themselves. Journalists develop a relationship with sources but must avoid bonds that could encroach on the journalist's freedom to report the truth as they perceive it. This increases journalists' sense of isolation and detachment from society and their own identity. They begin to identify more with their newspaper and television station. Merrill (1989) noted that this alienation has been exacerbated by the growing corporate and technological nature of the press. With the growth of press institutions, journalists "become estranged from one another and from the overall product" (p. 152). The expansion of the institution coupled with growing indifference to society and religious faith increases journalistic isolation.

This negative effect of alienation is offset by an emphasis on the individual's power over his or her own destiny. In other words, existentialism focuses on the importance of individuals choosing a particular course of action because they think it is good. This would belie the notion of pack journalism and resist subjugation to the status quo. Instead, existentialism "teaches that one should not choose a course of action unless it is good for everyone" (Merrill, 1989, p. 153). This infuses a principle into existentialism that has its roots in ethical theory. Indeed, Sartre (1975) explained that when existentialists say an individual is responsible for himself, "we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men" (p. 350). The individual, Sartre explained, cannot pass beyond human subjectivity, and this is the deeper meaning of existentialism. When we say that man chooses for himself we do mean that every one of us must choose [for] himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men. (p. 350)

The third theme of existentialism, authenticity, overcomes the negativism of anxiety and alienation by emphasizing harmony, progress, hope, and optimism. Authenticity pulls the journalist back to his or her own character and identity. Merrill (1989) said: "When one is anxious, the self is sacrificed for the approval of others . . . When one is alienated, the person is obsessed with guilt and a desire to conform" (pp. 154–155). If
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individuals conform to group norms or seek approval from others in an effort to belong, they also erode their authenticity. Integrity, honesty, commitment, and individualism relate to authenticity. "Authenticity is directly related to journalistic responsibility. . . . It is the inauthentic journalist who will compromise ethics and seek to escape responsibility" (pp. 154–155).

The authentic person, according to Sartre (1956), is the person who exists in accordance with his or her deepest values regardless of how they differ from societal values. Sartre said authenticity overcame bad faith or alienation and promised in Being and Nothingness to write about authenticity but never did (cited in Shrader, 1967, p. 41). Kierkegaard (1846/1992), however, helped explain the meaning of authenticity when he refuted the idea of a person being able to stand back and look at the world objectively and ethically at the same time.

Therefore the ethical wants to prevent every attempt at confusion, such as, for example, wanting to observe the world and human beings ethically. That is, to observe ethically cannot be done, because there is only one ethical observing—it is self-observation. The ethical immediately embraces the single individual with its requirement that he shall exist ethically; it does not bluster about millions and generations; it does not take humankind at random, any more than the police arrest humankind in general. The ethical deals with individual human beings and, please note, with each individual. (p. 320)

This means that ethical decision making begins with a recognition of one's biases, weaknesses, and background. One must first recognize the subjective truth of one's own actions before making an ethical judgment about what journalist's call the objective truth. This places more emphasis on the journalist's opinion, judgment, and integrity.

Some critics have argued that existentialists made no effort to deal with ethics in a standard way, and existentialists challenged "the very validity of ethics as a distinct and autonomous discipline" (Shrader, 1967, p. 29). Kaufmann (1975) noted that existentialism is not necessarily considered a school of thought, and the only thing that its writers had in common was a strong commitment to individualism (p. 11). The existentialists revolted against traditional philosophy and tended to tailor their themes to the context of their times. To do otherwise would have proved contradictory to their emphasis on the individual and context in pursuing truth. Merrill's (1989) hypothesis regarding a positive existentialism that offsets the negative aspects of the term is open to debate. Many existential philosophers focused more on the negative values of anxiety and alienation than they did on the positive values of authenticity. For example, many scholars have...
contended that authenticity summarizes in one word Sartre's views of the ethical ideal (McBride, 1967). The problem with applying authenticity as a moral standard stems from Sartre's belief that it should serve more as an ideal than a reality. But this is consistent with existential thought. If the ideal became more concrete, it would restrict the individual's possibilities for free choice. To determine the ethical choice to be made, the existential journalist must have the freedom to consider the context as well as subjective values.

Kierkegaard (1876/1941) considered the ethical person the end result of free choice. As an existentialist, Kierkegaard struggled to accept the moral philosophies of Kant and Hegel because they represented a collective idea of the philosophical system. Kierkegaard advocated the individual ideal of ethics. He wrote that a person achieved selfhood and freedom when that person refuses to conform to the status quo and seeks to become a new person. In a sense, this is an election of despair in that one is forced to break with the safety of the immediate world to enter into a world of one's own choosing. "The ethical man undertakes the wholesale reconstruction of his nature in the light of his duty and in the power of his freedom, to the end that he may thereby make himself what he is obligated to become" (Kierkegaard, cited in Shrader, 1967, p. 65).

The first step to freedom is accompanied by guilt, anxiety, and alienation because a person realizes that he or she has conformed to the collective world. But that despair is overcome when a person chooses to achieve his or her future possibilities. "For as soon as in despair a person has found himself, has absolutely chosen himself, has repented himself he has himself as a task under an eternal responsibility, and thus duty is posited in its absoluteness" (Kierkegaard, 1843/1959, p. 275).

In other words, for an ethical individual to acknowledge the claim of duty, the individual must first "accept oneself as one's own responsibility" (Schrader, 1967, pp. 66-67). Thus, Kierkegaard's existential journalist would accept moral duties as part of his or her responsibilities. This kind of journalist would be objective because it was the right thing to do, and not because it was the safest or most profitable course of action.

Another existentialist, Karl Jaspers (1975), described philosophy as a human and humane enterprise in which a person achieves authenticity and freedom through exercising self-understanding (see also Grabau, 1967). Jaspers (1975) emphasized that the search for truth in history, philosophy, or any other endeavor begins with the individual and his or her relationship with society. He considered communication as "the path to truth in all its forms" (p. 175) and emphasized that truth begins with two human be-
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ings. Existential journalists would not throw out their opinions in seeking the truth, but seek to understand their biases in relation to those they interview for their stories. Integrity would play a vital role in existential objectivity and prevent a journalist from reporting something he or she knows to be untrue.

The key to understanding existentialism, according to Merrill (1989), is realizing that the philosophy emphasizes relationships, particularly the relationship between the objective world and the subjective person. “The existentialist journalist stresses the writer’s perception of what is being reported” (p. 148). Therefore, existential objectivity accepts the objective world of facts, but reemphasizes the importance of the subjective individual in reducing those facts to an accurate account of the truth. Indeed, existential journalism represents an acceptance of a journalist’s responsibility to interpret objective facts truthfully and accurately.

Conclusions

Existentialism would help make journalists aware of their moral duties. Rather than contradicting moral philosophy, existentialism emphasizes the importance of the individual identifying and fulfilling his or her moral responsibilities. Existential journalists would refuse to surrender their own integrity when faced with a conflict between the objective account and journalist’s knowledge of the truth. Indeed, existentialism would provide objectivity with its moral base and encourage journalists to be true to themselves as well as to society. The authentic journalist would adhere to deontological duties, such as nonmaleficence, beneficence, fidelity, gratitude, justice, reparation, and self-improvement. The authentic journalist would question the credibility of official sources, not because of an inherent distrust for authority, but because of a duty to verify statements of fact, and understand the context and underlying causes of events. This would free the journalist to become more than just spokesperson for the ruling elite; he or she could serve as a watchdog, monitor, and a conscience for society.

Rather than contradicting moral philosophy, existentialism would free journalists to be moral. This also would influence journalists to take an active, responsible role in society while still maintaining their obligation to fidelity and justice; that is, reporting stories accurately, fairly, impartially, and completely. Existentialism would free journalists not only from their own biases but also from the biases of their profession. It would emphasize authenticity. It would demand that journalists be true to themselves as well as the public they serve.

But how would journalists balance their objectivity with existentialism? The following model could provide a framework by which journalists could justify taking liberties with the general norms of objectivity.
Note. Existential objectivity takes into consideration the angst associated with having the rights to free expression and having the power to harm or to help others. Anxiety in its negative form might paralyze journalistic action or standardize it into what Tuchman (1972) called a strategic ritual. It also encourages a professional relativism or egoism. Alienation, on the other hand, focuses on the stark individualism required to be a journalist. This also can move the individual toward the questionable ethical constructs of relativism and egoism. Authenticity encourages a sense of social responsibility. When objectivity combines with existentialism, it promotes a moral responsibility.

Figure 1. New model of existential objectivity.

Anxiety

Caruso experienced anxiety because the professional and organizational norms did not allow her to write a story without a credible source. This anxiety serves an important purpose in maintaining journalistic norms of fidelity—loyalty to one's craft and organization—and an inherent duty to publish the truth. However, it does not take into consideration social norms of nonmaleficence and beneficence. It also does not take into consideration an ethical duty to distribute justice to each individual and thus all individuals. Caruso concluded that the police and press had not considered all possible alternatives in the Stuart case, and therefore, she experienced angst because critical facts were not being reported. Anxiety would cause her to ask if the evidence backed up her suspicions.

Alienation

Journalists ought to detach themselves from society, the profession, their sources, and themselves to provide an accurate picture of the facts. However, Caruso could not detach herself from journalistic norms or organizational
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standards. Even though she had become a credible source in and of herself, she refused to alienate herself from external biases. Alienation encourages both separation and self-disclosure. What are my motives for doing the story? Am I submitting to professional standards or personal ones?

Authenticity

Journalists ought to be true to themselves and to others. They have a responsibility to promote harmony, progress, hope, and optimism. In the end, if Caruso would have been true to herself, and her editors true to their individual obligations to treat all members of society justly, they would have printed the story questioning the police’s investigation and Stuart’s version of the events. Authenticity moves the journalist beyond his or her social responsibility to the point of individual moral responsibility. In every story one would disclose part of one’s self because a journalist’s search for truth is at once personal and professional.

In essence, the existential journalist would serve as an interested reporter and interpreter and not as an amoral, disinterested observer. Existentialism focuses the journalist inward and evokes questions about the morality of the actions of each individual journalist and thus the actions of all journalists. Objectivity is outcome oriented, defensive in nature; it allows the journalist to avoid taking responsibility for what he or she does. By introducing existentialism into the equation, the door is opened for the journalist to take the offensive, to focus on process-oriented obligations and duties, and to assume responsibility as an human being in a society of human beings.

References

Stoker

2.2 Existential Objectivity


