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**OBJECTIVITY AND COMMERCIAL NEWS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE CONCEPT OF  
OBJECTIVITY IN NORTH AMERICAN JOURNALISM**

by

**Zhao Yuezhi**

B.A., Beijing Broadcasting Institute, 1984

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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of


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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the concept of objectivity in North American journalism. It attempts to make sense of the concept by searching its historical roots and by analyzing contemporary discourse surrounding the concept.

The thesis argues that the concept of objectivity was historically linked with the commercial press. This press claimed to take the perspective of "everybody" as it challenged the hegemony of the elite press of the pre-1830s and established its own hegemony in the domain of social signification. This universal perspective, or this position of presenting news independent of particular interests, was what the original ideal of objectivity meant in journalism. It not only gave the press economic advantages, but also gave it the moral superiority that was essential for its political legitimacy. The thesis identifies journalistic conventions such as factuality, balance and impartiality as journalistic practices that have been historically privileged as the dominant version of the objectivity ideal in the context of the commercial media system.

The thesis further argues that, as the hegemonic ideology of the commercial news media, objectivity is not only constantly being redefined by the press itself in facing emerging forms of journalistic consciousness and practice, but also actively constituted by different forces in the society at large. It acts as a political instrument in the struggle over the power of social signification through the media. For this reason, the concept of objectivity must be seen as fluid, dynamic, and multifaceted. It is a concept that contains both inherent contradictions and unlimited potentials.

The thesis is mainly based on a critique of contemporary literature on mainstream North American journalism. It disputes two simplistic versions of objectivity: the liberal pluralist version that tends to take the current practice of objectivity at face value and the radical critique of objectivity that tends to view the concept as a closed, monolithic ideology of the capitalist press.

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved fellow Chinese students and citizens, whose dreams and ideals I deeply share, whose courage and dedication will be my lifetime source of inspiration.



## INTRODUCTION

The modern commercial press, almost since its inception in the early nineteenth century, has set for itself a goal of providing detached, impartial, and "objective" accounts of the world. This ideal, however, was seen as problematic almost from the outset. Enunciation of the ideal of objectivity, therefore, has accompanied constant challenges to it throughout journalistic history. This challenge reached a crucial moment in the 1960s, during which the idea that objectivity is a myth became widely shared within the rising critical culture. Since the 1970s, the radical critique on objectivity has been transformed into a more systematic analysis of built-in bias in media representation. This critical analysis of journalistic objectivity, it may be seen, is a central component of a new paradigm in media studies — critical media theory.

This thesis is offered as yet another contribution to the critical analysis of objectivity in journalism. It explores the problematic of journalistic objectivity by searching the historical origins of the concept and by examining contemporary discourse on the concept in the mainstream commercial media. The purpose of the thesis is not to argue for or against the ideal, but to provide a consistent and comprehensive account on how the ideal has originated, developed and been perpetuated in both journalistic theories and practices. Furthermore, the thesis will also look at how the ideal mediates the relationships between the media and other social forces such as politicians, legislators and audiences in the realm of social signification.

This thesis contains five chapters. Chapter 1 is devoted to a brief review of the debate on objectivity in journalism. At the end of this chapter, a more detailed description of the thesis will be provided. Chapter 2 and 3 focus on the historical origins of the objectivity concept in journalism. Chapter 4 examines contemporary discourse on journalistic objectivity to discover the endurance, flexibility and pervasiveness of the concept. Chapter 5 is designed as a case study. Through an examination of the recent debate on the Fairness Doctrine in the United States, this chapter analyzes how the concept of objectivity mediates the relationships between different social forces in the struggle

for the power over social signification. The thesis concludes with a call for a historical, multi-dimensional understanding of the concept of journalistic objectivity.

To study objectivity is a risky, conflict-laden undertaking. I have chosen such a topic not only because of my belief that I may add something new to the literature, but because of my personal experience with the concept. I was taught that in a society divided into antagonistic classes, there is no such a thing as objective news presentation. If the concept exists at all, it is merely bourgeois hypocrisy. I was also taught that only a proletarian press can present a truly objective picture of the world because such a press has no other interests but that of the people. Such a press obviously has not emerged today. China's experience of the Cultural Revolution suggested how the rhetoric of a "truly proletarian" press can be used for the purpose of mass manipulation.

After China came out of the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, enthusiastic youth turned to the Western idea of media objectivity and did not hesitate to express their view that the Western media are more objective than the Chinese ones. During the student demonstration in the Winter of 1986, students in Beijing burned the official *Beijing Daily* for its "biased" coverage of their activities, while their fellows in Shanghai heroized U.S. reporters from the Voice of America. Even the official news agencies are no longer so alien to the Western techniques of news reporting. Journalistic staff are sent to Western schools of journalism to receive intensive training in reporting techniques. Western reporters become instructors in the lecture halls of the official Xinhua News Agency, where they celebrate the virtues of objective reporting and pass their expertise to a younger generation of Chinese journalists.

It is against this background that I read the whole body of critical literature on media objectivity. According to this literature, objectivity either operates as a conspiratorial device of a media system that functions to sustain capitalism and its structural inequalities, or at a more subtle level, it provides ideological support for the existing social and political order. A number of questions disturb me: if the Chinese media adopt Western techniques of objective reporting and yet still remain party-controlled, what will the results be? Does this mean that the party's ideological work will become more subtle and

thus more effective? Or, will this lead to a more open, more democratic media system? What about the banner of socialism on the one hand, and the use of reporting techniques suitable for the capitalistic press? What kind of journalistic strategy should China, which strives to "build socialism with Chinese characteristics", take?

These are not easy questions. And the pursuit of these questions is obviously beyond the scope of this thesis. It is my uncertainty about these questions, however, that partly compels me to undertake an analysis of media objectivity within the context of the mainstream North American press. With the intention of providing an analysis of the concept from a different perspective for those who are interested in the subject, especially for those of my fellow students in Chinese campuses who have heard about this powerful idea of objectivity in the Western media but don't have the opportunity to appreciate its complexity, I present my analysis. If it proves helpful in making the concept more intelligible, if it can be a useful reference for those of my fellow country men and women who are searching for a more open and more democratic media system in China, it will be worth my effort.

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE DEBATE ON THE CONCEPT OF OBJECTIVITY IN JOURNALISM

The concept of objectivity lies at the centre of Western intellectual thought. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "objective" was first given vogue by poet and semanticist Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1812. Coleridge wrote: "The very words, objective, and subjective, of such constant recurrence in the schools of yore, I have ventured to reintroduce because I could not so briefly or conveniently by any more familiar terms distinguish the percipere (the perceiving) from the percipi". (1884:274) By 1856, according to the dictionary, Thomas DeQuincey observed that the word "objective", which was "so nearly unintelligible" in 1812, had become "too common to need any apology".

One of the dictionary meanings of the word "objective" is "treating a subject so as to exhibit the actual facts, not colored by the feelings or opinions of the writer". The Webster's dictionary suggests that the word "implies a look at something as apart, as disentangled from all personal feeling, prejudice or opinion". This conception evolved as Western civilization moved out of the age of Medieval and began to look at the world in light of modern science. As inquiries moved from alchemy to chemistry, from magic to physics, and from blood-letting to the psychosomatic medicine of modern time, the Western world began the profound intellectual movement towards scientific detachment and the cultural-wide practice of separating fact from value. The underlying assumption of such a conception of objectivity is the belief that an observer can perceive an object completely, precisely, and accurately from what it is without letting his or her own experience and frame of reference affect that perception. It means that one can see a thing as "the way it is".

As scholarly inquiries extended into the whole process of human understanding itself however, it became clear that the whole concept of objectivity was fraught with problems. Gradually, words such as commitment, bias, preconception, and value were interposed into discussion of observing and reporting. As early as 1896, J. T. Merz, a specialist on European intellectual history, wrote:

A mind devoid of prepossessions is likely to be devoid of all mental furniture. And the historian who thinks that he can clean his mind as he would a slate with a wet sponge, is ignorant of the simple facts of mental life. 'The objectivity of which some of them pride themselves', remarks a caustic critic, 'will be looked upon not as freedom from, but unconsciousness on the part of, the preconceived notions which have governed them'. (1896:Vol. 1, p.7)

With the twentieth century, the distrust of the concept of objectivity spread rapidly among students of natural sciences, social sciences as well as news reporting. In 1938, William H. George wrote in *The Scientist in Action* that, since Einstein, it had become necessary to speak of the observer or the method of observation as "disturbing" the phenomenon studied and therefore preventing the "true" state of affairs from being examined. (1938:332, in Macrorie, 1955:148-149) At about the same time, American historian Charles A. Beard, was discussing the process of perception in much the same terms. He suggested that the issues of policy and human affairs "cannot be grasped in their fulness by any mere study of 'facts' on the assumption that no assumption has been made". (1936:40, in Macrorie, 1955:149)

In journalism, Walter Lippmann questioned the notion of value free "facts" as early as 1922. In his book *Public Opinion*, Lippmann observed the perceptive differences in journalism:

"That is why, with the best will in the world, the news policy of a journal tends to support its editorial policy; why a capitalist sees one set of facts, and certain aspects of human nature, literally sees them; his socialist opponent another set and other aspects, and they each regards the other as unreasonable or perverse, while the real difference between them is a difference of perception". (1922:60)

In 1937, after a detailed study of Washington correspondents, Loe C. Reston concluded that "objectivity" in journalism was "no more possible than objectivity in dreams". (1937:351) In the same year, Morris Ernest, a representative of the American Newspaper Guild, testified before the United States Supreme Court that the real question was not whether the press should be objective or not, but whose prejudices should color it. (in Schudson, 1978:156) Gerhart Weibe, former Vice-President of the Columbia Broadcasting System, echoed the same idea in 1952:

Even the reporting of the pure physical findings, to cite an extreme example, is not unbiased. It is biased in favor of revealing the findings. In recent years the practical import and responsibility of such a bias has been felt deeply by atomic scientists. The question is not whether a communication is biased. The question is: toward what value

system is the communication biased". (Harterly and Harterly, 1952:179)

With such an understanding, many leading thinkers became suspicious of the use of the term "objectivity". Sociologist Howard Becker suggested that the word objectivity had acquired so many contradictory and epistemologically dubious meanings that it should never be used before its precise meaning was specified. (1950:34n) John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley warned the abuse of the term in modern inquiry and suggested that "objective is used so frequently to characterize aspects of 'subject' rather than 'object' that its own status with respect to subject and object should be carefully established before use". (1949:298)

### 1.1 Objective Reporting as the Preferred Practice

Paradoxically, although the impossibility of objectivity had widely been acknowledged and the word had increasingly become disreputable among many leading thinkers, objective reporting was generally celebrated as a virtue of American journalism by the news media themselves and liberal media scholars in the 1950s. As part of the post-war celebration of the American way of life, the supposedly value-free news story was seen as a distinct American contribution to journalism, while press history was interpreted as the history of a gradual move towards objectivity. Herbert Brucker, a persistent apologist for the ideal of journalistic objectivity, for example, wrote:

Without benefit of law or any other compulsion, this exceedingly powerful tradition of objective reporting now keeps the vast majority of American news reports free from bias, and leads editors and publishers to segregate their opinion about news in clearly identifiable editorials, columns, cartoons and special articles. The tradition that the news must be reported objectively is beyond question the most important development in journalism since the Anglo-Saxon press became free from authority. (1952:74)

By contrasting the tradition of objective reporting with the partisan journalism of the past — the so-called "Dark Ages of American journalism", (Mott, 1962:70) — and modern partisan journalism elsewhere in the world, Brucker claimed that the American journalism's standard of objectivity "is so incomparably superior" that it "constitutes a revolution in journalism". (1951:253)



At the centre of this tradition of objective reporting is the positivist belief that one can and should separate facts from values. The operational principles of objective reporting are well summarized by George E. Lardner, Jr.:

1. The reporter may relate, on his own authority, only the observable facts of an overt event, that is, what he can see and verify — immediate sense knowledge.
2. The reporter should relate what is controversial by stating the views of the parties contending one another. This usually represents an attempt to give the "why" of an event while restricting the reporter to a narration of what is, for him, simply more sense knowledge, that is, what he heard the parties say about the controversy.
3. The reporter must be impartial in the gathering and writing of both the observable facts and the opposing viewpoints. He must not let his own beliefs, principles, inclinations or even his own knowledge color the raw, overt material or the statements controlling it. (in Lou Cannon, 1974:44)

To put it in simplest term, the practice of objective reporting contains three central requirements: factuality, balance, and impartiality. Adherence to these principles, it is believed, ultimate objectivity will be secured.

### 1.2 Objectivity as Cause of Condemnation

Even before the practice of objective reporting was widely criticized in the 1960s however, sensitive reporters had already perceived the problems surrounding it. Writing while Senator Joseph McCarthy was still on his rampage, reporter Douglas Cater analyzed in painful detail the limitations of the "frozen pattern" of objective reporting which accompanied McCarthy's accusations. "Faced with a phenomenon as complex as McCarthyism, the 'straight reporter' has become a sort of strait-jacket reporter," Cater wrote in *The Reporter* of June 6, 1950, "his initiative is hogtied so that he cannot fulfill his first duty, which is to bring clear understanding to his reader. The result is a distortion of reality". Although still speaking in the language of the objectivity assumption, Cater's comment testified that objective reporting had in fact resulted in the opposite of the intended ideal.

But it remained for a new generation of journalists to launch the fiercest attack on journalistic objectivity. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, after a decade of unprecedented popular protest against the status quo, protests which included civil rights marches, student revolts, protests by the urban poor,

and a large anti-war movement in Europe, the United States, as well as in Canada, "objectivity" suddenly became a term of abuse. Objectivity, in the eyes of the so-called "New Journalists", who themselves were part of the protesters, was no longer a desirable ideal, but a pretext for not taking a position, for maintaining a hypocritical neutrality that camouflaged complicity with those in power. It was viewed as a "myth", an insulating mechanism invented and nurtured by the established media to protect themselves as well as the existing social order which should be torn down.

Jack Newfield, a leading "New Journalist", expressed this strong sentiment rather effectively:

The men and women who control the technological giants of mass media are not neutral, unbiased computers. They have a mind set. They have definite life styles and political values, which are concealed under the rhetoric of objectivity. But those values are originally institutionalized by the Times, by AP, by CBS ... into their corporate bureaucracies. Among these unspoken but organic values are beliefs in welfare capitalism, God, the West, Puritanism, the Law, the family, property, the two-party system, and perhaps more crucially, the notion that violence is only defensible when employed by the State. I can't think of any White House correspondent, or network television analyst, who does not share these values. And at the same time, who doesn't insist he is totally objective. (1974:56)

With vivid examples, Newfield spoke of objectivity bitterly: "Objectivity can be defined as the way the mass media reported the history of the Vietnam War before the Pentagon Papers; the way racism in the North was covered before Watts; the way auto safety was reported before Ralph Nader ... Objectivity is printing a dozen stories about minor welfare frauds, but not a word about Mylai massacre until Seymour Hersh. Objectivity is not shouting "liar" in a crowded country". (1972:45)

Objectivity, in this view, was a journalistic sin which took fact at face-value and passively transmitted what reporters were told. It was a form which excused its own deficiencies by an appeal to an undefined body of outside information known as "the facts". Instead of a preferred practice, it became the object of scourge, and was increasingly seen as the very mechanism that perpetuated the most damaging bias of American journalism; that is, the belief that "bias can be excluded from news reports written by human beings". (Cannon, 1977:45)

### 1.3 Journalistic Objectivity as Subject of Academic Inquiry

As the above brief review of the literature has demonstrated, the debate on objectivity in journalism has been focusing on two issues: first, whether it was possible to be objective; and second, whether objectivity was a virtue or a flaw. In academic studies, those who endorsed the ideal took the concept for granted and engaged themselves in empirical studies which aimed at measuring the performance of the news media against certain pre-defined or undefined standard of "objectivity". They usually turned out quantitative findings suggesting the media as either "biased" or "unbiased" toward a particular political line in their overall news presentation or on the coverage of a particular issue. A new school of media scholars, who have been characterized as the critical school, however, took up the intuitive and spontaneous challenges of the "New Journalists" to the concept of objectivity in the 1960s and 1970s and subjected the concept itself to serious examination. Dan Schiller's suggestion was illustrative of this new approach:

We may ... substitute a different basic assumption about the nature of news objectivity: lack of bias or news objectivity has been attributed to newspapers in American culture so often as to become, de facto, the accepted gauge of their performance. It is not the presence or absence of a reified bias that is vital, but rather the cultural configuration that permits readers to indulge their belief that bias indeed is present or absent. The critical analytical question may also be recast to agree with this assumption". (1981:7, emphasis original)

Thus, instead of taking objectivity for granted, critical media scholars broke the concept into pieces and made the concept itself problematical. Hackett (1984) provides an intensive review of recent epistemological and sociological challenges to the concept.

This shift in the debate on journalistic objectivity reflects a larger paradigmatic shift in communication studies. It is also in accordance with contemporary reconceptualization of natural science and social science in general. In natural science, Thomas Kuhn challenges the fact/value dichotomy of positivism and advances a conventionalist view of science. Facts, according to this view, are not statements "reflecting" the world in a mechanical way, but rather theory-saturated observations. The world that the "facts" help to illuminate is made visible only by certain prior assumptions about what constitutes reality, including evaluations about what is interesting and important. In social science,

Berger and Luckmann's (1966) "social construction of reality" approach, Goffman's (1974) frame analysis, as well as the work of ethnomethodologists on strategies involved in the understanding of everyday situation, contributed significantly to undermine the transparency of "facts". Saussurean linguistics, the structural anthropology of Levi-Strauss, the semiotics of Roland Barthes, along with new interpretations of Marxism, all inform new critical understanding of news representation. And although the conceptual tools advanced by these theories differ, all of them make the assumption that there are no social facts without frameworks of some kind. Many accept the epistemological premise that knowledge is situationally determined. The century-honored concept of objectivity is therefore theoretically deprived of its authority. Its status as a transcendental standard for the revelation of ultimate reality is diminished.

Informed by all these theories, numerous studies of news have been generated. These studies in general claim that news is neither neutral, impartial, unbiased nor balanced. Instead, news presents reality in a way that serves the interest of powerful groups and as such acts as an agent of the status quo. The concept of objectivity, no longer a transcendental ideal, has also been redefined and analyzed in many different ways. Generally, critical media scholars confirm the suspicion of the "New Journalists" that objective reporting is in itself a form of "bias" and maintain that objectivity is a cultural form which ultimately contributes to the "structural bias" of news presentation. (Cohen and Young, 1973; Epstein, 1973; Tuchman, 1978; Gans 1979; Golding and Elliott, 1979; Fishman 1980; Connell, 1980.)

### *1.3.1 Objectivity as Strategic Ritual*

Based on her ethnomethodological study of news organizations, Gaye Tuchman characterizes objectivity as "strategic ritual". Tuchman's work is based on participant observation on journalistic sites and interviews with journalists. She argues that news does not reflect reality in a positivist way, but

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For a detailed review of this critical literature, see Jovanka Matic: *News and Ideology: an Evaluation of "Critical Studies" of News*, unpublished M.A. thesis, Department of Communication, Simon Fraser University, December, 1984.

actively constructs reality in a way which favors established political authority. She contends that news "frames" reality by transforming "occurrence" into "news". Such a transformation is done through conventions of reporting which combine a set of story telling devices with a set of organizational rituals. Objectivity, in this context, is not so much an ideal as a routine procedure which journalists use to protect themselves from the risk of their trade. Tuchman writes: "Attacked for a controversial presentation of 'fact', newsmen invoke their objectivity almost the way a Mediterranean peasant might wear a clove of garlic around his neck to ward off evil spirits". (1972:660)

According to Tuchman, reporters are essentially engaged in describing the activities of news source to an audience which is not present at these activities. She notes that an average reporter has very little time to gather his data and analyze his findings, little space or airtime to report them, and unless he is a "beat" reporter, very little prior knowledge about the activities and sources about which he is reporting. Consequently, reporters need a quick and easily applied set of methods to determine what data are to be gathered. They complete this, in part, by limiting themselves to empirically observable descriptive "facts" about what has happened, when, where, and structure them in an appropriate sequence. Further, Tuchman points out, because reporters lack the time to investigate motives, causes, or even the social process of which the activity is a part, they use quotation marks to remove themselves from participation in the story, and make sure to present conflicting views and other evidence which support a truth claim.

Presentation of "facts", the use of quotation marks, presentation of conflicting views and supporting evidence, the construction of information in an appropriate sequence, as well as the distinction between "straight objective news", analysis, editorials, constitute the "strategic rituals" by which journalists identify themselves with objectivity. Tuchman supports her thesis by citing similar phenomena in social sciences in which the notion of objectivity is seen as technical routinization which "rests on the codification of research methods that are employed". (1972:667)

The notion of objectivity as "strategic ritual" has been accepted as a classic one in the study of news. Approaching news study from a different perspective, Golding and Elliott likewise reach a similar conceptualization of objectivity. According to them, objectivity should be understood as nothing more than "labels applied by journalists to the rules which govern their working routines". (1979:208) Such a conceptualization of objectivity, however, only reveals what journalists do in order to claim the objectivity of their work. It is only an operational definition of the concept. It does not tell what the concept means theoretically and connotatively. Nor does it remove the epistemological confusions surrounding the concept. Is objectivity identical to a set of journalistic procedures? If so, why? If not, what is the relation between the two? What are the social forces behind the concept? Neither Tuchman, nor Golding and Elliott address these questions. Tuchman's analysis, in particular, sophisticated and penetrating as it is, remains at the phenomenological level.

The limitations of the "strategic ritual" thesis is more obvious when it is understood that objectivity, in other contexts, might have nothing to do with a particular set of journalistic conventions. A managing editor of the Soviet news agency Tass, for example, was quoted by American journalist Douglas Cater as saying that

"Unlike the bourgeois press, we are interested only in facts. The Tass reporter must follow the struggle of classes, but he must do it objectively. (in Cater, 1959:181, my emphasis)

Tom Wolfe, one of the "New Journalists" who believes that "novels and non-fiction should be written in the same way", was recently reported as saying that "all good journalism is objective, and that mine is objective". (*The Globe and Mail*, December-5, 1987) In either case, the term "objective" has nothing to do with journalistic conventions familiar with mainstream American journalism. And although these usages may sound obscure to some people, they nevertheless suggest that there are other possible ways of using the term. These examples indicate the concept of objectivity is not always identical to a particular set of journalistic conventions. This situation confirms Hall's (1982:80) observation that although ideological terms do not belong to a particular class, different classes do have different articulations of a particular term. Hall further points out that a certain articulation of a term tends to be effectively secured over long historical period and becomes the "dominant" definition. He therefore

suggests to approach this kind of term by asking under what circumstances and through what mechanisms certain class articulations of ideology might be actively secured. For an adequate understanding of journalistic objectivity, therefore, it becomes an imperative to ask: under what circumstances and through what mechanisms does the ideal come to be identified with a particular set of journalistic conventions? This crucial question, however, has been neglected in the "strategic ritual" thesis.

### *1.3.2 Objectivity as Occupational Ideology*

In his book *Reporters and Officials* (1973), Sigal likewise defines objectivity as part of a set of conventions in what makes news. But his concept of objectivity is slightly different. Rather than identify this set of conventions as "strategic ritual" as Tuchman does, Sigal attributes it as part of the journalistic occupational ideology. According to Sigal, every occupation has an ideology which consists of values widely shared within occupational groups. Borrowing from anthropologist Malinowski's account of the function of myths which primitive tribes use to "sanction moral authority to justify an otherwise anomalous status in society or to reduce anxiety over an event", Sigal defines ideology as a "patterned reaction to the patterned strains of a social role". (p. 90) He points to the conflict between natural inclinations of journalists to side with one point of view or another in controversial issues and the constraints set by their working conditions as examples of the anxieties and strains journalists encounter in their work. The convention of objectivity, which requires journalists to provide more "straight news" and a minimum of explicit interpretation, is therefore for Sigal a purely psychological and functional phenomenon. It exists only as a "myth" to help resolve journalists' psychological and functional problems in doing their job. The result of this adherence to the conventions of objectivity, according to Sigal, is an uncritical transmission of the official point of view and the vulnerability of news reporters to manipulation.

Such a conception of objectivity, in essence, is not fundamentally different from the "strategic ritual" thesis. Like Tuchman, the causal connection between a particular role strain and a particular

ideological tenet and the larger social forces behind the ideological tenets are unclear. The beliefs are just there: conventions in the news community are "just the ways things are done around the [news]room". (1973:3)

### *1.3.3 Objectivity and Media Audience*

Many other studies of news have also come out with similar conceptions of objectivity as those of Tuchman's and Sigal's. A common understanding is that objectivity is a "myth" sustained and reinforced by journalists' needs to protect their professional "credibility". (Roscho, 1975; Schudson, 1978; Gans, 1979) As for the implications, according to these scholars, objectivity is the instrument through which news takes on its ideological character. (Knight, 1982)

In his analysis of American political news, political scientist Lance Bennett carries the thesis of the mythic function of objectivity further to include not only journalists but politicians and the public as well. According to Bennett, not only journalists need the concept to maintain their credibility, politicians also need to endorse the "myth" of objectivity. This is because the American public will never tolerate a leader who does not keep up the outward appearance of commitment to democratic ideals. (1983:143) As for the public, Bennett claims, to call up the "myth" of objectivity is a choice made between escaping into the satisfying ideals of democracy and facing the unpleasant realities of politics. According to him, the real life of American politics shows that the public are locked into a weak power position with their choice structured for them and their efforts to respond filtered through the distorting lens of media formulas. And such a plight will naturally leave most people helpless and vulnerable to "political fantasy". Thus, from this point of view, the endorsement of the concept of objectivity by politicians and the public is nothing more than a political deception or self-deception.

Bennett's analysis however, is perhaps too simplistic. One could ask: is there something more substantial that both politicians and the public can gain by their endorsement of the concept? This question cannot be easily dismissed. Bennett's analysis nevertheless addresses an important issue that has generally been neglected by studies of journalistic objectivity. That is, the stakes both politicians



and the public have in the concept. Indeed, it is almost too common to be aware of the fact that in the domain of public discourse, not only politicians often criticize the media for lack of objectivity, the majority of the public also base their judgment of media performance on whether the media are objective or not. Numerous complaints of perceived media "bias" have been filed to both the media themselves and governmental or non-governmental agencies that are designed to oversee the media, not to mention special interest groups which act as "watchdogs of the watchdog". How then, does "objectivity" function as an evaluative criterion (in contrast with a set of journalistic conventions practiced by journalists)? What are the implications of this dimension of the concept to the media system as a whole?

Working within the framework of hegemony,<sup>2</sup> Richard Pinet has made a worthwhile contribution in this regard through his investigation of the "bias call" in media. Drawing from Morley's (1980) study of media audience, Pinet demonstrates that those audience who initiate "bias calls" — defined as "claims made by individuals and/or groups who disagree with the media's representation of particular and/or overall issues and/or events" (1987:59) — through channels such as letters-to-the-editor and complaints to the press council enter a negotiated relationship with the media. In entering this relationship, Pinet argues, these people accept the assumptions, structures and guidelines of the dominant institutions. They therefore paradoxically reinforce the prevailing media practices and legitimize the hegemonic power of the media. Pinet's study, however, did not explain what is in the concept of objectivity itself that makes it possible for the audience to challenge media representations while at the same time reinforces the dominant media practices. Nor does he reach a conceptualization of objectivity

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<sup>2</sup>The concept of hegemony was generally seen as derived from Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist intellectual, political activist and member of Parliament who died as a political prisoner during the Mussolini regime. Gramsci used the concept of hegemony to describe a process by which a powerblock in society, through its leading intellectuals whom he referred to as "organic", actively create a cohesive ideology and legitimated practices out of a set of inconsistent themes and premises that were accepted as "given" at certain point in history. As Stuart Hall (1982:85) notes, the concept "implies the dominance of certain formations was secured, not by ideological compulsion, but by cultural leadership"; that is, the winning of the active consent of those classes and groups who were subordinated to the dominant class or class alliance within the hegemonic order. The concept has recently been used widely as a framework in media analysis.

which is both a set of journalistic conventions and an evaluative criterion of the news consumers.

#### 1.4 The Present Project

While the above review of the literature does not pretend to cover all the issues, it is offered as a guide to the long-standing debate on the subject. From a preferred practice to a denounced one, and finally, to a subject of inquiry, the complexity of journalistic objectivity has been fully demonstrated. And although critical media scholars have offered many insights for the understanding of the concept, as it has been pointed out, there are still inadequacies. The central problem appears, in identifying objectivity with a set of conventions governing journalistic practice, critics seem to have often overlooked the social forces which structure these rules and make objectivity, but nothing else, necessary and effective for the sustaining of media credibility. The crucial question this thesis will ask is, then, how has objectivity assumed such a strategic importance and why does it work in this way? Or, how does modern industrial capitalist societies require a media system which wraps itself in the ideal of objectivity? If the concept is not to be taken for granted, how does it originate and perpetuate in the media?

In addressing the above question, this thesis will pay special attention to the relation between objectivity and the particular mode of news production, that is, the commercial news relations in which the news media engaged in the business of "selling" audiences to advertisers. However, the thesis will go beyond a mere economic reductionalist explanation of the concept. The economic logic of journalistic objectivity, that is, the media's need to cater to people of different political persuasions for the maximization of profits has become a common wisdom and is here taken for granted. What is emphasized in this thesis is the social, political, as well as the epistemological implications of the concept.

The thesis also recognizes that, in practice, there are connections between a set of journalistic conventions and the concept of objectivity. What is challenged is the contention that objectivity is

simply a set of journalistic conventions. The thesis will look at objectivity as more than just a set of journalistic conventions and try to uncover the reasons for this particular linkage.

What is argued in this thesis then, is that journalistic objectivity originated in the 1830s with the rise of the commercial press. This press, which embodied a new mode of news production, claimed to take the perspective of "everybody" in order to reach the mass audience it wanted to "sell" to the advertisers. This universal perspective, or this position of presenting news independent of particular interests, was what the original ideal of objectivity meant in journalism. It not only gave the press economic advantages, but gave it the moral superiority that was essential for the press to establish itself as a successful capitalistic institution; that is, as a social institution that is seen as central and indispensable to Western democracy.

Over time, certain journalistic practices have been historically secured as the legitimate practices of objectivity. The ideal was first operationalized in the media's commitment to present only the universally recognizable "facts". After the belief in the transparency of the "facts" was challenged along with positivism, the media reconstructed the ideal through the elaboration of a set of journalistic conventions which seemed to assure that the media will not only exclude their own particular point of view but will also avoid presenting a single particular interest among the audience. While the problems with this version of objectivity have been and are still being exposed, the media is searching for new ways to reconstitute the ideal and keep it alive. For it is this very ideal that legitimates the commercial media politically and socially.

These arguments will be presented in Chapter 2, 3, and 4. These chapters roughly follow a chronological order. Chapter 2 will examine the establishment of the penny press in the 1830s and the triumph of the commercial press at the end of the nineteenth century to discover the ideals and practices of the press. Chapter 3 will examine three different accounts on the origins of journalistic objectivity and try to offer an alternative explanation. Chapter 4 will examine some of the more recent issues that are associated with the concept. These issues are: the relation between journalistic objectivity and the

concept of the freedom of the press, the incorporation of "interpretive reporting" into the domain of journalistic objectivity, objectivity and the media profession, and finally, objectivity and the concept of fairness.

In the final chapter, the thesis will look at journalistic objectivity beyond the sphere of news production. It is argued that because of the universalising intention that is implicit in the ideal itself, objectivity, once a self-proclaimed goal of the media, has been taken over by other groups and social forces as a political weapon in the struggle for the power of representation. A case study on the controversy generated by the FCC's repeal of the "Fairness Doctrine" is designed to demonstrate the struggle over the power to claim "objectivity" in news, and beyond that, the power of representation in society.

The thesis will conclude that as a hegemonic principle, objectivity is both open and closed. It is closed in the sense that the ideal is a necessary product of the commercial press. It is closed also in the sense that at a particular historical moment, a particular journalistic practice is likely to be privileged as the version of objectivity, while other practices are marginalized and seen as illegitimate. The ideal is open in that, in the long historical run, the substance of the ideal, that is, what constitutes objectivity, is subject to constant redefinition and renegotiation.

The method of the thesis is interpretive. In order to make sense of the concept, the thesis will look at a large body of journalistic literature to discover who invokes the concept, what has actually been said about the concept as well as the contexts within which the concept is constituted. This body of literature comes from a variety of sources: publicized policy statements of the media, operational guidelines in the newsrooms, books written by journalists, journalistic textbooks, trade journals, newspaper articles, legislative debates on the news media, public discussions of news, academic studies on news, etc.. Across all the writings, the meanings of the concept are analyzed and elucidated.

## CHAPTER 2

### COMMERCIAL PRESS: THE INSTITUTION AND THE DISCOURSE

Modern commercial news-media have their institutional roots in the penny press of the 1830s. To understand objectivity, one of the key values of modern journalism, it is necessary to examine both the institutional structure and the discursive characteristics of the penny press. This chapter undertakes such a task. It investigates both the institutional structure and the discursive characteristics of the penny press by contrasting them with the press of pre-1830s and by looking at their development in journalism of the late nineteenth century.

#### 2.1 The Political Press of the Pre-1830s

The modern newspaper, since its inception in eighteenth century Europe, had until the 1830s been a vehicle of political debate and action. The main purpose of the newspaper, to the extent that it concerned itself with public affairs, was to express a particular point of view as forcefully and eloquently as possible. Newspapers were therefore instruments of political mobilization for political activists.

In the early days of the United States (pre-1830s), there were basically two types of newspapers — some were of a strictly merchant nature, while others were of a political nature. The merchant papers catered to the needs of the mercantile class and were mainly dominated by advertising and shipping news. They appeared as little more than bulletin boards for the business community.

The political papers distinguished themselves by different party lines they adhered to. They were backed financially by parties or politicians whose politics they represented and whose followers they served to mobilize. Editors not only depended on politicians for their points of view, but were forced by their patrons to place the agenda and strategy of political campaigning above the paper's own business stability and growth. (Schiller, 1981:35) For this reason, news was framed in an openly partisan manner, accompanied with deliberate distortion or suppression of information when it did not serve the interests

of the main body of the subscribers. Consequently, the period between 1795 and 1835 was referred by press historian Frank Luther Mott as the "Dark Ages of American journalism".

The merchant press and the political press, although differing from each other in terms of content and readership, shared some common features. First, as was noted earlier, these papers financially directly depended on their patrons. For the political press, financial dependence accompanied editorial dependence. One consequence of this financial dependence was short life of the newspapers. In the United States, for example, Donald Stewart notes that "fewer than half of the journals published before 1812 continued for two years, and only a fourth lasted four years or more". (1969:17-18) The short life expectancy of the newspaper suggested that as a social institution, it had not finally been secured. Secondly, the early newspapers were expensive. Copies were sold for six cents a copy on a subscription basis. And this price was beyond the reach of the ordinary people. For this reason, circulation levels were low and readership was confined to political and economic elites. As press historian George Henry Payne comments, these papers were edited not for people in the street, but for the business institutions or politicians. (1970:250) Thirdly, because these papers each cultivated a particular constituency of readers, they addressed their audience members directly, "in a personal tone, at an equal level" (Hallin, 1986:135). In other words, they solicited their readers' involvement in the situations being discussed and invited them to participate in political discussions. It is reasonable to say then that the mainstream press of the pre-1830s was a press of the economic and political elites, by these elites, and for these elites.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.2 The Rise of the Penny Press

The 1830s ushered in dramatic social, economic and political changes in the United States. It was the age of the rising capitalism. For journalism, the 1830s was the age of "commercial revolution". Out of this revolution was born the penny press, which served as the model on which today's commercial news media are shaped.

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<sup>1</sup>Besides the merchant press and the political press, there was a labor press prior to the 1830s, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

The first successful penny newspaper was published by Benjamin H. Day, a young New York printer, on September 3, 1833. It was called the *New York Sun*. The first number of the *Sun*, with a circulation of three hundred, was made up of four pages, 12 columns. Most of the material was trivial and flippant. Emphasis was on local happenings and news of violence. The paper was sold on the street for a penny a copy. Within 6 months, the *Sun* had a circulation of 8,000, nearly twice of its nearest rival.

Following the success of the *Sun*, other penny papers boomed. Thirty-five papers were published in New York in the 1830s. Among these papers, was another famous paper — James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald*, founded in 1835. The idea of penny press spread to many other cities. The establishment of yet another important penny paper, the *New York Tribune* by Horace Greeley in 1841, marked the maturity of a new kind of newspaper institution in the United States. (Emery, 1984:147)

### 2.2.1 *The Institutional Structure of the Penny Press*

What made the penny paper successful and distinct was new ways of news production, distribution and consumption. Unlike the old six-penny papers, which depended on economic and political elites for financial support, the penny papers depended on advertising as their major financial source. Instead of selling on subscription basis, these papers reached their readers mainly through street sales at the price of one penny per issue. Thus, for the first time in press history, the newspaper became accessible to the common people, the working class and the middle class who were captured by the papers' human interest stories, crime reports and society news. The prospectus of the *New York Sun* was suggestive of the characteristics of the penny press:

The object of this paper is to lay before the public, at a price within the means of every one, ALL THE NEWS OF THE DAY, and at the same time afford an advantageous medium for advertising. The sheet will be enlarged as soon as the increase of advertisement requires it, the price remaining the same. (The *New York Sun*, September 3, 1833, in Hudson, 1968:417, emphasis original)

This business-like statement clearly set out the principles of the commercial press. The newspaper was a channel for "all the news of the day", but at the same time a medium for advertising.

Moreover, the statement clearly indicated that the requirement of advertising would determine the shape of the paper. Advertising thus became the organizational principle of the newspaper. There was no overt political commitment, no explicit ideological persuasion of any kind in the statement. The newspaper was a business engaged in the selling of the readers' attention to advertisers.

Indeed, from the moment of their initiation, the penny press took business success as their primary goal. No longer would newspaper editors place the strategy of a political campaign at the expense of business stability and growth. With few exceptions, founders of penny papers were printers looking for profitable opportunities in the line of their trade. (Mott, 1959:240) Benjamin Day projected his *New York Sun* when his business as job printer scarcely afforded a living. By setting up the *Sun*, Day hoped that the new enterprise would take up some of the slack in his business. (Hudson, 1968:415) He openly admitted that "for a long time, the principle object of the newspaper was to advertise the job office". (Mott, 1959:242) James Gordon Bennett linked the content of his *New York Herald* directly to his ultimate goal — business success. In his detailed history of the American Press, Hudson portrayed the business-minded Bennett in this way:

No political office had any attraction for him: to increase his circulation, to improve and fill his advertising columns, to obtain the best correspondents, to get the news to his office before any of his contemporaries had it, were his ambition. To accomplish these points he would spare no expense. (1968:482)

With the success of the penny press, the newspaper, which began as a sideline for printers and an outlet for polemicists, had evolved into a major business enterprise. By 1850, the New York newspapers were the repository of a large quantity of social capital. Where Bennett had founded the *New York Herald* with \$300 and Horace Greeley the *New York Tribune* with \$3,000, Henry J. Raymond started the *New York Times* in 1851 with \$10,000. At the same time, newspaper publishers were accepted as part of the commercial elite. They were businessmen rather than political thinkers, managers rather than essayists or activists. They were part of the rising capitalists who established the press as an "independent capitalistic institution".



The notion "independent capitalistic institution" needs some elaboration. The term "independent" is used here in three senses. Firstly, the penny papers were editorially independent from political parties. What the newspapers offered was not dictated by political parties, but derived from the independent judgment of the editors. Secondly, these papers were financially "independent" in the sense that they were not directly subsidized by political and economic interests, but were indirectly patronized by these interests in the form of advertising. Thirdly, these papers were organizationally independent in that they were not part of the party or government organs. By "capitalistic", I mean the commercial nature of the press. Until the 1830s, as was pointed out earlier, a newspaper provided a service to the political or economic elites. With the penny press, a newspaper sold the news products to a general readership and at the same time sold this readership to advertisers. For the first time, newspapers became the manufacturers of the news commodities, and were subject to the imperative of capital. The emergence of the penny press, therefore, marked the beginning of a new form of news production. Finally, the term "institution" indicates the relatively stable and permanent position the newspaper has since occupied in the society. It is seen as central and indispensable to the society.

Of course, it should be noted that the transformation of newspapers from a partisan nature to a commercial nature is a gradual process. Party papers remained long after the penny papers invaded the domain of public discourse. In the United States, for example, it was not until the establishment of the Government Printing Office in 1860, which meant the end of patronage through printing contracts, that the party press of Washington was completely extinguished.<sup>3</sup> In Canada, according to press historian Paul Rutherford (1982), a commercial press catering to a mass audience arrived between 1869-1900, concurrent with the age of industrialization in this country.

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<sup>3</sup>For a detailed discussion of the party press, see Mott (1959:113-324).

### 2.2.2 *The Discursive Characteristics of the Penny Press*

Along with the transformation of the institutional structure of the press, came the changes in the discursive characteristic of the newspapers. Two important features stood out most distinctively: the allegiance to a universal perspective and the cultivation of a belief in value-free "facts" which were to be reported without "coloring".

#### The Universal Perspective

Unlike the pre-1830 press, which spoke to a particular audience, the penny press spoke to the "public" as a whole. It claimed to stand above narrow political interests. Perhaps it is not without reason that the first penny paper was called the *Sun*. The paper's logo, "It shines for all", profoundly captured the democratic promise of the penny press: extension of public access to information and metamorphosis of the character of the public information itself. (Schiller, 1981:48) The paper definitely aligned itself with "the whole people":

Great statesmen and good magistrates administer laws for the benefit of THE people. Knaves, demagogues, and narrow-minded men, add an epithet. They incline to favor some particular class of the people, as the rich people, the working people, the religious people, the temperate people. The politician, whose mind is not broad enough to take in THE people, the whole people, is unworthy of confidence or regard. (The *New York Sun*, April 17, 1834, in Schiller, 1981:49, emphasis original)

The *Herald* also declared that it would "support no party—be the organ of no faction or coterie, and care nothing for any election or candidate from the president down to constable". The paper's maxim was: "IRREPROACHABLE TASTE—CHARITY—FRATERNITY—JUSTICE—THE PUBLIC GOOD". (The *Herald*, May 6, 1835, in Schiller, 1981:49, emphasis original)

These words: The People, The Public Good, Justice, Fraternity, were the symbols by which the penny press sold itself to the audience. The allegiance to these unitary and universal concepts suggested that the penny press put itself in a position of speaking from a universal rather than a particular point of view. It posited itself "above" politics, "beyond" particular interests.

These concepts however, were not the invention of the penny press of the 1830s. They were, as Repo (1986) has demonstrated, the heritage of eighteenth century Enlightenment view on human society. This view, which presented a version of society based on the premise of equality of human beings and their "natural rights" based on this equality, first claimed to take the perspective of all members of society, rather than a privileged group within it. This view had served as an effective ideological weapon in the war the rising bourgeois class waged against the land-owning class and the aristocracy, and has since been the legitimating ideology of modern capitalistic societies. As the early nineteenth century American penny press challenged the hegemony of the elite press, they adopted this Enlightenment discourse and assumed the role of the spokesmen of the whole people. In her study of the early penny press in Canada, Repo finds a similar perspective:

Trumpeting their concern for the public good, they [the penny papers] saw themselves in the double role of being spokesperson *for* the people when criticizing civil society and the state, and being at the same time the educator *of* the people. This did not necessary mean that they fashioned themselves as mouthpieces of popular discontent. The interests they stood for were the "rational" interests of all citizens in a democratic state, interests which were determined, ultimately, by professional experts in social sciences and statescraft. In other words, they represented the interests of citizens as they believed they *ought to be*, and aimed at educating their readers for an *ideal* citizenship. This was the *universal perspective* they brought to journalism. (1986:127, emphasis original)

### The Belief in Facts

Closely associated with the penny press' presumed posture of speaking to everyone from a universal perspective, was the newspaper's cultivation of a belief in "facts". "Facts", from this view, are assertions about the world open to independent validation. They stand beyond the "distorting" influence of the individual. The penny press assigned itself the task of providing accurate and universally recognizable copies of events in the world. In the prospectus of the *New York Herald*, Bennett wrote: "We shall endeavor to record facts on every public and proper subject, stripped of verbiage and coloring". (the *Herald*, May 6, 1835, my emphasis) No other words expressed the point more lucidly than the *New York Times*, when it said that it simply presented "[F]acts, in such a form and temper as to lend men of all parties to rely upon its statements". (March 22, 1860)

Underlying these statements was the assumption that newspapers were able to provide reports of "facts" which were universally recognizable and independent of particular point of view. This point found further support in the words of an Associated Press reporter:

My business is to communicate facts; my instructions do not allow me to make any comment upon the facts which I communicate. My dispatches are sent to papers of all manner of politics, and editors say they are able to make their own comments upon the facts which are sent them. I therefore confine myself to what I consider legitimate news. I do not act as politician belonging to any school, but try to be truthful and impartial. My dispatches are merely dry matters of fact and detail. (in Roscho, 1975:31, my emphasis)

Thus, news, conceived as "dry matters of facts", was according to this view, value-free. It therefore had the legitimate claims on other people. Comments, as the above passage indicates, were subjective evaluation of the "facts". They were seen as ultimately infused with human values and were therefore without legitimate claims on other people. (Schudson, 1978:5-6) The underlying role of the reporters, following this logic, was a passive recorder of "facts", who did not impose any value judgment on the "facts".

Apart from these two discursive features that have just been described, the appeal to human interests, sensationalism, were also the novelty of the commercial press. The universal perspective, the belief in "facts", however, were two of the most central features of the penny press. Moreover, these two features were closely linked: the universal perspective was operationalized, in part, by the reporting of a body of presumedly universally recognizable "facts".

### 2.3 Triumph of the Commercial Press

The pioneers of the penny press probably did not realize that, by changing the organization of news production, distribution, and consumption, they had created a new mode of news production. With the further industrialization of the American society after the Civil War (1876-1881), which not only brought new businesses into the market, but consolidated the established relations of news production, the penny press was transformed into a mainstream commercial press which held monopoly in the

domain of public discourse. Along with this transformation, the discursive procedures of the newspapers were simultaneously elaborated and refined. This section describes some of the developments in terms of both the newspaper as a social institution and the news as a form of public discourse.

### *2.3.1 Expansion of the Press*

After the Civil War, American society underwent a dramatic social change. By the 1880s and 1890s, as one historian has put it, the nation was trembling between two worlds, one rural and agricultural, the other urban and industrial. By the end of these years, America had changed into a new industrial society, one more akin to Western Europe than to its own former agricultural self. (Schlesinger, 1983:XIV) It was an age in which agricultural capitalism moved into industrial capitalism and finally to monopoly capitalism. And this transition brought profound changes to the newspaper as well.

Economically, the Great Depression of the 1880s and early 1890s saw the large scale of capital consolidation — centralization and concentration — in a fewer number of larger hands. As a result, the market became monopolized and the form of economic organization began to shift from small entrepreneurial firms to large corporations. As part of the capitalistic social formation, the press itself underwent the same transformation, while at the same time contributing to the process. Economic consolidation meant the growing demand for the press to create mass markets through advertising. Just as Benjamin Day had envisioned when he established the first penny paper, advertising space of the newspapers accelerated. The ratio of editorial material to advertising in the newspaper declined. At the same time, advertising revenue accounted for an enlarged proportion of the total newspaper income. (Schudson, 1978:93) This increasing dependence on advertising revenue made circulation more firmly the measure of a newspaper's competitive standing. As a result, it became more difficult for a newspaper to confine to a narrow political perspective.

Mechanization, industrialization, and urbanization — social forces of economic and cultural development — also brought rapid expansion in the number of newspapers. Between 1870 and 1900,

the United States doubled its population and tripled the number of its urban residents. This population increasingly turned to newspapers for entertainment and information. During the same 30 years, the number of daily newspapers quadrupled and the numbers of copies sold each day increased almost six fold. (Emery, 1984:231). These papers, old ones as well as newly established ones, upheld the banner of independent journalism which had been set up by the penny press, and vied for circulation. The race between Joseph Pulitzer and William Hearst symbolized the intensity of the competition.

Therefore, there are sufficient reasons to say that if the industrial revolution of the 1830s gave birth to the commercial press, the economic consolidation of the late nineteenth century marked the development of the commercial press at a new stage. In his analysis of the evolution of the modern mass media in England, Stuart Hall links the transformation of the relations of culture and of the means of cultural production and consumption to the evolution of England as a capitalist society. He notes that the modern forms of media first appeared in the eighteenth century, with and alongside the transformation of England into an agrarian-capitalist society. This period is marked by the commodification of cultural products and the emergence of the institution of culture rooted in market relationships. Hall further points out that the transformation of an agrarian capitalist society into an industrial-urban capitalist one sets the scene and provides the material basis and social organization for the second great phase of change and expansion in the media of cultural production and distribution. According to Hall, the third phase coincides with the transformation from laissez-faire to "monopoly" capitalism. This stage lasts from about the 1880s to the present. As Hall notes:

This is the phase in which modern mass media come into their own, massively expand and multiply, install themselves as the principle means and channels for production and distribution of culture, and absorb more of the sphere of public communication into their orbit. (1977:340)

Although the historical situations in England and in the United States differed, as it can be seen, the patterns of media development in these two countries show some similarities. In Canada, the transformation of the press from the enterprise of private individuals with small capital to an undertaking appropriate only to the wealthy capitalists and large scale of consolidation and concentration

in the industry did not occur until the 1900s. (Kesterton, 1967:64)

### 2.3.2 Two Kinds of Journalism

Under the banner of independent, non-partisan journalism, there were two kinds of newspapers at the turning of the last century in the United States: crusading journalism and detached journalism. The former was represented by Joseph Pulitzer and his *New York World*, and the latter, Adolph S. Ochs and his *New York Times*. In two different directions, the late nineteenth century press upheld the spirit of the penny press and magnified it under new historical conditions. Pulitzer was an Austrian immigrant. After working as a reporter for several years, he bought the St. Louis *Post and Dispatch* in 1878 and began his career as an editor-publisher. In 1883, Pulitzer bought the *New York World*, which soon overshadowed the descendants of major penny papers<sup>3</sup>— the *Sun*, the *Herald*, the *Tribune*, and the *Times*, and became the emblem of crusading journalism. By 1887, the *World* reached American's largest newspaper circulation with a number of 250,000. The *New York Times*, established by Henry J. Raymond in 1851, was bought by Ochs in 1896. It soon succeeded the *World* as the most popular newspaper of the age and has since been a masterpiece of modern commercial journalism.

The difference between the two types of newspaper becomes apparent when the policy statements of the two newspaper owners are closely examined. In his statement for the *Post and Dispatch*, Pulitzer wrote:

The Post and Dispatch will serve no party but the people, be no organ of republicanism, but the organ of truth; will follow no causes but its conclusions; will not support the "Administration", but criticize it; will oppose all frauds and shames wherever and whatever they are; will advocate principles and ideas rather than prejudice and partisanship. (in Emery, 1984:255)

At the time of his retirement, Pulitzer found himself still committed to the same principle, perhaps even more strongly:

I know that my retirement will make no difference in its [the *World*] cordial principles; that it will always fight for progress and reform, never tolerate injustice or corruption, always fight demagogues of all parties, never belong to any party, always oppose privileged

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<sup>3</sup>By that time, most of the early penny papers had raised their prices to more than a penny. They were therefore no longer "penny papers" in a literal sense.

class and public plunderers, never lack sympathy with the poor, always remain devoted to the public welfare, never satisfied with merely printing news, always be critically independent, never be afraid to attack wrong, whether be predatory plutocracy or predatory poverty.

Here the rhetoric of the penny press was more boldly and more clearly spelt out. Like the penny press, but more than that, Pulitzer fought for "justice and equal rights and privilege for all, of what color, class, race or condition". (The *World*, July 12, 1883. in Juergens, 1966:236) Pulitzer enlarged the concept of the public to include not only men but women, and embodied such an enlarged concept in the content of the newspaper by publishing articles tailored solely or primary to the concerns of women. He created the first sports page in the newspaper and thus brought more social activities to the sphere of public discourse. Like the penny papers, Pulitzer's *World* aimed to solicit the attention of the whole people. In his policy directories to his managing editor, Pulitzer emphasized that the paper was not for the classes, but for the masses, by which he meant that nobody would be excluded: "I should make a paper that the judges of the Supreme Court of the United States would read with enjoyment, everybody, but I would not make a paper that only the judges of the Supreme Court and their class can read". (in Seitz, 1924:416-417)

While Pulitzer did not want to alienate the elite class, he crusaded for the immigrants, the labor, the poor, and actively involved himself in public affairs. Never contented with reporting the surface news, Pulitzer urged his staff never to drop a topic until they had gone to the bottom of it and until the subject was really finished. He popularized what became clichés of public service journalism; staff members of the paper disguised themselves to enter forbidden places to uncover unconventional stories. He and his rivals vied for the title of "people's champion" and become the forerunner of the "muckraking" magazine journalism of the early twentieth century.

The *World's* crusading was however, full of contradictions and and limitations. It attacked the titans of the Wall Street as pirates yet, at the same time, glorified them as living examples of the American dream of success; it sympathized with the labor movement but at the same time accepted their position of subordination to the capital. Similarly, in its attitude toward women, although the paper



admitted the need for emancipation, it paid little homage to the real substance of feminist issues of the day such as the right to vote, the right to equal education and the right to practice a profession. (Seitz, 1924:158)

In contrast to Pulitzer and his *World*, Ochs and the *New York Times* represented a different kind of journalism. Ochs' often-quoted principle for the *Times* in 1896 contained the following words:

It will be my earnest aim that the New York Times give the news, all the news in concise and attractive form, in language that is parliamentary in good society, and give it as early, if not earlier, than it can be learned through any other reliable medium; to give the news impartially, without favor and fear, regardless of any party, sect or interest involved; to make the columns of the New York Times a forum for the consideration of all questions of public importance; and to that end to invite intelligent discussion from all shades of opinion. (the *New York Times*, August 9, 1896, my emphasis )

It is extremely revealing to contrast these words with Pulitzer's principles for his papers.

Although both men claimed independence and non-partisanship, Pulitzer's statements, like the characters of his papers, were sensational, thought-provoking and stimulating. They clearly laid out the moral and social goals of the newspapers and stated without any hesitation the causes for which the newspaper would support. They were full of idealism and reform impulses. In contrast, Ochs' words were calm, detached and business-like. His priority in giving "the news, all the news" echoed Benjamin Day's statement for the *Sun*, in which he promised to "give all the news of the day" in a similar business-like tone.

Of course, the *Times* of the 1890s was much more sophisticated than the *Sun* of the 1830s. In the effort of publishing "all the news", the *Times* set itself the task of not only printing the news more voluminously than both its precedents and contemporaries, but also of avoiding deliberate slanting by presenting "both sides of the story". The *Times'* concern for news was carried to such an extent that the publisher once considered eliminating the editorials altogether. This consideration, of course, was directly in contrast to Pulitzer, who cared deeply about editorials and was never satisfied with merely providing the news.

in terms of the scope of reporting, while Pulitzer extended his coverage to women, labor and other "low" aspects of the social hierarchy, Ochs extended his coverage to appeal to the business class. Following the business reporting tradition set up by Bennett in his *Herald* in the 1830's, the *Times* devoted to the development of business reporting and soon established itself as the "Business Bible" and therefore won further advertising sponsorship from the business class.

To secure its final success in the competition with the Pulitzer and Hearst papers, the *Times* resorted to the price strategy by which the commercial press was born in the first place. From three cents a copy, the newspaper's price was reduced to one cent, lower than the prices of most other papers. Thus, once again, the *Times* became a truly "penny paper". The penny paper in the history of journalism had accomplished a whole circle. Of course, as was noted earlier, the "penny paper" of the 1890s was not the same as its precedents of the 1830s: its economic and technological basis had been consolidated; its techniques of news presentation had been refined; and its scope of coverage had also been expanded. The sensationalism that had accompanied the penny press since its inception in the 1830's and had been exploited in its extreme by the Pulitzer and Hearst papers in the later nineteenth century was transformed. In response to the common understanding that the drop of price would move the paper back to sensationalism, Ochs announced: "It is the price of the paper, not its character, that will change. In appealing to a larger audience the *Times* by no means proposes to offend the taste or forfeit the confidence of the audience it has". (in Berger, 1951:125-126)

With all these strategies, the *Times'* circulation soared. It soon defeated its rivals and established itself as a masterpiece of the modern commercial media and remains so today. The *World*, however, gradually declined as a newspaper giant. With the death of Joseph Pulitzer in 1911 and the passing away of the reform era, the age of crusading journalism elapsed. The *World's* conservative readers were drawn away by the *Times* and other descendants of the old penny papers, while the growing tabloids won those audience who were more interested in sensational news.

The emergence of the two types of journalism and the final success of the *Times* as the standard piece of modern commercial newspaper is of profound historical significance. As was pointed out earlier in this chapter, the penny press of the 1830s revolutionized journalism with two distinctive characteristics: its promise of providing "all the news" without coloring and its appeal to the public interest. In the keen competition for the audience market, while the *Times* advanced itself along the direction of the purveyor of news, the *World* carried the principle of serving the public good to a new stage. Together, these two types of newspaper further developed the ideals of the commercial press and created an age of journalistic prosperity in the context of new developments in capitalism. During this period, newspapers incorporated more of the social life into its domain of public discourse and solicited the attention of people from different strata of society.

### 2.3.3 Development of Journalistic Norms

As was pointed out earlier, the penny press of the 1830s put a strong emphasis on the presentation of "facts". This tradition was greatly enhanced in the commercial press of the late nineteenth century. Whether reporters were adherents to crusading journalism or detached journalism, they held a belief in "facts". Those who wrote memoirs often recalled their first editor who taught them to write just the facts and delete all the subjective adjectives in their copy. Julius Chambers, who served as managing editor of the *New York Herald*, wrote:

Facts, facts, nothing but facts. So many peas at so much a peck; so much molasses at so much a quart. The index of forbidden words was lengthy, and misuse of them, when they escaped the keen eye of a copy reader and got into print, was punished by suspension without pay for a week, or immediate discharge. It was a rigid system, rigidly enforced. (1921:7, in Schudson, 1978:77)

Lincoln Steffens, another editor of the time, recalled a similar experience when he was a reporter for the *New York Evening Post*:

Reporters were to report the news as it happened, like machines, without prejudice, color, and without style; all alike. Humor or any sign of personality in our reports was caught, rebuked, and in time, suppressed. As a writer, I was permanently hurt by my years on the Post. (1931:179)

Apart from the emphasis on the "facts", balance as a journalistic norm was also carefully observed. As a journalistic convention, the necessity for balance was gradually realized by the penny press. It was established as a strategy to achieve neutrality. In his criticism of the *New York Sun*, Horace Greeley, for example, said: "The iniquity of the Sun's course lies in its suppression of the truth. A neutral paper ought to present both sides of the party questions it discusses". (in Roscho, 1975:31) However, it remained for the *New York Times* to give this principle the fullest play. Meyer Berger, official biographer of the *Times*, claimed that the newspaper presented both sides of any controversy in its news column and was faithful to the principle even in its coverage of the First World War. (1951:208)

Another journalistic convention that had been developed was the rigid distinction between news and opinion. Again, Horace Greeley was a pioneer in the advancement of this reportorial-norm. He first institutionalized the practice by printing a separate "editorial page" on his penny paper — the *New York Tribune*. (Mott, 1962:72) Pulitzer, who made the fullest use of the editorial page for his crusading causes, was also a careful observer of the convention. In a memorandum to his editors in 1905, he wrote: "I want the news, Gentlemen, to balance, counteract and antidote. If I make a deuce of a fight on the editorial page ... I do not want the news columns to go off also". (in Fergens, 1966: 32) The convention was theorized in journalistic textbooks as early as 1894, when Edwin L. Shuman wrote in a book for new comers to the trade:

"The spirit of modern journalism demands that news and editorials be kept distinctly separate. The one deals with facts, the other with theoretical interpretations. 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 beginners." (1894:66)

The wording of the statement was quite interesting: the separation of news and editorials was "demanded" by the "spirit of modern journalism", and such a separation was the only "safe" theory. The underlying tone of the statement suggests the practicality of the convention. That is, the convention grew out of journalists' needs to remain "safe" in their trade.

These journalistic conventions, however, did not always guarantee the newspaper from harassment. The following incident from *The History of the New York Times*, which described a conversation in 1915 between Senator Tom Walsh, Chairman of a Senatorial committee examining the editorial opposition of *the New York Times* to the Administration, and Carr Van Anda, the newspaper's managing editor, is quite telling. On September 8, 1914, the *Times* published a story that British steamship lines were charging United States refugees excessive rates for transportation home from War Zones. The original dispatch said:

"The action of certain steamship companies in taking what is considered a disgraceful and unfair advantage of Americans forced to return home, by raising rates, will shortly be made the subject of an official report and complaint to the State Department ...

The situation illustrates what would be at least an advantage of government-owned passenger steamers. If they were available now, they could afford to create competition which would compel English liners to keep their rates normal."

When the story appeared on the *Times* however, the adjective "disgraceful" and the last paragraph were deleted. Seeing a possible "bias" in the newspaper, the Senator questioned the motive for the omission in this particular case. The managing editor responded by saying that the *Times* did not allow reporters or correspondents to express opinion in news stories. Berger continued the description of the encounter between the Senator and the editor:

"You allowed them to say it was 'unfair'", Senator Walsh insisted ... "What is considered unfair", (Van Anda emphasized the word "considered") "the word 'unfair' is referred to the other people who holds that opinion. The correspondent is not allowed to express his opinion that it is 'unfair'."

... Senator Walsh wanted to know why the *Times* had deleted the last part of the dispatch. Van Anda said: "That was done for the very good and sufficient reason that it was an expression of opinion by the writer. It is propagating one side of a case, which is a privilege we do not permit to correspondents and reporters. They may state the facts, but inferences are to be left to the editorial page, or to the understanding of the reader. That paragraph is very distinctly in advocacy of one side of the case, and it was stricken out according to an established rule.(1951:209-210, my emphasis)

This encounter between representatives of the political establishment and the journalistic establishment clearly indicated that prior to the First World War, journalistic norms such as reporting the "facts" and attributed opinions, presentation of two sides of views, separation of news from

editorials, etc., had been firmly established and were invoked consciously by the press in their self-defense.

## 2.4 Summary

This chapter has provided a very brief account of early history of the commercial press. It was argued that the rise of the penny press in the 1830s marked the establishment of the press as an "independent capitalistic institution" and transformed the social relations of news production. This new press declared its position of independence and promised that it would serve no particular interest, but the interest of the general public. Adopting the discourse of the Enlightenment, this press assumed a unified public and claimed to speak from a universal perspective. It dedicated itself to the cause of reporting the "facts" without "coloring" and charged itself with the duty of providing "all the news of the day". It is also argued that, the positivist belief in the self-evidence of facts and the confidence in the ability of reporters in providing "facts" as such without personal bias was the cornerstone upon which the universalistic perspective of the journalistic discourse was based and concretized.

It is further demonstrated that, with the further development of capitalism in the late part of the nineteenth century, the commercial relations of news production was greatly consolidated and expanded. At the same time, the discursive procedures of the press were institutionalized and rigidly enforced. The keen competition between crusading journalism and detached journalism was a test on the boundaries of such a press: how far it could go to crusade for the interests of one group in the social formation without alienating other groups — as in the case of the *World*; and how much it could rely on journalistic procedures so that it would not be suspected of being "biased" and face governmental intervention — as in the case of the *Times*.

This interpretation of journalistic history has provided the informing historical background to the concept of objectivity, the subject of this thesis; that is, much of the controversy surrounding the origins of journalistic objectivity is derived from different interpretations of the history of the commercial press.

It is to this controversy that the thesis will now turn. In the following chapter, the thesis will examine three different arguments on the origins of journalistic objectivity. Based on the historical interpretation that has been presented in this chapter and critiques of other arguments, Chapter 3 will come out with an alternative understanding of the concept.

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## CHAPTER 3

### EXPLANATION OF THE ORIGINS OF JOURNALISTIC OBJECTIVITY

To explore the origins of a concept is never an easy task, because a concept is seldom born of a sudden, with exact date and place. To make the task even more difficult, a concept is not static. Its meaning changes over time. And this is certainly the case with the concept of journalistic objectivity. As a result, explanations of the origins of the concept are varied. There are three major arguments which deserve close attention in this case. This chapter will begin with an examination of an argument put forward by Michael Schudson. Following that is a critique of two other arguments. In the final section, this chapter will set forth an alternative explanation.

#### 3.1 Michael Schudson's Argument

Michael Schudson's book *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (1978) pioneered the systematic exploration of the origins of journalistic objectivity. In focusing on the evolution of objectivity as a professional ideology in journalism, Schudson examines the history of the American press to discover "the relationship between the institution of modern journalism and general currents in economic, political, social and cultural life". (10-11) The book covers historical development of journalism from the 1830s to the 1970s.

Schudson says that the concept of news as we understand it today did not exist until the 1830s. According to him, news was a product of the massive economic and political changes of the 1830s, which he characterizes as the "rise of the democratic market society". This society, Schudson explains, was characterized by an extension of the political franchise to new groups, a competitive market economy free from many kinds of government controls and the beginning of a shift in social patterns from the intimacies of rural community to the anonymity of urban life. (58-59) The penny press, Schudson argues, had its roots in this "democratic market society". It both drew upon and strengthened the



culture of such a society and became the spokesperson for the egalitarian ideals in politics, economic life and social life through its emphasis on news as well as its cultivation of large audience. This society, in turn, provided the groundwork for the growth of journalistic beliefs. The most prominent belief, Schudson argues, is "a belief in facts, and a distrust of the reality, or objectivity, of 'values'." (p. 60)

This belief in "facts", Schudson argues, was intensified in the the late nineteenth century, along with the growing popularity of science and the rise of realism in literature. He suggests that reporters in the 1890s believed that facts can speak for themselves and saw themselves as "scientists uncovering the economic and political facts of industrial life more boldly, more clearly and more 'realistically' than anyone had done before". (p. 71) Schudson calls this belief in facts "naive empiricism".

As the world moved in the twentieth century, Schudson argues, however, leaders in journalism and other fields lost their faith in the "democratic market society". By the 1920s, journalists no longer believed that facts can speak for themselves. "People came to see even the findings of facts as interested, even memory and dreams as selective, even rationality itself a front for interest or will or prejudice." (p. 120) Schudson finds two direct reasons for the realization of the "subjectivity" of the "facts": the rise of public relations, through which powerful, self-interested institutions and groups created "facts" for journalists to report, and the journalists' experience of the wartime (World War I) propaganda in which they saw how the public mind could be manipulated and how powerless they were as journalists.

At the same time, Schudson notes, came the first systematic revelation of subjectivity in the part of journalists themselves. In their study of the *New York Times'* coverage of the Russian Revolution(1920), Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz found that "the news as a whole is dominated by the hopes of men who composed the news organization. ... In the large, the news about Russian is a case of seeing not what was, but what men wish to see. ... The chief censor and the chief propagandist were hope and fear in the minds of reporters and editors". (Lippmann and Merz, 1920:3)

It was this doubt of the validity of "facts" and the realization of bias in the work of the journalists, Schudson contends, that led to the rise of objectivity as a professional ideology in journalism. Objectivity is defined by Schudson as a body of rules and procedures by which a professional confraternity of journalists establishes the truth value of stated "facts". He writes:

Only then did the ideal of objectivity as consensually validated statements about the world, predicated on a radical separation of facts and values arise. It arose, however, not so much as an extension of naive empiricism and the belief in facts as a reaction against skepticism; it was not a straight-line extrapolation, but a dialectical response to the culture of a democratic market society. It was not the final expression of a belief in facts but the assertion of a method designed for a world in which even facts could not be trusted. (p. 122)

That is, Schudson contends that the experiences of the journalists in the 1920s and 1930s resulted in such "a deep loss of confidence" that objectivity as he defines it became essential: "Journalists came to believe in objectivity to the extent that they did, because they wanted to, needed to, were forced by ordinary human aspiration to seek escape from their own deep convictions of doubt and drift. ... its[objectivity's] source lies deeper, in a need to cover over neither authority nor privilege, but the disappointment in the modern gaze". (p. 159)

Schudson believes that Walter Lippmann was the main proponent of objectivity. He quotes Lippmann as explaining the emotional impulse behind the quest for objectivity: "As our minds become more deeply aware of their own subjectivity, we find a zest in objective method that is not otherwise there". (Lippmann, 1922:256, in Schudson, 1978:151) The objective methods proposed by Lippmann included legislation to make false documentation illegal, identification of news sources in news stories, the creation of non-partisan research institutions in journalism, the establishment of an international non-partisan news agency and the professionalization of journalism. (Schudson, 1978:152)

Schudson concludes his book with a discussion of the critical culture of the 1960s, and argues that although there is a simmering disaffection with objective reporting, there is no new ideal in journalism to successfully challenge objectivity and the ideal "holds its authority on sufferance". (p. 10)

Schudson's premises and conclusions have both been widely accepted in recent journalistic

literature.<sup>1</sup> There are, however, a number of problems with Schudson's approach to journalistic objectivity. The central problem with Schudson's work lies in his attempt to relate a particular professional ideology — in this case, journalistic objectivity — directly to the development of American society in general, without a sufficient examination of an intermediate social structure — journalistic organizations. As a result, the actual practice of journalists is lost in general historic explanations on the one side, and in the description of decontextualized occupational attitudes and mentalities on the other. (Schiller, 1981:327) In analyzing objectivity as an occupational ideology, Schudson sees journalists as agents free from organizational constraints, who were forced by "ordinary human aspirations" to seek escape from "doubt and drift". Objectivity is therefore seen in a sense as merely a psychological matter, as a passive response of the journalists to outside social changes.

This problem is also linked to Schudson's conceptualization of objectivity. As it has been shown, Schudson conceptualized objectivity as "consensually validated statements about the world", which means that a person's statements about the world can be trusted if they are subjected to established rules deemed legitimate by a professional community. (p. 7) However, a strong case can be made that objectivity is in no sense confined to the journalistic professional community alone. Elliott, for example, has demonstrated that objectivity can be seen as strategies which are not only means of achieving professional status for the individual, but means by which the organization may hold its ground in the wider society. (1977:150) Tuchman likewise argues that objectivity is routinely pursued and renegotiated inter-organizationally. She notes that objectivity functions as a common connection between reporters and sources, editors, publishers, and legal authorities. (1972:662-663). She situates the typifications that invoke and evoke objectivity squarely within "an organizational chain consisting of hierarchically arranged editors and their assignments:

As newsmen readily explain, processing a story involves "second guessing", the reporter "second guesses" the city editor and his assistants; the city editor, the news editors, the managing editor and editor-in-chief; these editors, the publisher. (1972:662)

As Schiller points out, the blue pencil, the reprimand, the next day's paper, and the occasional dismissal

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<sup>1</sup>See for example, Fishman, 1981; Emery and Emery, 1984.

are means by which the presence of objectivity is consolidated. (1981:328)

Another prominent media scholar, Herbert Gans, supports this argument by saying that the objectivity imperative on the part of the management was materialized into a variety of organizational mechanisms such as the awarding system, the frequent move of job assignments and so on. (1979:185) In terms of job assignments, Gans observes, general reporters move so quickly from story to story that they do not have time to develop attachment, whereas those covering emotionally charged stories such as wars and election campaigns are rotated frequently to preserve "objectivity". According to Gans, the division of labour is another organizational mechanism that helps to achieve the same goal. Story selectors are rarely out of their offices long enough to become involved. They are "detached" by their duty. (1979:185) All these suggest that objectivity is not so much as a creation of the professional journalists, or, to use Schudson's term, "daily reporters", as an imperative of the journalistic organizations.

That organizational imperative is crucial to the maintenance of journalistic objectivity can also be supported by a work upon which Schudson relies — Leo Reston's (1937) study of Washington correspondents. In a questionnaire filled out by 107 members of the Washington press corps, Reston asked his respondents whether they agreed with the following statement: "My orders are to be objective, but I know how I want stories played". 60% of the subjects agreed with this statement. Schudson accepts Reston's interpretation that journalists found it impossible to be objective. Yet from the wording of the question, which Reston noted was an expression of a number of reporters themselves, is it not clear that there was an "order" for the need of objectivity from above?

Another problem with Schudson's work lies in his understanding of the relation between the "naive empiricism" of the late nineteenth century and his concept of journalistic objectivity in the twentieth century. According to Schudson, the nineteenth century belief in facts is the precondition for the twentieth century idea of objectivity. The "objectivity" he understands is not an extension of the "naive empiricism", but a reaction against the disillusionment of that "naive empiricism". That is,

Schudson argues that the two are fundamentally different things. They belong to different categories and have different social grounds: the "naive empiricism" is the consciousness of the "democratic market society"; "objectivity" is the "ideology" of the 20th century in which the faith in that "democratic market society" had been lost.<sup>2</sup> However, there is strong evidence which indicates that the two beliefs share a common ground and they have many features in common. Schudson himself offers some clues for this argument.

Firstly, if we accept the argument that "objectivity" involves not only the need of individual journalists but also the imperative of the news organizations, it is also true that the early belief in "fact" was also cultivated by news organizations. This point has been clearly demonstrated in Chapter 2 of this thesis. It was the newspaper publishers who first declared that they would provide facts "stripped of verbiage and coloring". Similarly, it was from the strict teachings of the newspaper management that daily reporters learned the supremacy of the "facts". Schudson's own book described in great detail the enforcement of factuality in the nineteenth century newsrooms. The belief in "facts" is, therefore, like the 20th century "objectivity", also compulsive, as part of the imperatives of the journalistic institutions.

Based on the similarity and continuity between "objectivity" as a method, and the belief in "facts", it is not difficult to understand why, as Schudson finds, for daily reporters, even if they expressed allegiance for the ideal of objectivity, their conception of "objectivity" might mean "simply the application of a new label to the naive empiricism which reporters of the 1890s had called 'realism'." (p. 155) This point suggests that for the working journalist, the idea of "objectivity" posed little change in their daily routine, for the practice of "objectivity" was already there, although the rules were unwritten, and the term itself had not been consciously invoked.

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<sup>2</sup> Schudson does not have an explicit definition of "ideology" in his book. However, he does quote favorably Marx's famous passage in the *German Ideology* when he refers "objectivity" as an "ideology": "If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process". It seems that the reason Schudson relates this definition to objectivity is his belief that "objectivity", by virtue of his argument that it did not arise until its impossibility had been realized, is an ideology in the Marxian sense.

Secondly, according to Schudson, "objectivity" as a set of methods arose in the 1920s and 1930s, with Walter Lippmann as its most forceful spokesman. However, what Lippmann proposed was hardly anything new. As Schudson himself notes, before Lippmann proposed professionalism, the press had already been promoting the idea for several decades. The endorsement by Joseph Pulitzer for the establishment of the Columbia School of Journalism in 1904 was a good example to the point. Indeed, what was original to Lippmann was not the idea of professionalism *per se*, but the theoretical exposition of the idea. Similarly, before Lippmann proposed the identification of news sources in news stories, the practice had already existed in news reporting for some time. As was demonstrated in Chapter 2, the statements made by editor Carr Van Anda during his encounter with Senator Tom Walsh indicated that these journalistic rules had already been established prior to, or at least during, World War I. What Walter Lippmann did, both as a practitioner and a theoretician of journalism, was to systematically organize and articulate those unwritten rules that were already practiced in journalism. That is, acting as an "organic" intellectual, Lippmann merely theorized those rules and elaborated them from a theoretical perspective.

In an essay written in 1931, for instance, Lippmann accomplished such a job quite effectively. He suggested in the essay that any nation's press would naturally pass through four stages of development. The first stage was a press controlled by government. The second stage was a press controlled by political parties. In the third stage, according to Lippmann, the press broke from both the government and party "by enlisting the commercially profitable support of a large body of readers". In the United States, this stage began with the penny press. Lippmann then foresaw a fourth stage, which was the stage of objective journalism, emerging. When this stage reached full flower, Lippmann wrote, newspapers would institutionalize the use of "trained intelligence". They would be so attached to the conscientious pursuit of an "approximation to objective fact" that they would be free even from the changing tastes and prejudices of the public itself; (1931:433-441) that is, this is the stage of perfection. In this way, Lippmann resorted to history to contextualize objectivity and professionalism and made objectivity the inevitable, natural outcome of the self-evolving journalistic history.

Based on the above analysis, it can be seen that although "objectivity" as Schudson defines it is not a final expression of the belief in "facts", it nevertheless signifies a logical outgrowth of the early belief in "facts" under particular historical conditions. The catalyst for such an outgrowth is the realization of the inevitability of subjectivity in reporting. The genesis which determined the inevitability and the direction of such an outgrowth is the nature of the press as an "independent capitalistic institution". The need for the legitimation of such a press had early cultivated a belief in "facts". But when the transparency of the "facts" was challenged, a more concrete and more narrowly-defined concept of objectivity was elaborated to secure that legitimacy.

Indeed, if not for such an organizational imperative on the part of the journalistic institution, journalists could have reacted to the loss of faith in "facts" quite differently. Here again, Schudson's own documentation is illuminating. Facing the problems of subjectivity in reporting, Schudson notes, there were several different reactions initiated by the press. The first is the rise of political columnists, who openly acknowledged that there was no longer pure "facts", but only individual interpretations of "facts". Schudson observes that with the emergence of *Time* magazine in 1923, subjectivity in reporting was institutionalized in its extreme form. Henry Luce, the founder of *Time*, openly denounced "objectivity". Schudson quotes him as saying that "show me a man who think he's objective, ... I'll show you a man who's deceiving himself". (p. 149) Luce recommended that newspapers drop their division of the editorial page from the news and put on the front page "intelligent criticism, representation and evaluation of men who hold offices of public trust". (p. 149) Outside the news profession, Schudson suggests that Ivy Lee, a pioneer of public relations, declared that since pure "fact" was not possible for people to report, all he could do was to give people his interpretation of the fact. (p. 135)

Why then, did not daily reporters follow Lee's lead in declaring the interpretive nature of the news? Why did not daily newspapers accept Luce's recommendation? Schudson fails to pursue these questions. He only asserts:

Not all journalists could be columnists, nor were all free to write interpretively. Daily reporters still needed to believe in the value of their own work in gathering and presentation of facts. They need a framework within which they could take their own work seriously and persuade their readers and their critics to take it seriously too. That is what the notion of "objectivity", as it was elaborated in the twenties and thirties, tried to provide. (p. 151)

Again, why are not all journalists free to write interpretively? What prevents them from doing so? Why do daily reporters "need" to believe in "facts"? All these questions can not be answered without a sufficient understanding of the organizational imperatives of the press. Schudson's work is unsatisfactory in this area in that it fails to address these more fundamental questions, and therefore to provide a more substantial and adequate explanation of the origins of objectivity.

### 3.2 The Technological Argument

The technological argument finds roots of objectivity "in 19th century technology and its concomitant, industrialization and urbanization". (Blankenbury and Walden, 1981) The wire service, in particular, is charged with developing objectivity in the form of non-partisan, "unbiased" news reporting and teaching it to newspapers. (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1963) In their book *Four Theories of the Press*, Siebert and his colleagues describe the birth of objective reporting in the following terms:

Its [the theory of objective reporting] origin may be traced to the growth of cooperative newsgathering associations which furnished the local newspaper with information from state, national and international source. Most newspapers were then violently partisan, and they resented attempts to induce them to publish materials favorable to, or slanted in the direction of the opposite party. The alternative is to eliminate as far as possible all political bias in the news. The news agencies instructed reporters and writers to remember that their writings were being distributed to both Democratic and Republican clients and had to be acceptable to both. Writers became adept at constructing non-partisan accounts, and from this practice grew the concept of objective reporting which has permeated American journalism to the present. (1963:60)

To quantitatively test this argument, Shaw (1967) conducted a sampling survey of Wisconsin English daily press during the 1852-1910 period and found that there was a decline in partisan reporting as the use of the telegraph became more common.



It seems, however, the argument that the theory of objective reporting was brought about by the wire service is too simplistic, if not misleading. The argument is more a simple assertion than a theoretical exposition. It comprehends neither the proper historical chronology nor the complexity of the issue. It simply attributes a complicated historical phenomenon to a related factor and thus blurs the whole issue.

There is little doubt that the use of the telegraph contributed to the decline of partisan reporting. However, it will be a mistake to assume that there is a sufficient causal relation between the use of telegraphy and the rise of objectivity in journalism. Telegraphy came into use in the 1840s. The first wire story was sent from Washington and published in the *Baltimore Patriot* in 1844. The Associated Press was established in 1848, after the penny press had proved itself and articulated its non-partisan stand. In his history of American telegraph industry, Robert Luther Thompson indicated that James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald*, Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*, and several other publisher-editors of the penny press made the first and fullest use of the telegraph service, while most of the partisan press, like most of the public, was at the beginning unwilling to believe or unable to comprehend the potentials of this new technology. (1947:219) Thus, it was the penny press that first exploited the technology and used it in such a way that it reinforced their own policy orientations; that is, the wire service was a technological configuration which was super-imposed on a news-gathering system that already placed a premium on apparent factual accuracy. (Schiller, 1981:4) Indeed, the technological argument can be turned around: it was the penny press and the relations of news production it represented that created the wire service, not the wire service that invented the non-partisan reporting, because such a practice had already been established as one of the distinctive characteristics of the penny press.

Furthermore, even if we accept the argument that the wire service did initiate the practice of non-partisan reporting, we still need to explain why such a particular practice should become the institutional theory of the news media as a whole. Shaw's study, although it has provided some persuasive findings, fails to establish a sufficient causal relation between the use of the telegraph and the

decline of partisan reporting in the press. His study also suffers from the methodological problem of trying to judge the political inclinations of nineteenth century news reporting by the standard of the twentieth century.

If the technological argument is modified to assert that the wire-service did not initiate non-partisan, factual reporting, but was used in such a way that it facilitated the development of such a practice, then the relationship between norms of news reporting and the use of new communications technology might be more fully appreciated. Another important technology was photography, which, as Schiller (1981) has noted, contributed to reinforcing the press' self-image of a mirror to the world.

Photography was first invented in Europe and was introduced to the United States in 1839. The uncanny ability of the technology to depict reality without apparent human intervention bolstered the apparently universal recognition of it as supreme standard of accuracy and truth. Like its exploitation of the telegraphic technology, the American commercial press soon found inspirations in this new technology and made the fullest use of it. They appointed themselves a photographic role. The *Boston Herald*, for example, proclaimed in 1874 that its attention was to "group and picture the events of the passing time, and daguerreotype them for the public eye in unfading lines". (in Schudson, 1978:193) The *Minnesota Pioneer* stated in a leading editorial in 1851 that the most important purpose of the newspaper "is to mirror back to the world, the events, the peculiarities and the whole features of the new world by which it is surrounded". It indulged itself into the power of the picture and said that it would simply present a "daguerreotype" of a subject, instead of writing an article "as long as the Mississippi river, and twice as turbid". (in Hage, 1967:5) The *New York Tribune* likewise claimed that it was to be "a faithful daguerreotype of the progress of mankind".

Here, the commercial press spoke of its own role directly in the language of photography, because the new technology provided a metaphor for such a role. The significance of photography to the press is thus two-fold. It helped to enhance the press' self role image both practically and rhetorically.

A similar argument can be made with regard to television technology. By virtue of its capacity to capture the "real" world "live" and to speak to its audience "directly", television has established itself as "a window of the world", through which the real world is supposedly presented to the audience "objectively". Moreover, based on the scarcity of resource rationale and the "public trust" concept, radio and television technology lead to the codification of reportorial norms into regulatory guidelines and thus render them legal status. This kind of legislation was seen in the public broadcasting systems in the European countries,<sup>3</sup> in the Canadian Broadcasting Act (1968), as well as the U.S. Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) "Fairness Doctrine".<sup>4</sup> Here again, it is not radio or television technologies themselves that require the "objectivity" and "balance" in news presentation. Rather, the technologies were so perceived and so understood that they reinforced and perpetuated the existing reportorial norms.<sup>5</sup>

To summarize then, the cases of telegraphy, photography as well as broadcasting technology all suggested that there was no simple, linear causal relationship between technology and certain reportorial norms. But these technologies all had in one way or another contributed to the perpetuation of these norms. To search for the roots of objectivity, we need to look elsewhere. And this leads us back to the penny press, but with a different understanding from that of Schudson's.

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<sup>3</sup>For examples of European broadcasting regulations which stipulated "objectivity" and "impartiality" as statutory requirements, see Golding and Elliott (1979), Eva Etzioni-Halevy (1987).

<sup>4</sup>The "Fairness Doctrine" was repealed by the FCC in August 1987. Chapter 5 will discuss this case in detail.

<sup>5</sup>This argument deals with the specific technology and the specific reportorial norms discussed in the context of this thesis. In advancing this argument, I have no intention to thrust myself into the debate on technology in general.

### 3.3 Dan Schiller's Argument

In his book *Objectivity and News* (1981), Dan Schiller also undertakes the task of searching for the roots of journalistic objectivity. He covers some of the same ground as Schudson does in his work. He likewise characterizes the penny press as an important integrating force in the nineteenth century industrial society. That society, however, was not Schudson's "democratic market society" in which the middle class made war against tradition: it was a consumer society in which the dominant conflict was the one between the emerging working class and the capitalists. The readers of the penny press, according to Schiller, were not predominantly middle class but working class, who had been cultivated as a public by a nascent labor press in the 1820s and early 1830s. At that time, according to Schiller, the rich seemed to hold a monopoly on property, power, knowledge and justice, while the artisans, mechanics and tradesmen were threatened by a corrupt legal system and saw their natural rights to justice, equality and property impeded. As manufacture moved from workshop to factory, the emerging industrial and commercial workers organized their own press — the labor press, which presented a critique of monopolization of work in the emerging industrial economy. This press articulated the interests of the working class and expressed an emerging class consciousness. (p. 26) It declared its independence from monopolists and political factions and appealed to reason, justice and other republican values that had been forgotten by the leading capitalist class. (p. 46) This argument was forcefully presented by Schiller through an examination of the ideals and practices of the labor press of the 1820s and 1830s.

The labor press, however, according to Schiller, did not last beyond the economic depression of the late 1830s, in which a great number of people were unemployed. The ideals and aspirations however, Schiller argues, were picked up by the commercial press, which "appropriated and softened the anger of the labor press into a blustery rhetoric of equal rights, enlightenment and political independence". (p. 46) Schiller assigned much of the penny press' success to its use of the idiom and ideology of the artisan public:

In speaking to the living experiences of the public, the penny papers presumed to represent the voice of the people as they discharged their obligation to the privileged. They succeed in this new role because the public — from large merchants down to journeymen and even labors — generally accepted the rights of man to property. Even with its selective attacks on monopoly and on the unwholesome extension of class inequality by the state, the penny press could simultaneously align itself with both hard-pressed journeymen and successful capitalists. (p. 71)

Thus, for Schiller, the penny press' appeal to equality, natural right, justice, and public good was well suited to its working class readership whose social consciousness was not so much predicated upon a recognition of the necessity of class struggle within a capitalist social formation, as upon a republicanism centred around a belief in common interests, and a unitary public good grounded in individual natural rights. (Pickering, 1982:208)

Under this general premise, Schiller identifies two practices which enabled the penny press to claim its independence from party and state, from privilege and monopolistic interests as well as its allegiance to public good. These two forms were investigative reporting and the cultivation of "objectivity". He contends that while investigation on the abuse of state power and criminal infringement of individual rights exhibited a commitment to public enlightenment and a defense of natural rights (p. 54), "objectivity" helped the press to cultivate its role as defender of the public good in the same fashion as scientific knowledge — as straight forward presentation of the "facts" of the social world.

Drawing from Barthes' theory on myth, Schiller conceptualizes journalistic objectivity as a "myth", because it "transforms history into nature" — according to Barthes (1970), "myths" are historical creations that have been naturalized and presented as ahistorical. Schiller contends: "Arising in homologous relation to the paths taken by science and art, the myth of journalistic objectivity allowed the penny papers to oversee the public good — to supervise public enlightenment — without betraying any self-interest". (p. 54) That is, Schiller argues, "objectivity" mystified the relationship between class interest and knowledge and laid the foundation of a consumer society in which the workers would be condemned to pursue their own interest on the basis of information provided by another class, a world

in which people waited to be informed, rather than produce their own knowledge.

Schiller then devotes the rest of the book to a detailed analysis of the content of a penny paper — the *National Police Gazette* (1845–1850), a newspaper that specialized in crime news — to discover the "patterns of objectivity" and to show how objectivity was specifically cultivated in newspaper practice. He identifies a number of practices through which the newspaper demonstrated its "objectivity". These practices included professional competences such as eyewitness accounts to actual events and an authoritative presentation of the "facts" through attribution to legitimate news sources; the use of situated language in attempt to capturing the texture of the criminal subculture; and the belief in the "value-free" accuracy of information, etc..

Schiller concludes his book by an examination of the increasing tension between the self-interest of the commercial press and the working class public in the late nineteenth century and with an acknowledgement that the democratic promise invoked by the penny press of the 1830s has not been fulfilled. He pleads: "We must redeem the democratic promise that has, since the 1830s, been latent in American information system. We must strive for a public sphere in which the people themselves rather than undelegated groups from their midst will be the lord of fact." (p. 197)

Schiller's work offers a particularly insightful analysis into objectivity, and into the nature of commercial press. The most significant contribution of the book is Schiller's documentation of the relationship between the early labor press and the penny press; that is, the argument that the penny press appropriated the discourse of the labor press and thus won the working class readership.

In her study of the early Canadian press, Satu Repo (1986) finds that a similar relationship existed between the early Canadian labor press and its commercial successors of the late nineteenth century. Repo argues that the early Canadian commercial press, like its counterpart in the United States, also adopted the discourse of the nineteenth century labor press, as it challenged the hegemony of the established party newspapers. This discourse was termed by Repo as the "democratic discourse".

a discourse that has its ideological roots in eighteenth century Enlightenment thought.<sup>6</sup>

Both Schiller's and Repo's studies suggest an important point. In contemporary cultural studies, the phenomenon of the commercial media's appropriation of the lived experience of subordinated classes has been a recurring theme. These studies suggest that that appropriation occurred at the very beginning of the commercial news media, that is, at the making of the commercial news media themselves. More significantly, the studies suggest that what the commercial news media appropriated was the Enlightenment discourse which claimed to take the perspective of the whole people and had been consciously endorsed by the subordinate groups on their own terms (the laboring classes through their own press). It is precisely through the appropriation of this discourse that the commercial press came into being in the first place, and survived the challenges from emerging forms of journalistic consciousness and practices.

Despite the significance of Schiller's study, there is an ambiguity in his argument. This ambiguity centres on the authenticity of the commercial press as a representation of the working class. On one occasion, Schiller asserts such an authenticity. In contrast to the press in European countries, where government control of the press long persisted, Schiller writes:

In the United States the commercial newspaper was left relatively free to develop along the working class itself ... The American working class had barely begun to employ the press as an agency of class identity when the commercial penny papers began to enlist the interest and identification of laboring men. This was no sleight of hand. It was, rather, an authentic expression of dominant values among the emerging white, male working class public. And it was the authenticity itself that marked the American experience unique. ... (p. 74-75, my emphasis)

He seems also to have taken the rhetoric of the penny press seriously: "the impartiality and independence claimed by the penny press successfully ushered its stewardship of the pursuit of enlightened reason in the public sphere. Although different penny journals had different ideals ... they all shared what Bennett termed 'the great focus of intelligence, news, business independence, true knowledge'." (p. 75)

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<sup>6</sup>Referred to in Chapter 2 section 2, page 22.

Yet in other places, Schiller is at pains to reveal the intrinsically entrepreneurial nature of the commercial press and the lip-service it paid to the values of the working class. He points out that the commercial press spoke for itself first and only afterward for a distinct social stratum, (p. 72) and that its nature as a commercial undertaking made its self-claimed motive of public good "patently untrue". (p. 128) Indeed, as Pickering (1982) has pointed out, in its reportorial practices, the commercial press faced characteristic tensions between condemnation of corrupt power versus defense of the state and recognition of class interest versus support of property rights. When these tensions eventually led to a divergence from its public, it opted for respectability and commercial success. Even at its early stage of development, the press' first priority was already evident. In the famous "Moon Hoax" in 1835 (Emery, 1984:142), the newly established *New York Sun* was ready to sacrifice "true knowledge" and engaged in the fabrication of a story about discoveries on the Moon for the purpose of commercial success.

In fact, Schiller himself also acknowledges the different meanings of the Enlightenment discourse to the labour press and to the commercial press: "what mechanics thought to accomplish as a public in the name of reason and a universal justice based on natural rights, newspaper proprietors pursued as a means of ever-enlarging circulation profits." (p. 70) Repo expresses the point more vividly in noting that when the commercial press was appropriating the discourse of the labor press, it retained "some of its bark, if not its bite". (1986:20) Therefore, it might be more appropriate to argue that the penny press did not help to advance a distinct working class consciousness, but effectively contained it, and used it to advance its own interest.

The ambiguity of Schiller's argument around this issue is derived partly from his inability to take into account the whole picture of both the content and the readership of the penny press. At one point, he mentions that the greatest contribution of the penny paper was that it found ways to speak to both the working people and the capitalists. (p. 17) Yet in his analysis, the relation between the penny press and its capitalist readership and the influence of this relationship on the shaping of the newspaper is largely neglected. In fact, at the same time the penny press appealed to the lower classes with crime news and stories that exposed corruption and abuse of power, it made its best effort to attract up-class



readers. And although it had broken its institutional ties with the political and economic elites, it did not curtail its service to these dominant social forces. In fact, the commercial press was closely tied to the political and economic elites. Firstly, it depends on the political and economic sectors for advertising revenue; secondly it depends on these same people for source of news and frame of analysis; thirdly, it should not be neglected that the press has itself become part of the political and economic establishment. All these suggested that if it is true that the "myth" of objectivity enables the commercial press to "supervise public enlightenment without betraying any self-interest", it is even more reasonable to say that the same "myth" allows the commercial press to serve the interests of the political and economic elites without an overt allegiance to these groups.

Viewed from the above analysis, it is clear that Schiller's conceptualization of objectivity as a "myth" that "allowed the penny papers to oversee the public good — to supervise public enlightenment — without betraying any self-interest" is rather problematic. There are several reasons for this point. First, the notion "public good" is not clearly defined in Schiller's analysis. Indeed, as Gramsci's analysis of hegemony has suggested, notions such as "popular will", "public interest" are often vague and problematic. They are in fact often used as a disguise for the advancement of particular interests. Second, even if we assume that there is really a "public interest" to be represented and defended, Schiller's analysis does not make clear the fact that there are limitations to the role of commercial press as a defender of such an interest. When there is an emphasis on profit, there will be constant pressure not to offend somebody, and as Williams has pointed out, to concentrate on things already known and safe but not necessary relevant to the real problems of the people. (1969:102) Finally, Schiller's analysis fails to acknowledge that "objectivity" not only mediates and redefines the relationship between the press and its working class public, but readjusts the relationship between the press and the dominant political and economic interests in the society.

### 3.4 Objectivity Revisited

So far, this chapter has examined three different conceptualizations of journalistic objectivity and their respective theories of origin: objectivity as a method that resulted from a loss of faith in a "democratic market society"; objectivity as non-partisan, factual reporting invented by the wire service and spread to the whole profession; and finally, objectivity as a "myth" allowing the press to oversee public interest without betraying its self interest. Although all the three conceptions share a common element, that is, "objectivity" has something to do with non-partisan, factual reporting, they are grounded in different premises and theoretical perspectives. And as the above analysis has tried to demonstrate, while all the arguments offer some insights, they suffer from limitations of one kind or another. In this section, I shall draw together the themes that have emerged in the historical interpretation in Chapter 2, the insights of the three arguments examined in this chapter as well as my critiques of the arguments to form an alternative conceptualization of journalistic objectivity.

In Chapter 2, I traced the historical evolution of the commercial press from its very beginning in the 1830s to its consolidation at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rather than try to identify the class of its readership, as did both Studson and Schiller, the chapter focused on the institutional and discursive nature of the press itself. It was argued that the emergence of the penny press marked the establishment of the press as an "independent capitalistic institution" and the beginning of a new form of news production. This new form of news production set the very basis for the press to assume a new role in society — to be "above" partisan politics, "beyond" particular interests. Discursively therefore, this press assumed to speak from a universal perspective; that is, a perspective which is independent of particular interests and to be endorsed by all the people. This universal perspective, is what the ideal of objectivity means.

The immediate economic reason for the rise of the ideal is very obvious. With the transformation of news into commodity and journalism into a commercial undertaking, news is forced "to see in everyone the buyer in whose hand ... it wants to nestle". (Benjamin, 1973:54) In the sense of the public

is the buyer of the news commodity itself as well as the goods it helps to advertise, and only in this sense, the newspaper saw a unitary, homogeneous body of "public". This unitary, homogeneous body of public as the buyer was the very economic basis upon which a universal perspective could take.

Objectivity as an ideal of journalism was however more than a mere reflection of immediate economic interest, for the news is not merely a commodity. News is also a cultural form and a means of political communication. The political dimension of the ideal of objectivity, therefore, must be addressed. In freeing itself from narrow partisan politics, the early commercial press, as both Schiller and Repo have demonstrated, appropriated a wide range of public rhetoric and idiom. More specifically, the early commercial press successfully appropriated the discourse of the early labor press. This discourse, in turn, was drawn from Enlightenment thought, which had been articulated by the rising bourgeois class in their war against the aristocracy and was then taken over by the emerging working class in their struggle against industrial capitalism. During this process of appropriation, the early commercial press appealed to what Gramsci called "the popular will" — equality, justice, fraternity, and natural rights. In this way, the commercial press created the intellectual and moral unity of various groups which constituted its readership and therefore successfully established itself as a hegemonic capitalistic institution. In particular, with its breaking away from the institutional ties with the ruling political and economic elites and its appropriation of public idiom, the commercial press for the first time reached the people on the lower level of the social pyramid and won their consent.

Viewed from this perspective, the ideal of objectivity was not only an economic imperative, but a political necessity. It was the core hegemonic principle by which the commercial press established its new position in the capitalistic social formation. Compared with the old hegemony of the merchant and political press, this new hegemony had a broader social basis. With the establishment of the commercial media, newspaper was no longer the mouthpiece of a particular political party, and information no longer under the monopoly of the political and economic elites. For the first time in history, the newspaper not only became accessible to common people, but overtly claimed to speak for the interest of the whole people. The ideal of objectivity, with its universalistic intention, harbored a profound

democratic promise.

There were, however, inherent contradictions within this new mode of news production. The unified, homogeneous public, which the ideal of objectivity assumes, existed only in the commercial sense; that is, in the sense of the "public" as faceless buyers of the news commodity and the goods it helped to advertise. In the political and social sense however, such a unitary body did not exist. In fact, the "public" was rather heterogeneous. It was divided into groups of different interests. In terms of the press and its readers, two sets of conflicting interests existed simultaneously: the self-interest of the press and the interests of its readers; and the different interests among the readers. Under such a circumstance, the newspaper, which embodied in itself a dual nature of both a commercial enterprise and a political and social institution, thus bore in itself the inherent contradiction between the ideal of objectivity and the actual practice of news representation. On the one hand, the economic imperative of the newspaper and its political need of legitimacy determined the necessity for the articulation of objectivity as an ideal; on the other hand, the political and social reality determined that news practices would deny the very substance of that ideal. This contradiction continues to persist today. And it is the very reason why the celebration of the ideal of objectivity accompanies the criticism of media "bias".

The contradictions of the commercial press, of course, is manifested in many forms. In terms of political communication, for example, the contradiction is well summarized by Hallin:

On the one hand, it [the transformation of the press from a political one to a commercial one] democratized the market for newspapers, but on the other, it centralized the means of political communication in the hands of large corporation and caused atrophy of the mobilizing and advocacy roles previously fulfilled by the newspaper. (1982:128)

What Hallin suggests is that, at the same time the commercial press brought information to the people as a whole, it excluded the ordinary people from participating in the generation of information and the crusading for their own causes. Truly, the press claimed to provide the "facts", but it was ~~not the~~ people themselves, but a privileged group, namely, the private media and their sources who were, to use Schiller's term, "lord of the facts". In this way, the people have been transformed into the consumer of information, with their values and aspirations effectively contained.

To summarize, then, it can be argued that as an ideal, objectivity has its ideological roots in the enlightenment thought, which for the first time in human history envisioned an unified and homogeneous public based on the natural rights of each individual. This ideal became institutionalized in journalism, however, only after the rise of the commercial journalism, whose economic need for the maximization of profits and whose political need of legitimation made such an ideal an imperative. The irony is, therefore, that objectivity, with its basis in the Enlightenment, should find its roots in the self-interested commercial media in a class-divided society. But the legacy remains, for the plot is constantly being cultivated by the media for both its political and economic necessity. Over history, some particular journalistic practices have been concretized as privileged and legitimate versions of the ideal. In concluding this chapter, I shall return to the belief in "facts" and the cultivation of "objective" reporting methods for a brief re-examination. I shall argue that the belief in "facts" and the cultivation of reportorial methods are two inter-related privileged forms of the ideal of objectivity. In advancing this argument, it is hoped that the themes that have emerged in both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 will point to a comprehensive view of the history, development and the nature of objectivity in news presentation.

#### *3.4.1 The Belief in Facts*

At its emergence, the ideal of objectivity took the form of a belief in "facts". It was operationalized through the reporting of "facts" upon which, as the *New York Times* put it, "men of all parties relied". This practice of objectivity-through-factuality was made possible and facilitated by the positivist epistemology and the press's exploitation of several communication technologies, mainly, telegraphy and photography.

This positivistic version of objectivity-through-factuality, however, was doomed to become an illusion. Because in positivism, the notion of "construction" was a forgotten one. With the realization that the "real world" was actively constructed by the human mind, the old form of objectivity could no longer be easily held valid. If such a realization was a historical progress in term of human beings'

knowledge of themselves and their world, it caused a "crisis in journalism", (Lippmann, 1922) an institution that had built its political legitimacy on a naive belief in "facts".

#### 3.4.2 *The Elaboration of Methods*

Facing this "crisis", the commercial press strove to maintain its hegemonic status by the elaboration of reportorial methods. Walter Lippmann's theoretical exposition on the necessity of objectivity was an example of such an effort. Other efforts included the establishment of journalism schools and the compilation of journalistic codes of ethics, etc.. Balance, the use of quotation marks, the attribution of sources, as well as other methods and conventions were established to allow journalists to claim complete objectivity. Through this set of methods, objectivity was defined in more technical and more concrete terms.

The difference between this mechanized form of objectivity and the old belief in "facts" is very apparent by a comparison of journalists' attitudes toward journalistic rules. In the earlier stage of the development of the imperative of objectivity, reporting was seen as an activity that merely copies what the real world is. Consequently, it was understood that there was no need for rules. "Making rules for news?" queried the official biographer of the *New York Sun*, "how is it possible to make a rule for something the value of which lies in the fact that it is the narrative of what event happened, in exactly the same way before?" (O'Brien, 1928:156) Editor Charles Dana contrasted the journalist with the physician and the lawyer, who both have codes of ethics. He noted that he had never met with a system of maxims that were suitable to the general direction of a newspaperman. (1895:18)

It is ironic then, that two decades later, in 1923, the first action of the newly established American Society of Newspaper Editors was to put forward the Canon of Journalism, the first national code of ethics and standards for the journalistic profession. In 1935, the American Newspaper Guild's code of ethics formally endorsed the ideal of objectivity by saying that "the newspapermen's first duty is to give the public accurate and unbiased news reports". (in Schiller, 1981:195, my emphasis)

Finally, it must be pointed out that there is not a clear-cut distinction between objectivity in its early form of a simple belief in "facts" and its late form of a set of elaborated journalistic conventions. That is, although these two forms are historically specific, they interpenetrate into each other. While the simple belief in "facts" still remains the core component of journalistic objectivity even today, journalistic conventions can be traced back to the very beginning to the commercial press.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE ON THE CONCEPT OF JOURNALISTIC OBJECTIVITY

In the last two chapters, the thesis has traced the origins of the concept of journalistic objectivity and has examined the manifest forms of the concept within different historical contexts. In this chapter, the thesis will analyze contemporary theoretical discourse around the concept. More specifically, the concept will be explored in relation to the ideal of freedom of the press, the journalistic profession, interpretive reporting as well as the notion of "fairness".

Chronologically, this chapter roughly connects to the last time period that has been covered in the last two chapters, that is, the late 1920s and 1930s, the time during which the ideal of objectivity was institutionalized and formalized into a set of journalistic conventions. Through such an investigation, the complexity of the concept will be untangled. At the same time, the analysis will demonstrate both the flexibility and the enduring power of journalistic objectivity, and in the broadest sense, demonstrate how the media themselves and their liberal scholars have endeavored to draw together inconsistent ideas and themes to formulate a coherent journalistic ideology to effectively mediate journalistic practice.

#### 4.1 Freedom of Press and Journalistic Objectivity

Freedom of press, an idea first articulated by John Milton in the 17th century England, has served for centuries as the ideal of journalism. Although the concept has different meanings, it originally meant the freedom of the press to disseminate information and ideas without government restriction. The uneasy "marriage" between the idea of freedom of the press and the concept of journalistic objectivity demonstrates the forcefulness, the flexibility and the adaptability of the imperative of objectivity.

As demonstrated in the last two chapters, the concept of journalistic objectivity originated in the 1830s, with the rise of the commercial press. Once it was formulated however, the concept acquired a



life of its own. It became naturalized and its actual historical origins became obscure. Thus, in the battle between the Nixon Administration and the press in the 1970s, I. William Hill, associate editor of the *Washington Evening Star*, was able to compose a legend about the concept. In a 1970 article appeared in the bulletin of American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), Hill imitated the rhetoric of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and wrote:

Nine Score and five years ago, our forefathers brought forth upon this continent the daily newspaper, conceived in objectivity and dedicated to the proposition that all men are entitled to impartial facts. Now we are engaged in a great media debate, testing whether this newspaper or any medium so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. (my emphasis)

It is understandable that Hill invoked newspaper tradition in defense of the media. And as we have shown, such a strategy had been employed by the editor of the *New York Times* in facing a government investigator as early as 1915. But it is amusing to read a statement such as this by a newspaper editor in a publication by an organization as prominent as the ASNE. Thanks to the journalistic convention of "balance", Hill's remark was "balanced" by Derick Daniels, executive editor of the *Detroit Free Press*, who said in the following issue of the ASNE bulletin: "[I]f my understanding of history is correct, it was just the opposite — that the press in America was born of advocacy and protest — that opinion and activism were the cornerstones which the constitution is designed to protect".

Daniels is correct. The early foundations of journalistic freedom were laid down by participants in the social struggle who fought not for the freedom of "objective", detached reporting, but for the opposite: the freedom of advocacy. John Milton's *Areopagitica*, considered the primary proclamation for the freedom of the press in the English language, was subtitled "A Speech by Mr. Milton, for the Liberty of Unlicenced Printing". As Bagdikian puts it, any suggestion to the early journalists like Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift that they should write in calm and balance tones giving fair argument for both sides would have struck them as bizarre. (1971:269) Similarly, in the United States, as it was demonstrated in Chapter 2, prior to the rise of the commercial press in the 1830s, there was the "Dark Ages" in which partisan journalism predominated. That is, when the forefathers "brought forth upon this continent the daily newspaper", it was not "conceived in objectivity and dedicated to the proposition

that all men were entitled to impartial facts". Rather, newspapers were conceived in "truth" and "reason" and dedicated to the proposition that all men are entitled to a "marketplace of ideas". Through this market, it was believed that people would be able "to hear everything true and false, and to form a correct judgment between them". (Jefferson, ed. Lipscomb & Bergh, vol. 11:37) For instance, in his second Inaugural Address(1805), Thomas Jefferson said:

Since truth and reason have maintained their ground against false opinion in league with false facts, the press, confined to truth, needs no other constraints; the public judgment will correct false reasonings and opinions on a full hearing of all parties; and other definite line can draw between inestimable liberty of the press and its demoralizing licentiousness. (Jefferson, ed. Ford, vol. 10:135, my emphasis)

Clearly, then, in Jefferson's concept of freedom of the press, there was room for "false facts", not to mention "partial facts". In short, the "free press" was not originally conceived as the way editor Hill had wished it to be.

If Hill and his journal editors were alone in their overt historical mistake, they were however not alone in their effort of trying to rewrite press history and trying to link "objectivity" to the theory of the freedom of the press, and ultimately, to the theory of democracy. And such an effort has been on its way long before Hill. Here again, we are invited to examine the writings of Walter Lippmann. In his 1931 essay on American journalism, Lippmann said that although the American press had freed itself from external government control, it was not free in the sense that it was subjected to commercial imperatives. To achieve total freedom, Lippmann proposed not structural changes, but the ideal of objectivity. According to him, when a press concerned itself primarily with the goal of "approximation to objective fact", it would not only be free from government control, but would be "free also of subservience to the whims of the public". (1931:440)

By introducing the concept of objectivity, Lippmann had actually modified the substance of the original free press concept. That is, whereas the original concept was based on the conviction that truth could conquer falsehood through the competition in the marketplace of ideas, Lippmann based his concept of free press on the philosophy that "truth as to the visible world comes only by candid and critical observation with humility and detachment"; (1931:441) that is, through objectivity.

While Lippmann shifted the ground for the freedom of the press concept to "objectivity", some other theoreticians of the press linked objectivity directly to the theory of democracy. Jorgen Westerstahl, for example, has written:

The requirement of objective news reporting is intimately related to Western democracy and to one of its basic principles, the freedom of opinion. According to democratic ideology, neither political parties nor leaders nor any other potentates shall decide the direction of society's activity. This right belongs ultimately to the individual citizen. Therefore citizens need to be informed of what is happening in the world around them. News reporting must be factual and impartial in order to provide a foundation for independent and rational decision making. (1983:407, my emphasis)

It is especially illustrative to compare Jefferson's version of democratic decision-making through the marketplace of ideas in which "truth and reason" compete with "false opinion in league with false facts" with Westerstahl's version of democracy in which "objectivity" has become the pre-requirement for the "freedom of opinion".

As it was pointed out early in this section, the freedom of press concept originally meant the press' freedom to publish without government intervention. This freedom was guaranteed in the United States by the First Amendment to the Constitution, which states that "congress shall make no law abridge the freedom of speech or press ...". However, the First Amendment did not protect the press from restrictions by economic, social or other non-governmental interests or pressures, nor did it guarantee the access of everyone to the press. As in other spheres of commodity production, the press, established as a business enterprise, was inherently subjected to monopolization, which made it increasingly vulnerable to the charge of limiting opportunities for freedom of speech and diversity of opinion. Commitment to "objectivity", then, blunted the potential contradiction between a monopoly press and the ideology of freedom of the press.

It is worthy of note that the common term "freedom of the press" is substituted by a slightly different term — "freedom of opinion" — in Westerstahl's above quoted passage. The difference between the two terms should not be overlooked. Whereas the concept "freedom of press" takes the press as its subject and defines its freedom to publish "truth and reason" as well as false opinion and false facts, the notion "freedom of opinion" as used in Westerstahl's context takes individual citizens as

its subject. At the same time, the clear intention of the original concept of free press has been substantially reduced and blurred. This new concept consciously or unconsciously embodies one of the core principles of "objectivity": facts are sacred(reserved only for the privileged media); opinions are free(to such an extent that they are free to be formulated on the basis of the "facts" provided by the media).

Other related concepts that have recently gained wide currency are "freedom of information" and "the right of the public to know". Although these concepts all have their definite meanings, they all reflect an effort to move the focus away from the press itself and take either the public or a reified entity such as "information" (which often connotes "value free") as its focus of concern. It is with good reason that Herbert Brucker entitled one of his books *Freedom of Information* (1947), in which he actually crusaded for the practice of objectivity.

All these rhetorical modifications symbolize profound changes in journalism. As the "free press" grows bigger, its underlying logic lies more bare. Consequently, the old rhetoric loses its authority. Freedom of the press, once a noble idea, has increasingly been tarnished with the connotation of the self-interest of the press. As a response, defenders of the "free press" have tried to redefine the concept and to come up with new terms to justify the reality of existing journalistic structures and practices. While Hill's anti-historical remark may sound questionable, Lippmann, Westerstahl and Brucker, as well as many others, are all learned scholars and theoreticians who have tried to find new ideas and concepts to not only explain, but guide journalistic practices. Although the terms they propose are varied, they all take the situation of press monopoly for granted and all resort to the ideal of "objectivity". That is, they all try to "marry" "objectivity" to the idea of "freedom of the press". Thus, while the free press concept sustains its legacy by its incorporation of "objectivity" into its own domain, the concept of objectivity gains its authority through its "marriage" with the free press concept.<sup>1</sup> As Altschull puts it: "If the First Amendment remains the banner under which press ideology advances in

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<sup>1</sup>It should be noted, however, not everybody is happy with this "marriage", especially when it needs to gain legal recognition. Chapter 5 will discuss this issue.

the United States (and in the industrial world), it is the code of objectivity that is its moral artillery." (1984:126) These two "parental" concepts, together with their "offsprings" such as "freedom of opinion", "freedom of information", "the right of the public to know", make up some of the most important ideographs of twentieth century journalism in the industrialized world.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4.2 Objectivity and the Journalistic Occupation

In Chapter 3, the thesis disputed Michael Schudson's argument that objectivity was a journalistic ideology born out of the journalists' loss of faith in the "democratic market society" and its accompanying epistemology — "naive empiricism". It was argued that the roots of "objectivity" lies at the very structure of the commercial press. However, this is not to suggest that "objectivity" has nothing to do with the journalistic occupation. On the contrary, it is through the working of daily reporters that the ideal is operationalized and perpetuated. What, then, is the journalists' stake in this ideal? This section will explore this issue.

In posing this question, one is immediately reminded of Gaye Tuchman's objectivity as "strategic ritual" thesis.<sup>3</sup> Here I wish to elaborate this thesis in a broader perspective. That is, objectivity is not only the defensive strategy of the journalists in their daily news practice, but the principle by which they negotiate their status in the society at large. It is, in a sense, the single most important principle that distinguishes media practitioners from other people engaging in the information business. By an allegiance to objectivity, journalists attempt to establish themselves as professionals and turn journalism into a profession.<sup>4</sup> As Lippmann once claimed, reporting as a profession could not begin until "modern

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<sup>2</sup>An ideograph is an ordinary language term found in political discourse. It is a high order abstraction representing a collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal. Ideographs are usually culture-bound. They are the structural elements and building blocks of ideology. See Michael Calvin McGee(1980):

<sup>3</sup>See Chapter 1 Section 3 for a brief analysis on this argument.

<sup>4</sup>The term "professional" has two meanings. It may loosely mean the mere opposite of "amateur". In this sense of the word, anybody who does anything for money is a professional. In a more restricted sense, it may be used to refer to a member of a learned

objective journalism was successfully created, and with it, the need of men who would consider themselves devoted, as all the profession ideally are, to the service of truth alone." (1931:440-441, my emphasis)

This last sentence is worthy of special attention. The modern commercial press, as it has been pointed out earlier, holds a dual identity: both a commercial enterprise and a cultural institution. Journalists therefore serve two lords: capital and the "truth", to use Lippmann's term. Professionalization, and along with it, the practice of "objectivity", is the very means by which journalists dramatize the social meaning of their work, while downplaying their function as agents of capital. It is a psychological comfort against, and a social legitimation for, the compromises the editorial side of the daily newspaper made with its business side.<sup>5</sup> Objectivity, therefore, serves a two-fold purpose: it serves the economic and political needs of the news organizations, and at the same time serves the social and psychological needs of the journalists for the cultivation of their self image as independent, autonomous truth seekers.

It has been pointed out in this thesis that economic consolidation and press monopoly provide the media organization with an impulse for the imperative of objectivity. Here I wish to point out that press monopoly and concentration, and consequently, the relatively stable property relationship and the relative distance between the ownership and the employees of the media organizations have also provided a favorable condition under which journalists are able to claim their "objectivity". Such a situation is particularly true with large media. In other words, had there been dramatic and frequent

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<sup>4</sup>(cont'd) profession, such as physicians, attorneys and the like. Journalists have attempted to achieve the status of professionals in the second sense and usually see themselves as professionals in this sense. In referring journalists as "professionals" and their occupation as a "profession", however, I am simply speaking in the language of the mainstream journalism itself. It should be noted that there is disagreement on the issue. Strong arguments have been made that journalism is not a profession and should not be a profession, because journalism does not have features that are characteristics of such professions as medicine and law, and because professionalism in journalism is not consistent with the spirit of freedom of the press. See Jeffrey Olen (1988: 29-31) for a forceful presentation of these arguments.

<sup>5</sup>This argument borrows heavily from John Pauly's (1988) analysis of professional independence in journalism.

property transactions, had media owners constantly intervened in the daily operation of the media, journalists would have been less certain to claim their "objectivity". They would have more readily realized that it was the media owner's economic interests rather than their commitment to "truth" that dictated the media operation.

John Pauly's (1988) study of the American media establishment's reaction to the exceptional case of Rupert Murdoch lends some support to such a speculation. Murdoch is an Australia-based media proprietor. Since his entrance into the American media market in the early 1970s, he has evoked more criticism among the American journalistic community than any other media owner for the last few decades. The reason for this, as Pauly has demonstrated, is not so much the fact that Murdoch threatens the American media establishment politically and economically, as the fact that he threatens the social legitimation and psychological repose of professional journalism. (1988:252) Murdoch's careless acquisition of media property, his overt exercise of ownership power, his intrusive newsroom behavior, his unconcealed interest in the economic performance of his properties, as well as his disrespect of the ideals and conventions that have been held so dearly by the American journalistic community, lay bare the larger economic premise that professional journalism has tried so hard to downplay.

A media owner like Murdoch, therefore, disturbs the established community of professional journalists and threatens their self image as independent, "objective" truth seekers. It is then not surprising to see why Murdoch has been denounced by Abe Rosenthal of the *New York Times* as a "bad element, practicing mean, ugly, violent journalism", (Welles, 1979:51) and accused by an editorial in the *Columbia Journalism Review* of "doing the devil's work". (January/February 1980:18)

Of course, the commitment to "objectivity" is not an isolated journalistic phenomenon. In his essay "News and Ideology", Canadian media scholar Graham Knight suggests that the cultivation of "objectivity" and the rise of professionalism in journalism is closely linked to the emergence of a "new" middle class of salaried, "intellectual" labor (as contrast to the "old" middle class of independent, self-employed commodity producers). (Knight, 1982:23) Objectivity, viewed from this perspective,

provided the basis on which this "new" middle class "lay claim to professional autonomy and thereby resist the rationalization of their skills on the part of the capital that employed them". (1982:23) According to Knight, journalistic objectivity converges with objectivity and ethical neutrality in other bureaucratic institutions to form the ideal basis of work orientation and career commitment of this "new" middle class.

The implications of this commitment are complex. And the pursuit of such a question is certainly beyond the scope of this thesis. For the journalistic practitioners however, the consequences seem dual: on the one hand, the commitment to "objectivity" provides the basis for journalists to establish autonomy and prestige; on the other hand, "objectivity", with all its rigid operational rules, may serve as a device of self-denial; that is, "objectivity" may be the very mechanism that ultimately alienates journalists from their work. This alienation was extremely evident before the 1950s and the early 1960s when the practice of "objectivity" was particularly pervasive.

Two examples are sufficient to illustrate the point. One story was recounted by Irving Dilliard, one time chief editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. According to him, sometime before World War I the paper's managing editor had pointed out a page-one story to him, and complained:

Here is a lie. I know it is a lie, but I must print it because it is spoken by a prominent public official. The public official's name and position make the lie news. Were the source an unknown person I could and would gladly throw it in the waste basket. I have done what I can to show that I know that the statement is untrue by putting it under a small headline and printing only enough of it to make an entry in the record of the day's news. Printing these lies, even in this way, is one of the hardest thing I have to do. (1951)

Another case in which journalistic objectivity may serve to alienate journalists from their job concerns the use of quotations. In 1950, an editor described how reporters were instructed to perform their job: "Somewhere a city editor is always saying 'You can't rite that unless you can quote somebody'." (*The Neiman Report*, April 4, 1950:29) Michael J. O'Neill, former editor of the *New York Daily News* described such an experience when he was assigned to cover a meat packer strike in Chicago about 1950 for the UPI. The union claimed that the company had scabs working inside the plant. But management denied it. O'Neill climbed over the fence, ripping his suit on the barbed wire



and discovered non-union workers living inside the plant and sleeping on 125 cots by his count. When O'Neill went back to the newsroom, his editor told him that he could not use what he had seen unless he could quote some company officials. (Goodwin, 1983:12) Sometimes, when it happened that the officials were so lazy or for some other reasons that there was nothing to quote from, it was not an uncommon practice that reporters would feed their views to the appropriated sources and then "quote" their own remarks as somebody else's.

All these examples suggest that journalists do pay a high price to maintain "objectivity". And perhaps it was this alienation that led to the rise of the so-called "New Journalism" in the 1960s. One main characteristic of "New Journalism" was the rebel against the conventions of objective reporting. "New Journalists" abandoned the practice of objectivity completely and indulged themselves in methods in which they themselves became part of the story. Instead of suppressing their subjectivity and remained "detached", they wrote through their feelings.

The consequence of such a challenge to the conventions of objectivity, however, was the exclusion of its practitioners from the established professional community and the loss of their credibility within the profession. To be sure, some of the "New Journalists" eventually won prestige. But their prestige was not earned within the discourse of the mainstream journalism. They were famous because they were "New Journalists", although Jack Newfield, himself labeled as such, for instance, had questioned the very label itself. In a 1972 article entitled "Is There a 'New Journalism?'", Newfield protested being labeled as a "New Journalist" and argued that his brand of journalism was legitimate within the journalistic tradition:

To begin with, there is not that much new about new journalism. Advocacy proceeded the who-what-when-where-why of the AP by a couple of centuries. Tom Paine and Voltaire were New Journalists, so John Milton when he wrote his *Areopagitica* against government censorship in the seventeenth century. (1972:45)

Despite the protest, "New Journalism" has become an acknowledged term in mainstream journalistic literature. The term has effectively excluded those journalists who broke the conventions of objectivity. Because of their challenge from within the profession, "New Journalists" ended up being

excluded from the established journalistic community. They were marginalized. And perhaps this was the irony of this history: whereas the advocacy journalism, which had a historic tradition and was what the forefathers actually "conceived and dedicated", was labeled as "new", extreme; the mainstream journalism, which was also historically specific, was seen as natural, created by the forefathers at the very beginning and was thus undisputably legitimate.

#### 4.3 Objectivity and Interpretive Reporting

If "New Journalism" is a challenge from within that has been marginalized, "interpretive reporting" is a practice that has gradually been incorporated into the tradition of objectivity.<sup>6</sup> In this section, the relation between "objectivity" and interpretive reporting will be closely examined.

Interpretive reporting, according to the mainstream journalistic discourse, means the type of reporting that puts news in its "proper" perspective and gives factual background. It means explaining, amplify and clarifying situations for readers. (MacDougall, 1968:17) As a form of reporting, interpretive reporting emerged as a response to the dissatisfaction with "straight objective reporting" which simply "lets the fact speaks for itself". According to the Hutchins Commission Report (1947) on the American press, interpretive reporting requires that reporters should not only report the "fact" truthfully, but report the truth about the "fact". The addition of a "why" to the traditional "4Ws" (who, what, when, where) format is perhaps symptomatic of this increasing emphasis on interpretation.

The necessity of interpretation in reporting was well articulated by Walter Lippmann. He wrote:

In the course of time most of us have come to see that the old distinction between fact and opinion does not fit the reality of things ... the modern world being so very complicated and hard to understand, it has become necessary not only to report the news but to explain and interpret it. (in Hehenberg, 1981:39)

In 1933, the American Society of Newspaper Editors endorsed the practice of interpretive reporting by passing a resolution which stated that "editor should devote a large amount of attention and space to

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<sup>6</sup>Of course, reporting is by definition interpretive. Here the term "interpretive reporting" is used as the way mainstream journalism uses it.

explanatory and interpretive news and to present a background of information which will enable the average reader more adequately to understand the movement and the significance of event". (in Schudson, 1978:148)

Interpretive reporting, however, poses a dilemma to the tradition of "objectivity" both theoretically and practically. Interpretation requires the active participation of the reporter, whose role had long been suppressed as far as possible in the traditional "objective" narrative mode of news presentation. As Raymond Gram Swing, for twenty years a foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Daily News*, put it in 1935: "If it is explained it has to be explained subjectively". (in Schudson, 1978:147) To resolve this dilemma, the media and their theoreticians have found resolutions which enable them to "objectify" interpretation both theoretically and practically.

The theoretical "objectification" of interpretive reporting involves the definition and/or redefinition of terms. First, the term "objectivity" was redefined in such a way that it did not exclude interpretation. In a statement to his staff in 1943, Kent Cooper, the general manager of the AP, for example, called upon for "direct, factual and wholly objective news reporting that digs below surface and tells the true story." (in Mott, 1962:79, my emphasis) Kenneth Stewart, a working newsman, redefined the term "objectivity" in this way:

If you mean by objectivity absence of convictions, willingness to let nature take its course, uncritical acceptance of things as they are (what Robert Forst calls the isness of it), the hell with it. If you mean by objectivity a healthy respect for the ascertainable truth, a readiness to modify conclusions when new evidence comes in, a refusal to distort deliberately and for ulterior or concealed motives, a belief that the means shapes the end, not that the end justifies the means, all well and good. (1953:316)

In both statements, the concept of objectivity has been expanded. Implicitly, there is a recognition of the distinction between "surface" phenomena and the deep level of social reality. Further, news is no longer just "direct, factual" reporting without convictions and interpretations. The active role of a responsible journalist has been theoretically incorporated in the discourse on news reporting. A more evident example of bringing interpretation into the domain of "objectivity" is shown in the title of an essay appearing in a 1950 issue of the *Nieman Reports*: "Reporting Background; You

Can Interpret and Still Retain Objectivity". The article was written by a young newsman who had been awarded an one-year fellowship to Harvard University on the basis of outstanding professional competence. In calling for a more interpretive approach to news reporting, he writes:

Let us make it clear that this isn't a condemnation of objectivity as such. But if the newspaper is to do the job it should do in a democracy, where things are eventually decided by the people, the reader is entitled to his objectivity served up in a form that he can understand.

Like Stewart, this young reporter also called for the newspaper "to shoulder its responsibilities" and supply the information not made overt by the newsmakers so that the readers would not be mis-informed.

At the same time, interpretation is defined in such a way that it is consonant with the concept of objectivity. Lester Markel, a prominent editor, defines interpretation as "an objective appraisal, based on background knowledge of a situation, and analysis of primary related facts". (in William, 1977:272) The *Christian Science Monitor* ran a series of page-one discussions in April and May 1951 on interpretive reporting, and tried to convince its readers that interpretation requires "integrity and knowledge and understanding and balance and detachment" which can only be secured by "steadfast news objectivity". (Mott, 1962:80) In their book *A Taxonomy of Concepts of Communication*, Blake and Haroldsen discuss investigative reporting, interpretive reporting and depth reporting under the concept of "objective reporting" and suggests that these terms sometimes "used rather interchangeably to suggest thorough but objective reporting and writing". (1975:55, my emphasis)

The journalistic effort of trying to "objectify" interpretive reporting has been collaborated by a number of media scholars who elaborate the point at a more philosophical level. Roscho, for example, has argued that since interpretation and objectivity are not incompatible in either natural and social science, they need not be incompatible in news reporting so long as reporters hold a sole obligation comparable to that of the scientific researcher and avoid "subjective editorializing". Echoing Roscho, Gene Gilmore and Robert Root have also argued that the popular dichotomy of objectivity versus interpretation represents a misunderstanding of the media's problem with truth. According to them, the

"straight news", the feature story and the interpretive reporting are all "one side of objectivity", with the "subjective" story that consciously or unconsciously "distorted" the news on the opposite:

"the sound interpretive story introduces the writer's evaluation (and those are admitted subjective, with personal coloring, but as fairly and honestly — as objectively — as he can). The corrupt interpreter, by contrast, does not aim at truth, but vents the writer's prejudice and slants". (1981:28)

However, just as Roscho is not able to provide a concrete criterion to distinguish between "objective interpretation and subjective editorializing", Gilmore and Root fail to provide a concrete standard as to who is a "sound interpreter", and who is a "corrupt interpreter".

In fact, without being bothered by these theoretical problems, newsmen have worked out their own way to "objectify" interpretive reporting. This practice involves the employment of strategies which make interpretive reporting fit into the old convention of "objectivity". One such strategy is the use of quotation marks. Following the conventional strategy, reporters find a new category of sources who offer their opinion on a certain subject and then quote these opinions as interpretations of an event. Therefore, as long as the interpretation could be attributed to a source, it is still "objective" in the old manner. As a result, a growing number of "experts" in different spheres of social life have joined public officials and institutional spokesmen as authoritative interpreters of events and definers of situations. Furthermore, for one reason or another, a few experts have emerged as "the king of quotes" in their specialized fields. In U.S. politics, for example, some often-quoted experts include such political scientists as William Schneider of the American Enterprise Institute; Stephen Hess of the Brookings Institute, and Michael Robinson of Georgetown University. In the stock market, one such a "king of quote" is said to be Monte Gordon, Director of Research at Dreyfus Corporation. Ironically, according to Dan Cordtz, ABC's economic editor, the only reason that Monte Gordon is on TV so much is not that his views are brighter than other experts, but that his office is closer to the network than the market analysts who are headquartered in Wall Street. (Lawrence, 1988:26)

Another strategy to maintain the "objectivity" of interpretation in news practice is to resort to the "balance" method. As in conventional reporting, interpretations of the same event from "both sides" (or

occasionally, more than two sides) are sought. In the case of stock market crash, for example, when the market dropped 97 points on October 6, 1987, an ABC newscast offered comments from a Wall Street analyst who blamed the crash on rising interest rates. These comments were then followed by a Washington economist insisting otherwise. After "both sides" had been presented, the network made no effort to reconcile those contrasting point of views. The analysis was therefore inconclusive.

So far, this section has examined the "objectification" of interpretive reporting on both the theoretical and practical level. The theoretical elaboration of interpretive reporting acknowledges the active role of the reporters in their work. They are no longer seen as passive agents who merely report what they are told. They are supposed to dig in and find out the "whys". Such a theoretical recognition brings some new content to the ossified concept of "objectivity" and therefore contains some fresh elements both in the understanding of the concept of "objectivity" itself, and in reportorial practice. The practical operation of interpretive reporting, however, suggests that it has not yet broken away from the old reportorial conventions. Therefore, although interpretive reporting has in certain degrees extended the spectrum of people who are sought to define social reality, it is difficult to determine whether this new practice, in the old clothing of objective journalism, can really achieve what it intends — to help the public to understand the world better.

Finally, it must also be noted, interpretive reporting, once a forbidden fruit, is still permissible only to a few seasoned reporters and foreign correspondents. In many cases, it is still considered as a dangerous practice. Journalistic textbooks, for example, have repeatedly warned that interpretive reporting is not for amateurs and beginners. In their sample survey of the entire population of working journalists in the United States, Johnstone and his colleagues find that 61.2 percent of all reporters classify themselves as reporters who write what he or she sees and what is told. Only 12 percent label themselves as interpretive reporters who writes both what he sees and what he constructs its meaning to be. (1976:74)

The reason for the lack of interpretive reporting is perhaps not only political and ideological, but economic. As Blankenbury and Walden have demonstrated, interpretive reporting is expensive to produce. That is, under the organizational constraints, interpretive reporting suffers from many economic disadvantages. First, it requires more reportorial time. As a result, the productivity of the reporters may suffer. Second, the production of an interpretive piece usually requires more travel, more personnel, more material resources and therefore may raise the production cost of the news. Finally, according to the researchers, since interpretive reporting usually produces relatively long pieces, it may be under the risk of a possible loss of audience attention. (1977:594) Thus, the economic logic of the commercial media itself has become a barrier to the development of interpretive reporting.

To summarize then, the emergence of interpretive reporting and its being incorporated into the tradition of journalistic objectivity is both a blessing and a frustration. It is a case in which emergent journalistic consciousness and practice challenges ossified theory and inject it with new content while at the same time the practice itself is modified and contained by the old tradition. On the one hand, interpretive reporting challenges the old practice of objective reporting and has liberated the journalists to a certain degree; on the other hand, because of the power of tradition and the unchanged logic of commercial news production, the potential of interpretive reporting is very much limited.

#### 4.4 Objectivity and Fairness

While part of the media and some of their scholars try to rescue "objectivity" by injecting it with new meanings and associating it with new practices, others advocate the rejection of the concept. At the same time, they embraced a new term: fairness. In this section, I shall briefly examine this new concept and its relation with "objectivity".

The motivation for the substitution of "objectivity" by "fairness" come from two different considerations. For some, although "objectivity" is still a desirable ideal, it is too difficult to achieve. It is therefore necessary to substitute it with a more practical goal. Such a proposition is exemplified by

David Brinkley's statement: "Objectivity is impossible for a normal human being. Fairness, however, is attainable, and that is what we are striving for, not objectivity, [but] fairness". (*Newsweek*, January 6, 1969:43) For others, the motive for the substitution comes from a negative understanding of "objectivity". In the eyes of these people, "objectivity" is the synonym of passivity and uncritical acceptance of source information. After a critique of the rôle of "objectivity" in the rise of McCarthyism, Canadian columnist and journalism educator Walter Stewart, for example, has offered the following prescription: "Fairness, yes, balance, yes, but objectivity, no". (1980:15) The report of the Canadian Royal Commission on Newspapers (1980) echoes Stewart's position in claiming that the notion of "objectivity" has been replaced by "fairness" because of the negative connotations of the term derived from the 1960s. (p. 24)

Has "fairness" really replaced "objectivity" as the paramount ideal of journalism? Or perhaps more substantially, can "fairness" effectively solve the problems that have been associated with "objectivity" in journalistic practice? The answers to these questions seem negative. First, although it might be true that the term "fairness" has recently gained a wide circulation as an ideal of journalism, there is no sign that "objectivity" has been displaced by the term. "Objectivity" is not an antiquated term today, nor is it always used in a negative sense. It is still enshrined in journalistic codes and creeds as the ideal of journalism. A recent report indicates that a growing number of media organizations in the United States have been promulgating written codes and creeds that endorse "objectivity". An ethic code of the ABC news, for example, requires that employees "must refrain from doing any act or following any course of conduct which would permit their objectivity in performance of their duties to be challenged or impeded". (Schneider and Gunther, 1985:55) Empirical study also reveals that many working journalists do not support the "fairness, yes, balance, yes, but objectivity, no" prescription. Boyer, an American professor who undertakes a study of wire service editors' attitude toward "objectivity" has found that, despite different definitions of the concept, editors generally endorse the ideal. (1981:28)



Secondly, because the concept "fairness" sounds more practical and more concrete, in many cases, it is used not so much as a substitute for "objectivity" as a component of the more abstract ideal of "objectivity". In its *Journalistic Policy*, the CBC, for example, lists "fairness" as one of its journalistic principles (the others include "accuracy", "integrity", "thoroughness") and states that "Application of these principles will achieve the optimum objectivity and balance which must characterize CBC's information program". (1982:7) The same is true in the literature of American liberal school of communication studies. In his study of the influence of reporters' attitude on the "objectivity" of their work, Drew, for example, defines objectivity as "fairness and balance in decision making, information seeking and presentation of information". (1975:129)

Finally, it must be pointed out that even if we accepted the prescription that "fairness" should substitute for "objectivity" as the ideal of journalism, it still could not solve the problem that the idea of objectivity has aroused. The concept of fairness itself is in fact as ambiguous and as difficult to define as "objectivity" itself. Like "objectivity", "fairness" is also in the eyes of the beholders. To uphold "fairness" or "balance" as yardsticks to evaluate journalistic performance therefore does not solve the problems that "objectivity" has generated: "fairness" by whose standard? "balance" by whose social and political scale? Thus for Herbert Brucker, a unbending proponent of the ideal of objectivity, "there is little semantic authority to support those who say they want to be fair rather than objective"; whereas for Robert Cirino, an indignant critic of the ideal of objectivity, "fairness" is nothing but another "myth" invented by the media owners when the old "myth" of objectivity can no longer hold its credibility in deceiving the audience.

Of course, there is nothing revolutionary in the idea of "fairness". But it seems to me, as in the effort of trying to incorporate interpretive reporting into the concept of objectivity, the call for the substitution of "objectivity" by "fairness" signifies an acknowledgement of human subjectivity in news reporting and a disparagement of the type of superficial reporting that takes "facts" at face value. Truly, "fairness" does not hold much semantic authority over "objectivity", but it connotes a dissatisfaction of the passivity of the press and a desire to break away from the passive tradition that has been practiced

under the name of "objectivity"; it is less a creation of the consciousness of the media owners for the purpose of deception, than the inevitable development of the press' longtime allegiance to the ideal of objectivity — a perspective independent of particular interests. In a sense, "fairness" is a new, more modest, post-sixties formulation of objectivity.

No doubt "fairness" in its turn will be challenged by yet another way of establishing the same claim of "objectivity". For while the terminology may change, mass media today, no matter how much it has expanded both in terms of its technological sophistication and its economic scale, its nature remains the same. Even the American social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s did not substantially alter the media's news process or redefine their relationship with both the government and its audience. The media therefore cannot and will not discard the ideal of objectivity, for it is this ideal that is the very basis upon which the media legitimate themselves. Further, it is only by their allegiance to this ideal that the media maintain their credibility and achieve their effectiveness.

But there is gradual change. Market segmentation, for example, has made the old strategy of the cultivation of a audience as big as possible less paramount. At the same time, the media have to face the challenges from emerging forms of journalistic consciousness and practice. And just as a capitalistic social formation itself needs frequent reformation and readjustment, objectivity, the legitimate principle of the media, needs frequent redefinition and reinterpretation. As it has been demonstrated so far in this thesis, since its inception in the 1830s, the ideal has gone through a long historical journey: from its identification with reporting "value free" facts to its routinization into reportorial conventions; from its uneasy "marriage" with the ideal of the freedom of the press to its incorporation of interpretive reporting; and finally, to its post-sixties variant of "fairness". From this long historical journey, it seems that although its original form, that is, the fact/value dichotomy of the positivist version has by no means totally disappeared, and as Herbert Gans said, journalism is still the "strongest remaining bastion of logical positivism in America", (1979:184) there is a growing tendency in both theoretical exposition and practical operation toward an acceptance of human subjectivity in the constitution of "objectivity". That is, "objectivity", if it is believed that there is such a thing at all, is not the absence of, but the

active involvement of the human mind in an interpretive process.

Once it is acknowledged that human subjectivity is a component of "objectivity", however, the endless debate on whether the news media are "objective" or not becomes less relevant. The critical question becomes: who has the power to claim the "objectivity" of their knowledge, and further, to impose their particular accounts of the world as "objective", that is, as universally valid and legitimate? Therefore, if the ideal of objectivity in itself is hollow and abstract, the struggle for "objectivity" — for the power to define reality and to claim the objective status of that particular definition — is nevertheless real and concrete. To say this is to focus on issues of ownership and participation, and is to invite questions that will explore the nature of the media and the relationship of journalistic enterprise to the media. These crucial questions, however, have been obscured in the debates and discourse surrounding the concept and practice of objectivity.

## CHAPTER 5

### OBJECTIVITY AND THE STRUGGLE OVER SIGNIFICATION: THE CASE OF THE FAIRNESS DOCTRINE

In the previous chapters, the thesis examined the origins of the ideal of journalistic objectivity and contemporary theoretical discourse surrounding the concept. Throughout this examination, my focus has been limited to the discourse on objectivity within the news media; that is, how the concept has been defined and cultivated by both practitioners and theoreticians of the news media. The news media, however, are not alone in the construction of the ideal. For an ideal to become a successful hegemonic principle, it must win the consent of other related segments of the society. It must be incorporated into the common consciousness of the society. Further, it must be embodied as a set of social institutions so that it is both concrete and useful. An adequate understanding of the concept of journalistic objectivity, therefore, needs to move beyond the media institutions' discourse on the concept to examine how it is understood by other related segments of the society and how it mediates the relations between the media and a variety of other social forces. This final chapter undertakes such a task.

To make the task more manageable, this chapter is designed as a case study. The case under examination is the ongoing debate on the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in the United States. The debate is useful for the purpose of this chapter is because it brings many different social forces (the President, the Congress, the regulatory agency — FCC, the media, the courts, the interest groups, etc.) to the forefront and provides a forum for these social forces to articulate their concerns for the concept of journalistic objectivity. The Fairness Doctrine, of course, is not the equivalent to the whole concept of objectivity. But as my analysis in Section 4 of Chapter 4 has suggested, the concept of fairness is a recent formulation of the ideal. The Fairness Doctrine, which requires broadcasters to provide balanced coverage of controversial issues, stipulates one of the basic requirements of objective reporting and concretizes the ideal in a specific way. Through a close examination of the debate on the doctrine, it becomes clear that, the concept of objectivity, because of its universalising intention, has in fact become

a political weapon that is used by different social groups in their struggle for the power over social signification; that is, as I have pointed out in the last chapter, for the power to define reality through the media and further, to claim the objective status of that particular definition.

The chapter will be divided into four sections. Section 1 will provide a brief description of the Fairness Doctrine; Section 2 will focus on the recent debate that was culminated by the repeal of the doctrine in August 1987; Section 3 will be a discussion of the case; Section 4 will look beyond the case for some more general conclusions. Unlike most of the literature on the Fairness Doctrine, such issues as the constitutionality of the doctrine, its influence on broadcast news reporting, its service to the public will not be discussed. The study will be an analysis of the debate itself and the arguments that have been advanced by different players in the debate. Through such a study, I wish to isolate and analyze the meanings different social forces have attached to the doctrine, and the implications of these meanings for the understanding of the ideal of objectivity.

### 5.1 The Fairness Doctrine and Its History

Before its abolition in August 1987, the Fairness Doctrine was the name given to two requirements applied by the FCC to radio and television broadcasters throughout the United States. The FCC stated that the doctrine involved a two-fold duty: "1) the broadcaster must devote a reasonable percentage of ... broadcast time to the coverage of public issues, and 2) his coverage of these issues must be fair in the sense that it provides an opportunity for the presentation of contrasting points of view". (FCC, 1974) The United States Supreme Court interpreted the doctrine as requiring that "discussion of public issues be presented on broadcast stations, and that each side of those issues ... be given fair coverage". (1969)

The evolution of the Fairness Doctrine involved a series of FCC policy decisions and court rulings over the past several decades. The development of the doctrine stemmed from an understanding of the technical limitations of radio spectrum and the assumption that the airwaves are owned by the public

and a broadcasting licensee is a public trustee. These factors, combined with the need to inform the American people about important public issues in a "free marketplace of ideas", and the potential for powerful broadcasters to monopolize or influence the marketplace and to "bias" the information received by the American people, provided the main rationale for the imposition of the doctrine. (Simmons, 1978:55-56)

The regulatory history for the formation of the doctrine is long and has been subjected to different interpretations. According to several authorities on the doctrine, concern about broadcast fairness was evident as early as the later 1920s, soon after the introduction of radio. (Simmons, 1978:16-71; Rowan, 1984:25-49) A major case for the formation of the doctrine was FCC's Mayflower decision in 1941. This decision, known as the Mayflower Doctrine, stated that:

Radio can serve as an instrument of democracy only when devoted to communication of information and the exchange of ideas fairly and objectively presented ... freedom of speech on the radio must be broad enough to provide full and equal opportunity for the presentation to the public of all sides of public issues. Indeed, as one licensed to operate in public domain the licensee was assumed the obligation of presenting all sides of important public questions, fairly, objective and without bias. The public interest — not the private — is paramount. These requirements are inherent in the conception of public interest set up by the Communication Act as the criterion of regulation.(my emphasis)

Here the concepts of "fairness", "objective", "without bias" were seen as the "inherent" requirements of the Communication Act. Moreover, reinforcing my argument in section 1 of Chapter 4 that the concept of free press has been expanded and has incorporated the ideal of objectivity, the above statement indicates that the commission obviously applied a "broad" interpretation of the free press concept to justify its decision, although such a decision might be considered by some First Amendment "absolutists" as a repression of the broadcasters' freedom of speech.

Preceding in the same direction, in its 1949 *Editorializing Report*, the FCC relied on its interpretation of the public interest principle of the Communication Act and on the First Amendment principle of the public's right to know as justification for the formal imposition of the two-fold duties of the Fairness Doctrine. Then, in 1959, the U.S. Congress amended the Communications Act with a Fairness Doctrine. According to one interpretation of the legislative history, even though there was no

extensive debate about the doctrine and its implications, the language of the Amendment to the Communication Act (1934) suggested that there was an explicit recognition of the Fairness Doctrine as a requirement under the Act. (Simonns, 1978:46-51) Through its statements on various occasions, the FCC itself made it clear that the 1959 amendment "endorsed" and gave "specific statutory recognition" to its Fairness Doctrine. The conventional wisdom was thus held that Congress had codified the Doctrine and that it had statutory authority.<sup>1</sup>

Such an understanding was reinforced by a United States Supreme Court decision in 1969, known as the *Red Lion decision*. In that decision the Court declared that the Fairness Doctrine was constitutional and did not violate the First Amendment right of broadcasters. The Court also affirmed that the Congress had ratified the FCC's implication of a Fairness Doctrine in 1959 "with positive regulations".

Over the past few decades, the FCC had been exercising its power to promulgate the doctrine. And although the FCC failed to describe in any detail the Fairness Doctrine parameters, it had stated that it took the requirements of the doctrine seriously. The Commission once claimed that it regarded "strict adherence to the Fairness Doctrine as the single most important requirement of operating in the public interest — the *sine qua non* for grant of a renewal of license". (FCC, 1970)

The Commission relied on complaints from the public about a particular licensed broadcaster for the enforcement of the doctrine. According to the complaint procedure, if a person found that a broadcaster had violated the doctrine, he or she should first complain to local licensee. If the issue could not be solved between the two parties, complaints might be filed with the FCC, which would be reviewed by a specialist analyst. The analyst would then pass those complaints that contained the required information to the legal staff and return complaints that required additional information. If the legal staff decided that a *prima facie* fairness case had been made, it would require a response to the complaint from the licensee. If the Commission staff finally decided against a licensee, general

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<sup>1</sup>A different interpretation of the legislative history might hold that Congress did not codify the doctrine into law, but only authorized the FCC's implementation of the doctrine.

punishment included a letter written to the licensee asking for the fulfilment of the doctrine requirement. The letter would play a role in license renewal. Extreme measures of punishment included failure to obtain a license renewal and repeal of license. As a final procedure, the staff's decision and sanction might be appealed to the whole Commission, whose decision could in turn be appealed to the court.

The FCC received about 5,000–8,000 complaints each year. The rate for an individual to "win" a FCC fairness case was however very low. Over the years, no license had been revoked on the sole basis of fairness violation. In only two cases, violation of the doctrine were cited as partly responsible for a broadcaster's failure to obtain a license renewal.<sup>2</sup>

## 5.2 The Debate on the Repeal of the Fairness Doctrine

### 5.2.1 *The Repeal of the Doctrine*

Since its inception, the Fairness Doctrine had been subjected to constant debate. The debate intensified in the 1980s, under the Reagan Administration's general policy framework of deregulation. The FCC, under Chairman Mark Flower, had long attempted to abolish the doctrine. In 1983, the FCC launched an inquiry into the status of the doctrine. In its report issued in 1985, the Commission concluded that the doctrine did not serve the public interest and had a "chilling effect" on broadcasters. The report also challenged the scarcity of airwave rationale by arguing that there was a multiplicity of voices available to the public. But based on the understanding that the doctrine had been statutorily amended by the Congress, the FCC decided that it could not repeal the doctrine and would leave for the Congress or the court for action. The Commission also decided that it would continue to enforce the doctrine.

A fairness case involving the Meredith Corporation provided the chance for the FCC to repeal the doctrine. In a 1984 decision concerning a fairness complaint filed by the Syracuse Peace Council,

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<sup>2</sup>For a detailed study of the regular enforcement of the doctrine, see Rowan, 1984.



which was represented by the Media Access Project (MAP), the FCC ruled that the Meredith Corporation, the licensee of TV station WTVH, had violated the Fairness Doctrine for its broadcasting of a series of commercials advocating the construction of a nuclear power plant without providing a contrasting view. Meredith sought judicial review of the Commission's decision and challenged the constitutionality of the doctrine. In its ruling, the U. S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit remanded the FCC for consideration of the constitutional issue raised by Meredith and indicated that, as an alternative, the Commission could simply avoid the constitutional issue by determining, "in an adjudicatory context, the doctrine cannot be enforced because it is contrary to the public interest". (D.C. Cir., 1987) The court, in a divided three judge panel, held that the doctrine was not a law but a policy of the FCC which the Commission could repeal. This decision dissented from the views generally expressed by lawyers in and out the government since 1959. (*Broadcasting*, June 15, 1987)

Seeing a possible repeal of the doctrine, two interest groups, the Telecommunication Research and Action Centre (TRAC) and the MAP, who both supported the doctrine, sought a rehearing of the case at the same court. The court, however, refused by a narrow margin to rehear the case. Judge Robert Bork, President Reagan's unsuccessful nominee to the Supreme Court, played a crucial role for the groups' failure to obtain a rehearing. (D.C. Cir., 801, F2n, 1987) The U.S. Supreme Court in June 1987 rejected TRAC's petition for a review of the appeals court's decision.

In response to the appeals court's decision that the doctrine was not a statutory obligation imposed by the Congress, the U.S. Congress began a series of legislative activities aiming at writing the doctrine into law. The Senate and the House of Representatives passed both by overwhelming majority legislations codifying the doctrine. President Reagan, however, opposed the doctrine's Congressional proponents and vetoed the fairness bill. In an interview with the *Broadcasting* journal in June, 1987, the President sent a signal to the FCC that "the decision on repeal of the Fairness Doctrine is its to make". (June 29, 1987, p. 30) With the courts' ruling and the President's support, the FCC, in its Meredith decision adapted by unanimous vote in August 4, 1987, repealed the doctrine.

This action, however, did not end the debate. Supporters of the doctrine began their protest even before the final vote was taken place at the decisive FCC meeting. (*Broadcasting*, August 10, 1987, p. 62) In the ensuing events, the MAP continued its fight for the doctrine in the court; the doctrine's Congressional supporters attempted to reinstate a fairness bill by attaching it to "veto proof" bills so that the President had to "swallow hard" and signed it into law. The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), in the meantime, initiated a lobbying campaign to block Congressional efforts to pass fairness legislation. (*Broadcasting*, August 17, 1987, 38-39) Due to the NAB's campaign and the President's threat that he would veto any bill if the doctrine were attached, the Congress has so far failed in its effort to codify the doctrine. Up to this point, it seems that opponents of the doctrine have won the debate. But there is little compromise on the part of the doctrine's proponents and the debate is by no means over. The arguments of the parties, however, have been clearly articulated. I will now turn to an examination of the arguments and the feature of the debate itself.

### 5.2.2 *The Arguments*

*The FCC and Other Opponents.* As was pointed out earlier, the rationale for the Fairness Doctrine was the public trustee concept and an acknowledgement of the potential conflict between the public and private interest. The First Amendment was not seen as a barrier for the Doctrine, but was interpreted in such a way that it served as a justification for it. That is, there was an acknowledgement of the First Amendment right of the public and further, a proposition that this right should be paramount. The current FCC, however, argued exactly the opposite. Current FCC Chairman Denis Patrick's claimed on the day of the repeal that the Commission's action introduced the First Amendment to the twentieth century because it extended to the electronic press the same First Amendment guarantee that the print media have long enjoyed. He argued that the First Amendment does not guarantee a fair press but only a free press and that "the record in this proceeding leads one inescapably to conclude that the Fairness Doctrine 'chills' free speech, is not narrowly tailored to achieve any substantial government interest, and therefore contravenes the First Amendment and public interest". (*Broadcasting*, August 10, 1987, p. 27)

The FCC, moreover, used the First Amendment to challenge the Red Lion decision and justified its current approach:

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of all under Red Lion approach is that the stated purpose for diminishing broadcaster's First Amendment rights is the exact same purpose behind the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech itself — that is, to preserve an uninhibited marketplace of ideas in which truth will ultimately prevail. That is what our democracy is based on. But the mechanism relied on by earlier commissions to achieve this goal was the exact opposite of that relied on by the founders of the constitution. (FCC, 1987)

There is, of course, nothing new in such rhetoric. The FCC defended the concept of the "marketplace of ideas" and charged that the Fairness Doctrine resulted in "blandness" or "nothingness" in the media. The potential danger of private broadcasters' irresponsible use of their monopoly power, and the possibility that "blandness" may result from commercial imperative, rather than from the "chilling effect" of the doctrine, were not the issues that the FCC seemed to be concern about. Patrick stated the approach quite clearly:

I much prefer to rely upon, first of all, the sense of journalistic responsibility among broadcasters, and secondly, the incentives to meet the needs and the interests of the public that arise from a competitive marketplace, and finally, more generally, competition in the marketplace to ensure that broadcasters identify and meet the needs and interests of the public rather than relying upon government content regulation. (April 20, 1987)

Clearly, underlying both the FCC official statement and its Chairman's personal view was the classic ideology of capitalism which maintains that profitability is compatible and helpful to the public interest.

President Reagan, who is in the same ideological line with the FCC, also said that freedom of press would ultimately be insured by competition in the broadcasting industry and that "the public trusts and expects those in the media to provide news and information without bias. Maintenance of that trust will do far more to insure fairness than any law." (interview with the *Broadcasting*, April 20, 1987, p.

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*The Broadcasters.* The position of the broadcasting industry, however, was less consistent and less strong than their regulators. When the FCC decided that despite the findings of its report, it would still enforce the doctrine in 1985, for example, only the Radio-Television News Directors Association, the CBS and a few other groups sent an appeal to the court for the repeal of the doctrine. Later, when

Congress passed legislation codifying the doctrine, there was little lobbying effort on the part of the broadcasters. Senator Robert Packwood, the chief opponent of the doctrine in the Congress, even expressed disappointment with the broadcasting industry because he saw that the broadcasters "don't care about" the doctrine and did not make their "First Amendment right" their chief priority. (*Broadcasting*, April 27, 1987, p. 33) In fact, what the Senator said was quite true. The Fairness Doctrine was not the chief priority for the broadcasting industry at the time. Broadcasters stood carefully aside on the debate because they were waiting for the Congress to pass another bill on broadcasting issues that they considered as more important. Only after the President's veto and the FCC's decision of repeal did the NAB, representative of broadcasters, began its lobbying activity.

Based on the opinion survey by the *Broadcasting* journal, the broadcasters' reaction to the repeal of the doctrine was mixed. Although many of them celebrated the fact that they finally won the First Amendment right and some expressed the view that they will be more "aggressive" in future reporting, many expressed the view that they did not see any "chilling effect" the doctrine had on them, and claimed that they had always been fair and would still be fair. Woody Sudbrink, a broadcasting media owner in Florida said: "We've never had any big problem with fairness doctrine the way it was. We're still going to honor it and I think most broadcasters will continue to invoke it the way it was. But it's real good news because it's unnecessary". A news director in Georgia said that they had an ethical commitment to present both sides of every issue and that they would be "as aggressive as they were before". (*Broadcasting*, August 10, 1987, p. 59)

And there is no lack of supporters of the doctrine in the industry. Westinghouse Broadcasting, for instance, had been a long time champion of the Fairness Doctrine. The group said that the Doctrine was "beneficial and consistent with First Amendment principle". The Fisher Broadcasting addressed the issue by saying that the Fairness Doctrine was "a vital ingredient of the public trusteeship which is at the heart of the legislative scheme for broadcasters". (*Broadcasting*, March 2, 1987, pp. 39-40)

On the whole, it seems that the broadcasters' attitude toward the doctrine can roughly be represented by the attitudes of the three big networks. Among the three, only the CBS participated in the original court appeal action and in the following legislative battle for the abolition of the doctrine. NBC, while opposed to the doctrine, said that it would express its opposition only as an intervenor in a court case. ABC, however, said that the network had learned to live with the doctrine and that it had never opposed it. (*Broadcasting*, June 29, 1987, p. 28)

*The Congress and Other Proponents.* The main support of the doctrine come from Congressional sources, interest groups as well as some former FCC commissioners. The proponents' arguments are basically the ones that had been advanced as the rationale for the imposition of the doctrine. The fairness bill introduced by Senator Ernest Hollings (Senator Commerce Committee Chairman) and his colleagues, still stressed the public trustee concept and argued that despite technological advances the electromagnetic spectrum was still a scarce and valuable public resource. They also argued that over the years the Fairness Doctrine had "enhanced free speech by securing the paramount right of the broadcast audience to robust debate on issues of public importance". (U.S. Senate Reports, 1987) The legislators also put forward the notion of "a reasonable balance" among the First Amendment rights of the public, broadcaster licensees and speakers other than owners of broadcasting facilities.

The language of the fairness bill was magnified in the arguments put forward by other proponents of the doctrine. In contrast to the FCC's argument that the doctrine chills broadcasters and therefore did not serve the public interest, former FCC commissioner Abbott Washburn argued that the repeal of the doctrine undermined the very foundation of the Communication Act of 1934 — the public trustee concept". Washburn contended that the Fairness Doctrine has served the public well and that "It should be kept as long as monopoly licenses are granted by the government". (*The Washington Post*, July 20, 1987) Against another rationale that the FCC invoked for the repeal of the doctrine — the First Amendment issue, Washburn said:

Critics of the doctrine wrap themselves in the First Amendment, yet the Doctrine does not censor anything. On the contrary, in the words of the Supreme Court, it adds to 'the uninhibited marketplace of ideas ... It is the right of the viewers and listeners, not the right

of the broadcasters which is paramount.

Former FCC Chairman Charles Ferris contended that the "real incentive" for avoiding controversy was that advertisers do not want to be associated with controversy.

Ralph Nader, a prominent consumer advocate, went further to argue that the doctrine was not only constitutionally permissible, but constitutionally required. He argued that without the doctrine, such issues as women's rights, the health effects of smoking, and the safety of nuclear power plants would have come to far less prominence. (*New York Times*, August 10, 1987) Nader saw the repeal of the doctrine as the "ultimate transfer of monopoly power to the broadcasters who already have exclusive license to decide who says what on TV". (*Broadcasting*, August 10, 1987, p. 63) Phyllis Schafly, head of the conservative group the Eagle Forum, predicted that the repeal of the doctrine "opens the door for TV to be even more unfair than it already is". (p. 62)

### 5.2.3 *The Politics in the Debate*

The debate on the Fairness Doctrine is both a usual and an unusual political phenomenon. There was obviously partisan politics involved. Thus, the positions of President Reagan, Judge Robert Bork, as well as the current FCC were almost expected. The action of the Democrat-controlled Congress was also no surprise. Partisan politics, however, is far from sufficient for the understanding of the debate. Indeed, labels such as "Democratic", "Republican", "left", "right" sometimes seem to lose their meanings in the debate. Thus, in the Congress, although the Democrats has a majority, there was no lack of Republican proponents of the doctrine. Conversely, there was no lack of Democrats opposing the doctrine. For example, while Senator Ernest Hollings, a Democrat, was the author of the legislation for the codification of the doctrine, Lonel Van Derlin, a former California Democratic Congressman, was the author of a bill for the repeal of the doctrine, when he was the House Communication Subcommittee Chairman.

Outside the political establishment, the debate on the doctrine resulted in an unusual political alliance. Fifty-six groups of all kinds of ideological persuasions — religious groups, conservative,

liberal, labor, civil liberties, peace groups, environmental organizations — joined under the banner "Friends of the Fairness Doctrine" and expressed their support for the doctrine. Thus, Patrick Buchanan, a conservative columnist and media figure, found himself allied with Senator Hollings and Ralph Nader on the Fairness Doctrine issue. (*Broadcasting*, June 8, 1987, p. 35; August 10, 1987, p. 62) So did Reed Irvine, head of the rightist media group Accuracy in Media, an unbending ideologue of the free enterprise system.

### 5.3 Discussion

#### 5.3.1 *The Ideological Dimension of the Debate*

The debate on the Fairness Doctrine must be understood as two-dimensional: the ideological and the practical. On the ideological level, the debate reveals an unresolved ideological tension in the media. As was demonstrated earlier in this thesis, the concept of objectivity arose in the 1830s, after the idea of freedom of the press had fully held its ground and been endorsed by the U.S. Constitution. Neither a right won by the press nor an obligation imposed from above, the concept of objectivity was a self-imposed commitment of the press as it established its hegemonic status and assumed its monopolistic role in the domain of public discourse. Following this line, it was not surprising to see that the Fairness Doctrine, which in a particular and relatively concrete way operationalized the ideal of objectivity, should be accepted by many (including part of the broadcasting industry itself) as a natural requirement for the broadcasting media. Such an acceptance seemed particularly appropriate after broadcasting technology has made the monopoly status of the media more apparent.

However, there is uneasiness with the doctrine. And the source for the uneasiness come from the pre-1830 idea of free press. The language of the FCC decision on the repeal of the doctrine, the rhetoric of the President, and the FCC Chairman, were all derived from that idea. The long-standing debate on the Fairness Doctrine reflects the unresolved ideological tension between the free market ideology of the *Laissez-faire* capitalism and the regulated "public trust" ideology of the monopoly

capitalism. The partisan line in the debate can be drawn between these two ideologies. Considering the current political climate, it was hardly surprising that the Fairness Doctrine, a creature of the "public trust" concept, should be repealed under the Reagan Administration. From the larger environment of deregulation to the unprecedented interpretation of the doctrine by a court and finally, to the President's veto and the FCC's action, the influence of the conservative force was apparent. Indeed, perhaps there was some truth in columnist Patrick Buchanan's comment that the FCC's repeal of the doctrine is an example of the "Republican party coming to the rescue of corporate America". (*Broadcasting*, August 10, 1987, p. 62)

As was noted earlier, underlying the rhetoric of the opponents of the doctrine was the classic ideology of pre-monopoly capitalism. There is however, a new element to the arguments. That is, opponents of the doctrine found a justification for monopoly and concentration of media power in the idea of professionalism. This idea, in fact, was invoked by both the President and the FCC Chairman as an important justification for the repeal of the doctrine.

The broadcasters, judging by their attitude in the debate, also embraced the idea of professionalism. For those who opposed the doctrine, their opposition seemed more a rejection of government regulation than the rejection of the idea of fairness *per se*. Many broadcasters claimed that they had always been fair and would still be fair because they had an ethical commitment to fairness. In other words, they could not afford not to endorse the idea of fairness. And as was demonstrated in Chapter 4 of this thesis, the "marriage" of the idea of free press and the concept of objectivity was very much to the media's favor, and to certain degree, of their own arrangement. But when it came to the time that their self-proclaimed commitment to objectivity was to be legally mandated, and therefore provided with some teeth, most of them, lobbied to reject it. The current victory of the Fairness Doctrine opponents may be seen as an indication of the fact that the classic capitalist ideology, armed itself with the idea of professionalism, has prevailed; whereas the idea of a constitutionally accepted concept of public participation, or to a lesser extent, the idea of "balance" of the First Amendment rights between the media and its audience, as proposed by the Fairness Doctrine's Congressional



proponents, has not held its ground, at least in the United States.

### *5.3.2 The Practical Dimension of the Debate*

The debate on the Fairness Doctrine, however, must also be understood on the practical level. And indeed, this dimension of the debate may be more substantial. Where partisan politics did not apply is where the practical utility of the Fairness Doctrine comes into play. It is precisely the practical utility of the doctrine that resulted in the unusual political alliance in the debate.

As the early history of the evolution of the Fairness Doctrine indicates, the doctrine was not designed as a mechanism of access. But the way the FCC enforced it actually made it a mechanism of access. While the actual effectiveness of the doctrine as such a mechanism is another question, it at least provided the only legitimate access means for many individuals and groups. Therefore, for those who were unsatisfied with media presentation, the repeal of the doctrine meant the deprivation of a legitimate weapon in the struggle for access to media. Although the rhetoric of "public interest" and "fairness" might sound noble and altruistic, the actual motives lie behind the various Fairness Doctrine proponents might be rather egoistic. For those elected politicians in the Congress, Democrats and Republicans alike, the motive for their advocacy of the doctrine might well be the fact that they had enjoyed or perceived a political benefit in the doctrine. That is, when they saw they had been presented "unfairly", when they saw their political rivals had gained what they might conceive as "undue" advantage in the media, they could easily wield the Fairness Doctrine to advance their own interests in the media.

Such a speculation becomes almost common sense knowledge with regard to the various interests groups who had joined to fight for the doctrine. For these interest groups, to gain media access is part of their causes. They therefore have a heavy stake in the doctrine as a legitimate means of access. Barbara Joy, representative of the Safe Energy Communication Council, a coalition of several groups against nuclear power, for example, once said that the abolition of the doctrine was "the single most important issue threatening all activist groups alike in this country" because the doctrine was "an

integral part of the strategy for every major causes which is working within the political system and cannot afford to purchase expensive advertising time". (in Rowan, 1984:86, my emphasis.) Reed Irvine, head of the Accuracy in Media, also expressed the motive for the group's endorsement of the doctrine well by saying that with the doctrine they could more easily gain access. For practical purposes, he was ready to bend his ideological commitment.

The irony for these people is however, that the Fairness Doctrine had also been used by major political parties to suppress minority views. In the 1960s, for instance, the Democratic party mounted a campaign to oppose right-wing commentary on hundreds of radio stations across the United States. In his book *The Good Guys, the Bad Guys and the First Amendment*, Fred Friendly relates how a plan was hatched in the Kennedy White House when appointment Secretary Kenneth O'Donnell instructed Wayne Phillips (a former reporter who later joined the Democratic National Committee) to meet with Nicholas Zapple, the counsel to the Senator Communications Subcommittee, to see how the Fairness rules could be used to protect Kennedy and Johnson from attacks from the right. (1976:33) The Democratic party began to monitor radio broadcasts and developed a kit explaining "How to Demand Time Under the Fairness Doctrine". As Friendly writes:

The idea was simply to harass radio stations by getting officials and organizations that had been attacked by extremist radio commentators to request reply time, citing the Fairness Doctrine ... "All told", [Phillips] recalls, "this volunteer effort resulted in rebuttals on over five hundred radio programs". (1976:33)

Using the same strategy, the Democrats in the campaign year of 1964 inundated broadcasting stations with complaints in an effort to persuade broadcasters that it was too expensive to carry the ultra-conservative commentators. Martin Fireston, a former staff of the FCC, who was familiar with the Commission's procedures for dealing with complaints, joined the campaign. And the Democrats were well-rewarded. According to Friendly, some 1,035 letters to the stations resulted in a total of 1,678 hours of free broadcasting time.

The above instance suggested that, as a mechanism of access, the Fairness Doctrine might be more effective in the hands of the powerful than in the hands of those who have less power, because for

those who had the power, they had the money and resource to monitor broadcasting and perhaps, more importantly, had the expertise to wage a successful campaign, if merely by virtue of the fact that they could hire former reporters and former FCC staff members at their service. Those individuals and small groups with less money and resource, on the other hand, might be less effective in using the Fairness Doctrine as a means in the pursuit of their political ends.

#### 5.4 Beyond the Fairness Doctrine

In the above analysis, I have been arguing two points. First, although "fairness" has been generally promoted by the media as their paramount ideal, when it came to the time that the ideal would be legally mandated and thus given some practical power, it met strong resistance both from ideologically-minded politicians who hold dear the classic free market ideology and from some broadcasters who would not let their monopoly power over broadcast intruded by "fairness seekers" from outside. The limitations of the fairness rhetoric, and for this matter, the whole concept of objectivity, are thus well-demonstrated. While the media strictly uphold the banner of objectivity and fairness, they have also tried to keep their monopoly over the judgment on fairness. Any other judgments (the FCC's, the complainants') were either ideologically or practically unacceptable.

The broadcasters, of course, were not alone in their efforts to try to keep the judgment of fairness on their own terms. The fate of the National News Council (NNC) in the United States was by no means a coincidence. The NNC, an independent organization which dealt with complaints about violation of objectivity and other standards in both printing and broadcasting media, died in 1984 after surviving eleven years of underfinancing and hostility from the major media organizations. Unlike the FCC, the NNC had no power to punish or compel. Its only power, as Alie Abel, the Vice-Chairman of the council for its last years, said, was "exposure". (1984:60) Even a mechanism as toothless as the NNC, however, was seen as a nuisance by the media community.<sup>3</sup> All these suggest that, the media,

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<sup>3</sup>Of course, there were other reasons for the fate of the NNC. Press councils in many other places have been secured as an mediating institution between the media and audience. An

while wrapping themselves in the ideal of objectivity and claiming to be the embodiment of the ideal, would try their best to maintain their monopoly over the discourse on objectivity.

A second point that emerged from the case study on the Fairness Doctrine debate which I wish to elaborate here is that, fairness, and more generally, the whole concept of objectivity, has in fact become a weapon in the struggle for the power over signification. It is a weapon that people of all political persuasions can wield for the pursuit of their different political ends, although the effectiveness of the doctrine might vary in accordance with the power and money one possesses, and with the compatibility of one's ideas with the dominant ideology.

The reason for such a usage lies partly in the very quality of the concept itself; that is, the fact that the concept embodies the unity of both universality and particularity, both altruism and egotism, both the abstract and the concrete. Therefore, although the perception of "objectivity", "fairness" is in fact very individualistic, specific and concrete, the very invocation of the concept nevertheless connotes a sense of universality, altruism as well as a high level of abstraction. Melanne Verveer of the People for the American Way, spokesperson for the Friends of the Fairness Doctrine coalition, demonstrated the point well. She said that the various groups were united on two counts, one was abstract, the other was concrete. On the abstract level, the groups were united on the belief that fairness "is a minimal requirement" that broadcasters should bear as part of their "public trust" status; on the concrete level, Verveer said that most of the groups were involved in controversial issues and "want the assurance that broadcasters will cover those issues in a balanced manner." (*Broadcasting*, June 29, 1987)

Therefore, since the ideal of objectivity is generally accepted within the mainstream political discourse, those who invoke it for either defensive or offensive purposes in the struggle for meaning will always possess political superiority, no matter how selfish, how individualistic their ends might be. It is

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<sup>3</sup>(cont'd) irony for the NNC, and perhaps, for the ideal of objectivity it supposedly embodies is, in order to live up the ideal, the council had carefully maintained a spectrum of political views in its membership and for the most part, had tried to avoid partisanship in its decision. But it is precisely this reason that made it difficult for the council to win financial support outside the media community, while media groups with a political axe to grind find it relatively easy to raise money.

precisely this quality that makes the ideal of objectivity live long and serve well for the cause of ideological hegemony. So long as the current social system, and within it, the media system prevails, the debate on objectivity, and behind it, the struggle for meaning will continue. Those who dare to challenge the ideal itself will be marginalized, and excluded from the legitimate social discourse.

As a final observation, it should be noted that the Fairness Doctrine and the press councils are only two of the social institutions through which the ideal of objectivity is perpetuated and by which the struggle for the power over social signification carries on. Many other social mechanisms, such as the politicians' frequent criticism of perceived media bias, the media's letter-to-the editor columns, independent opinion poll organizations which produce quantitative statements on the degree of the "objectivity" of different organizations, and even academic studies on media "bias", all join in the orchestra which performs the symphony of objectivity. There are "solos", "duets", and "ensembles", and it is full of dramatic movements: a politician's accusation of lack of objectivity in media may make big headlines in the media and may invoke systematic inquiries into the media; the findings of the inquiries, may then be used by various interested groups and individuals to launch their attack on media "bias".<sup>4</sup> The media, in defense of themselves, or simply in their search for news, may selectively publish research findings arguing the opposite, and they may also throw the ball of "bias" back to the audience by saying that "Bias is in the eyes of the beholders!"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Examples for the above situation are numerous. In the 1960s, Nixon's Vice-President Spiro Agnew's attack on the media's liberal "bias" made big headlines in the media; intrigued by the attack, Edith Efron attempted to prove such a "bias" through her book *The News Twisters* (1971), which became a popular book and also resulted in another study "Untwisting the News Twisters" (Stevenson, et. al. 1973), arguing a different point. More recently, political scientists Robert Lichter, and Stanley Rothman's study of American media elite and their perceived anti-business bias provide heavy ammunition for the some big corporations and conservative media watchers as well as politicians in their attack on media. See Herbert Gans (1985); Peter Dreier (1988).

<sup>5</sup>This is the title of a *Wall Street Journal* editorial article in July 23, 1985.

## CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to make sense of the concept of objectivity in journalism. I have traced the historical origins of the concept, located its material basis and described its complicated relations with other journalistic ideas and practices. I have also tried to demonstrate the role of the concept in mediating journalistic practices, and in a broad sense, in mediating the process of social signification. In this concluding chapter, I shall summarize some of the main arguments that have been advanced in this thesis and thereby formulate a historical, multi-dimensional understanding of journalistic objectivity.

The ideal of objectivity, as I have demonstrated, has its philosophical roots in eighteenth century Enlightenment thought, which for the first time in human history perceived a unitary public based on the natural rights of individuals in the society. As a manifestation of this ideal in journalism, the ideal of objectivity proclaimed the representation of the world from a universal perspective, that is, a perspective which is based on the authority of nature itself and is independent of particular interests in the society. It claimed a position that is "beyond" politics, "above" partisan interests. The ideal contained a revolutionary element in that it helped to break the monopoly of the elite press and for the first time in history, the general public was incorporated into the process of social signification.

The ideal of journalistic objectivity, it is also demonstrated, was historically linked with the capitalist mode of news production; that is, the ideal found its material basis in the press as an "independent capitalistic institution", whose commercial imperative of profit maximization and whose political necessity of legitimation transformed the ideal into its institutional ideology. As such, objectivity helped to conceal the inherent contradictions which were part of the structure of the commercial press and mystify the actual relations of news production: the "facts" which the practice of "objective reporting" produced were actually value-laden; the set of journalistic conventions whereby objectivity was supposedly secured were ultimately culturally embedded and the very source of bias -- a bias toward the existing social, political order. As a result, journalistic objectivity, with its original

democratic promise, has in practice been transformed into a sterile, ossified dogma which undermined a truly democratic system of signification. The contradiction between the abstract, universal form of the ideal — the presentation of news from an universal perspective — and the concrete, particular perspective of the dominant ideology of the capitalist society which the practice of objectivity has helped to maintain, has been in existence since the inception of the commercial press and remains unresolved till today.

It is precisely this unresolved contradiction that accounts for the phenomena that were discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 in this thesis. In Chapter 4, I have demonstrated how the concept struggled against its internal inconsistencies and came to terms with itself in facing emerging forms of journalistic consciousness and practices. Through a process of redefinition, incorporation and modification, the concept constantly renegotiated its theoretical and practical boundaries and thereby secured its status as hegemonic ideology of the commercial press. The hegemonic role of the ideal was finally accomplished with the consent of other related segments of the society; that is, the internalization of the ideal by the society at large and the operationalization of the ideal through concrete social institutions — the press councils, the Fairness Doctrine, the activities of various lobbying groups, etc., as the case study in Chapter 5 has demonstrated.

Here the concept of hegemony is useful in summarizing the general position of the thesis. As it has been noted earlier, hegemony refers to a process by which a powerbloc in society, through its leading intellectuals, actively created a cohesive ideology out of a set of inconsistent themes and promises that were accepted as "given" at a certain point in history. Hegemonic ideology, however, was not something that was achieved once for all. It had to be actively maintained in a context of a power struggle between dominant and subordinate classes and groups. It was, in Gramsci's words, "a moving equilibrium". Viewed from this perspective, journalistic objectivity can be seen as a component of the hegemonic ideology of the capitalist society. Throughout this thesis, we have seen how it has been constituted and reconstituted in the struggle over social signification. It is by its allegiance to this concept that the commercial press secures its hegemonic power in the domain of social signification.

Similarly, it is by the invocation of this ideal that different social groups carry out the struggle over social signification.

As the hegemonic ideology of the commercial media, objectivity is both closed and open. It is closed in the sense that it is a necessary imperative of the commercial press. It is closed also in the sense that in a particular historical moment, a particular form of journalistic practice is likely to be privileged as the version of the ideal. The ideal is open in that, in the long historical run, the substance of the ideal, that is, what constitutes objectivity, is subject to constant redefinition and renegotiation, for the concept is premised upon inherent contradictions and faces constant challenges.

To adequately understand journalistic objectivity, therefore, requires a historical, multi-dimensional perspective. There are those who believe that the news media are objective, because they report only the facts, because they do so impartially and with balance, and because different points of view are represented and contested. On the other hand, there are those who strongly denounce the idea of objectivity and argue that the very practices of objectivity in fact "bias" reporting and help to maintain a media system which is, as Hall (1980:34) points out, "structured in dominance", in favor of a capitalistic social order. These contrasting views have made the concept of journalistic objectivity highly controversial. However, an informed and comprehensive understanding of the concept can be achieved through an investigation of the complexity of issues involved. Such a project requires a perspective that puts the concept into its proper historical context, and requires a critical analysis of not only the media practices that associate with the concept, but also the ongoing struggle surrounding the concept (be it the struggle for the internal consistency of the concept by the media themselves, or the struggle of various social groups for the power of social signification in the name of objectivity). Only such a perspective enables us to recognize the progressive and democratic dimensions of objectivity in its philosophy and its application. Furthermore, such a perspective allows us to see the different stakes that different social groups have invested in this concept, and to formulate effective counter-hegemonic strategies accordingly.



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