Embracing Objectivity Early On: Journalism Textbooks of the 1800s

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My interpretive analysis of news reporting and writing textbooks shows that journalism education already had embraced objectivity as a central tenet long before separate schools and departments of journalism were established in American universities and long before journalism professors would start publishing journalism textbooks.

Since the late 1800s, schools of journalism and mass communication in the United States have worked to promote values of good writing ability, competence, professionalism, citizenship, and humanitarianism among their students. The purpose of this research is to study the role objectivity played as pioneer journalism educators and textbook authors went about their work when their discipline was in its infancy.

Before the Civil War, educators saw little need for formal training in journalism. The first known attempt to develop a school of journalism was undertaken by Duff Green, editor of the United States Telegraph. In 1834 Green announced plans to establish a school for boys ages 11 to 14 who would work 8 hr a day as printer’s devils, the term common then for beginning printers, and also attend classes in languages and arts 5 hr a day. Green argued that his plan, known as the Washington Institute, would allow the boys to become skilled printers as well as educated men and thus raise the standards of journalism in America. However, the school was never established. The Columbia Typographical Society, the local printers’ union that Green’s printing operation depended on, threatened to boycott Green’s shop when it was found that the boys would be paid little compensation for their work, so Green abandoned the plan (Kaul, 1988).

In the second half of the 19th century, the German university, with its emphasis on science and systematic inquiry, gained wide acceptance as the model for American higher education. The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 provided thousands of acres of land for the establishment of collegiate in-
stitutions that would provide training in practical subjects. After the Civil War, such training grew in value as Americans came to embrace a growing mechanized movement.

Land-grant colleges, mainly in the Midwest, developed many of the earliest journalism courses. Kansas State College in 1873 set up a course in printing. The University of Missouri created a course in newswriting in 1878 and another course called “Materials of Journalism” in 1884. Other public colleges in the Midwest joining the movement to start journalism courses included Iowa State University (1892), Indiana University (1893), University of Kansas (1894), University of Michigan (1895), and the University of Nebraska (1898).

Private colleges, particularly Ivy League institutions, also embraced journalism and employed innovative approaches.

In 1869, Washington College, later known as Washington and Lee University, set up a program offering scholarships to printers in the South. Recipients received free tuition to take classes in the college’s regular curriculum. The program gained notoriety as the first-ever college course in journalism in America because scholarship recipients were also required to work the equivalent of 1 hr a day in the composing room of the local newspaper under the supervision of a college faculty member.

Yale University was the first to offer nonprint-shop lessons in journalism. In 1871, Yale offered students the opportunity to study and discuss journalistic trends in literature and history on a regular schedule.

The first degree in journalism was developed by another Ivy League school, Cornell University. In 1875, Cornell students were offered a series of formal lectures in journalism that would lead to a Certificate in Journalism.

The first organized curriculum in journalism was developed by the University of Pennsylvania in 1893. The courses offered in the first journalism “major” included journalism history, law and management, reporting and editing, current topics, and special lectures by journalists serving as guest speakers.

Other institutions that hold the distinction of offering journalism in the 1800s include a private school, the University of Denver (1882), and a state-funded school, Temple University (1889). The University of Chicago is credited with developing the first correspondence course in journalism in 1899.

Because barely more than a dozen schools nationwide had journalism courses before 1900, it is easy to overlook the contributions of journalism education to a 19th-century phenomenon. In addition, so-called courses at some of those schools hardly bear resemblance to the structure of the modern 3-hr college course; the special topics and independent study courses of today are probably more comparable.
However, merely the idea that colleges were offering courses in journalism was enough to ignite spirited debate among journalists as well as college educators and community leaders on the role of journalism in society and its vocational possibilities (Camp, 1888; Wingate, 1875). It is likely during this period that many more colleges took a cue from the interest in this debate and offered lectures on journalism on an irregular basis not connected to a structured course. Well-known editors and reporters were in demand as guest speakers during this era, and journalism was more than likely a topic on which they liked to speak.

Interest in journalistic methods was a by-product of this debate. Although it was still very small during the 1890s, a body of knowledge on journalism was available to instructors of journalism courses as well as to any students interested in journalism. It was also the only time in the history of journalism education that all books on the subject were written by working journalists, not professors who could be accused of being out-of-touch pedagogues. During this era, journalism textbooks had the potential to make an impact on what David Mindich (1998) called objectivity’s “laboratory-pure environment.”

Haney (1867) described many of the qualities usually attached to objective reporting and even used the word object:

There should be no comments. The editor should not be a partizan of either side. He should chronicle the facts, but not give opinions. If there be a public meeting, it should be reported fairly. It makes no difference if the editor differs with its object, or objects to its proceedings. He may comment on both editorially with a reasonable degree of severity, if he thinks it judicious so to do; but he should report it fairly and honestly as a matter of news, giving his personal views in another portion of his paper. (p. 92)
Haney’s Guide to Authorship (Haney, 1867) advised students to “construct your sentences that the reader will emphasize for himself” (p. 14), and the book refers to “the old school of reporters” (p. 23) who would tend to use euphemisms, unlike the best reporters who emphasize accuracy, complete details, and brevity.

Haney’s (1867) work is also noteworthy for the author’s attitude toward the function of objectivity. Instead of moralizing on objective reporting, he provided a line of reasoning that few other textbook authors would ever provide:

If newspapers were merely the organs of individual opinions, or the opinions of a coterie, this would be well enough. But a newspaper is a thing made for sale. It is as much a marketable matter as a pair of shoes, or a coat. It must be made to suit the views and wishes of its customers. (p. 84)

In one of the earliest histories of journalism in America, Frederic Hudson (1873) took note of the debate taking place “all over the country” (pp. 712–713) that Washington College had ignited with the debut of journalism education in 1869 and Yale’s following with a journalism course of its own 1871. New York newspapers severely criticized Washington College, and now that a college in New Haven, Connecticut, Yale, was trying the same thing, Hudson saw the debate getting even hotter. Hudson reprinted an article from the Yale campus newspaper that described how the course was being conducted and then proceeded to condemn the very idea of journalism education: “Professor James Gordon Bennett or Professor Horace Greeley would turn out more real genuine journalists in one year than the Harvards, the Yales, and the Dartmouths could produce in a generation” (p. 713).

A New Haven book publisher named Charles C. Chatfield, who had printed textbooks written by Yale professors, was also a witness to these events and soon published Hints to Young Editors (Editor, 1872), a book that could be used by students in the journalism course at Yale and other colleges that were soon to establish similar courses. It has never been established as to exactly who wrote the book, because the author’s name is simply “By An Editor,” but it is likely that it was Chatfield himself or the editor of one of New Haven’s newspapers, The Evening Register or The Daily Morning Journal and Courier. Bylined articles were rare in newspapers during this era, and most articles made liberal use of the “editorial we,” so concealing the author’s identity could have been a ploy to simulate newspaper tradition in a book. Although the author saw fit to condemn journalism education in the book, the author demonstrated a keen awareness of the possible future importance of the book in addressing it to “Young Editors” in the title and using the preface to declare the book “the first textbook” (p. 3) ever on the subject of journalism.
Like Haney’s (1867) guide, *Hints to Young Editors* (Editor, 1872) showed a strong endorsement of objectivity based on viewing news as a marketing strategy. However, instead of dealing with a strictly monetary approach, the author of *Hints to Young Editors* used what would become the standard justification for objectivity that journalism textbooks would come to use for the next 125 years:

There is no reason why the news of a Republican paper should not be read by a Democrat with as much confidence as that of a paper of his own party, and *vice versa*. It is only by presenting clear, unbiased records of fact that any benefit can be derived from the accompanying comments. (p. 17)

*Hints to Young Editors* (Editor, 1872) advised prospective journalists to relegate evaluative writing to the editorial page and reserve objectivity to news stories: “All news should be treated strictly as news, i.e., in distinction from editorial opinion. Every report should be written with unclouded fairness, presenting records of fact in the clearest and most concise forms” (p. 17).

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Although *Hints to Young Editors* (Editor, 1872) does not specifically identify the inverted-pyramid style of story development, it does refer to many of its characteristics. For example,

the necessity of paragraphs cannot be too strongly urged. An editor who will print a column, unbroken by a single paragraph, may count on driving away many readers. The paragraphs should introduce breaks in the subject, thus bringing each part into greater prominence, and resting the eye and mind. (p. 25)

George A. Gaskell (1884), the editor of a monthly journal focusing on education matters, directed his textbook toward freelance writers and newspaper stringers. It contains advertisements for the sale of pens from Gaskell himself and another book by Gaskell strictly on penmanship. However, the full title of the book, *How to Write for the Press: A Compilation of the Best Authorities*, demonstrated his desire to provide readers with the
norm of journalistic work. His statements referring to objectivity as normative behavior are clear: “In ordinary reporting it is well to lose sight entirely of the reporters. By them impersonality must be cultivated as carefully as it ought to be avoided by those whose work is of a less conventional order” (p. 12).

Gaskell’s (1884) advice to journalism students was to emphasize simple, familiar words and short sentences. More than a half century later Rudolf Flesch (1949, 1974) would gain fame for giving news reporters and journalism students the same advice in his books, *The Art of Plain Talk* and *The Art of Readable Writing*. However, whereas Flesch was trying simply to encourage a formula for readability, Gaskell offered his advice as an encouragement of objectivity: “It appeals to the understanding, and is not adapted to arouse the passions or move the feelings” (p. 28).

A trade journal, *The Journalist*, which later became *Editor & Publisher* magazine, served to further discussion on issues related to objective reporting and journalism education. Established in 1884 by Alan Forman, *The Journalist* sought to carve out a niche in journalism by addressing the leading industry issues of the day. Robert Luce’s (1886) textbook, *Writing for the Press*, was heavily advertised in *The Journalist* and proved so popular that four more editions of the book were to be printed over the following 19 years. Forman tried to duplicate the success Luce experienced by reprinting series of articles on journalistic methods that originally appeared in *The Journalist* in book form—with *The Ladder of Journalism* written by Thomas Campbell-Copeland (1889) and with *The Blue Pencil and How to Avoid It* by Alexander G. Nevins (1890).

All three books are devoted mostly to describing how a newspaper office, rather than a print shop, is conducted, but no evidence contradicting objectivity as the norm is present. Luce (1886) pointed out that reporters must keep their opinions out of their news stories. Campbell-Copeland (1889) suggested that young reporters must be careful to seek confirmation for all information they gather if there is any indication that a news source may be untrustworthy. Of the three, Nevins (1890) offered the clearest comments in support of objectivity. According to Nevins, “the facts, when concisely written, speak for themselves” (p. 11), and “it is better taste and more in keeping with the dignity of a metropolitan newspaper to hold the reporter in the background” (p. 17).

In the twilight of his career, *New York Sun* editor Charles Dana gave three speeches between 1888 and 1894, two of which were for audiences of college students, which were republished as a book, *The Art of Newspaper Making* (Dana, 1895). Dana’s remarks bore a striking resemblance to many of the lessons past textbooks offered and thus raised the possibility that *The Art of Newspaper Making* could be offered as a textbook to the growing number of college students interested in journalism.
Dana’s (1895) first speech reflected pride in America when he criticized the newspapers of France for being overly partisan. One famous comment he made in this speech is often quoted to this day as an example of biting journalistic wit, but taken in the context of his era, Dana was merely using religious imagery to explain objectivity as editors of the future would:

There is a great disposition in some quarters to say that the newspapers ought to limit the amount of news that they print; that certain kinds of news ought not to be published. I do not know how that is. I am not prepared to maintain any abstract proposition in that line; but I have always felt that whatever the Divine Providence permitted to occur I was not too proud to report. (p. 12)

“Whatever the Divine Providence permitted to occur I was not too proud to report.”

The chuckles he received at that remark may have encouraged him to use a variation of that same line in his third speech. In the same context of talking about whether newspapers should be able to report on controversial subjects, Dana (1895) wanted to show a religious trust in facts and detachment:

I have been led to conclude, in reasoning on this subject, that if the Divine Providence permits such things to happen, we who are merely the witnesses of its operation, may certainly stop a moment and report the facts to each other. (p. 86)

Just before the publishing of Dana’s (1895) book of speeches, a new journalism textbook appeared that was unlike all of its predecessors—Steps Into Journalism by Edwin Shuman (1890). It is frequently argued that Shuman’s book deserves to be considered the true first-ever textbook in journalism regardless of the claim of the writer of Hints to Young Editors (Editor, 1872) or the timing of Haney’s Guide to Authorship (Haney, 1867). Shuman’s 229-page book contains an in-depth, systematic treatment comparable to modern college-level textbooks. It was also the first journalism book to be developed in a school-type atmosphere because it is based on the lecture notes Shuman put together for a course he taught at a Chautauqua assembly at Bay View, Michigan. Shuman’s book was the only one still in use when journalism schools and departments were created in the 20th century; it was reprinted in 1899, then revised and renamed Practical Journalism in 1903 and was reprinted in 1912 and again in
1920. In a speech before the American Association of Teachers of Journalism, Mencken (1925) recalled Shuman’s book as the best book of its kind during the 1800s and highly influential among journalists who had risen up to take over positions as editors by the 1920s.

All of the generally agreed on elements of objectivity—inverted pyramids, nonpartisanship, detachment, a reliance on observable facts, and balance—are thoroughly dealt with in the book’s 11 chapters. Shuman’s (1894) textbook could be easily mistaken as a blueprint that future journalism textbook authors would come to follow. The ideals of objective reporting are explained in *Steps Into Journalism* in much of the same manner 20th-century newswriting and reporting textbooks would explain them, such as including examples of reporting work from past history, providing fictitious narrative accounts of reporters’ work, printing lists of common errors, using slogans, and offering inspiring quotes. *Steps Into Journalism* also offered aspects that too few journalism textbooks would come to deal with, such as criticism of trends in journalism, commentary on publishers’ economic realities, and even gender recognition.

Shuman (1894) stressed the importance of authoritative sources and wire service writing standards, with religious and nationalist imagery wrapped in a journalism educator’s outlook:

> It is the mission of the reporter to reproduce facts and the opinions of others, not to express his own. One of the articles of instruction given by the Associated Press to its employees is this: All expressions of opinion on any matter, all comment, all political, religious or social bias, and especially all personal feeling on any subject, must be avoided. This editorializing is the besetting sin of the country correspondent and a weariness of the flesh to the copy-reader who has to expunge the tyro’s colorings and invidious remarks about individuals. Opinions are the peculiar province of the editorial writer. The spirit of modern journalism demands that the news and the editorials be kept distinctly separate. The one deals with facts, the other with theoretical interpretations, and it is as harmful to mix the two in journalism as it is to combine church and state in government. This, at least, is the only safe theory for the beginner. (pp. 65–66)

Overall, no author of an 1800s journalism textbook included in this study specifically mentioned the word *objectivity* but used terms and descriptions generally not associated with the practice of objective reporting. The trend toward embracing objectivity is unmistakable.

The utility and influence of journalism textbooks and journalism education of the 1800s remains questionable. However, as a study of just how dominant objectivity was as a journalistic concept, this research shows that objectivity was very well established among journalists before the 20th century. All of the textbooks examined in this study had a common goal—
to provide their readers with a reliable account of what was acceptable practice in journalism. From 1867 to 1899, all of the textbook authors were consistent in their view that objectivity was not just an ideal for journalists but also a routine way of practicing journalism.

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During the 20th century journalism schools would come to embrace objectivity as a key value to be nurtured throughout their curricula. During the 1900s, objectivity would become such a standard lesson that journalism educators would find themselves singled out for criticism when objectivity came under attack. Journalism education had already embraced objectivity as a central tenet even before separate schools and departments of journalism were established and even before journalism professors would start publishing journalism textbooks.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Southeast Colloquium of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Chapel Hill, NC, March 2000.
2. This article is based on the author’s interpretive analysis of textbooks selected from the following sets of journalism bibliographies:

   Kane, C. (1916). The journalist’s library (Journalism Series No. 3). Columbia: University of Missouri.


### References


Shuman, E. L. (1894). *Steps into journalism*. Evanston, IL: Correspondence School of Journalism.