**Objectively speaking**

BY M U N A K H A N 2021-05-03

IN his guest lecture on objectivity in journalism two years ago, Badar Alam, then editor of Herald, cited two hypothetical examples and asked my students how they would cover them. One: an allegation of harassment at the workplace and two, a protest about missing persons in Balochistan. Did objective reporting mean they would give the same amount of coverage to the woman making the accusation as her boss and similarly, would the protesters get the same representation as the folks accused of disappearing them? The ensuing discussion was a reminder about the need for more journalism schools and training centres, not less because there`s little understanding of how objectivity came about and who is expected to be objective. For example, who defines objectivity? Media owners. And who weaponises it? News owners` favoured employees who regulate which stories get told in the newsrooms. Senior anchors (whatever that means now) can make wild, unfounded allegations when reporting on women, minorities and the marginalised but are quick to demand balance when reporting on you-know-who, lest it upset powerful lobbies.

Media scholar Jay Rosen calls a method journalists use to protect themselves from accusations of bias as a `production of innocence`. He cites `hunting down climatechange deniers` as an example `to balance out a report on the destructive effects of climate change`. This is the same false equivalency Mr Alam was referring to when he lectured my class. We hear more from perpetrators of state violence than the community subjected to the violence.

Equality of speech isn`t a good measure of objectivity. Who benefits from stories practicing this formula? Naturally, powerful corporations reap rewards from journalism`s quest to be objective because their version shares equal space with the vulnerable. This is grossly unfair.

Objectivity isn`t steeped in goodness as much as it is in business models. As Matt Taibbi points out in his book Hate Inc. media practitioners in the West initially switched to an objective approach in the early 19th century to bring in larger audiences so that advertisers knew their product was getting mass exposure. A few things then changed over the years: 24-hour news channels in the 1990s stretched their resources so they started putting people together to face off which worked well. Then the internet came along and disrupted the distribution and advertising revenue model. And finally, as he notes, Fox News figured out that instead of trying to get all the audience (ie objective approach) they needed to target a specific demographic and give them the news weknow they`ll like.

The rest is history.

In entertainment, sex sells. In news, it`s conflict. There`s no money then in neutrality.

Since I began teaching journalism in 2017, I`ve been hearing about the need for new business models certainly in Pakistan where there is much dependency on the government for advertising but all the new ideas centre around profit. Maybe we need to seriously consider a non-profit journalism model proposed by the French economist Julia Cage in her in 2016 book Saving the Media. The model is between a foundation and a joint stock company supported by workers, readers and crowdfunding. She believes news is a public good.

In an interview to Forbes in January 2017 she said people were looking `for media they can trust, and I think that to begin with reader ownership will help increase trust.

What people want is people-powered news; what I offer them, is a democratic re-appro-priation or tne media so that they can trust the news they consume`.

Many news consumers here believe an objective journalist is one that agrees with their views; therest are `jiyalas`, `youthias` etc. Then there`s people who are tired of trying to break down editorial biases and are looking for reliable sources of information themselves.

Journalist Lewis R. Wallace recognised how objectivity created an exploitative nature to traditional journalism in his book, The View From Somewhere. `It is deeply grounded in capitalist ideology: people, experiences, and events are turned into commodities, things that can be sold as `clickbait` or pushed as `shareable content`.

Such objectification bolsters journalists` careers, but it doesn`t build trust or necessarily reflect a truer version of the world.

So in this age of polarisation which is where the profit lies is there any hope for a return to the idea of objectivity without fear it will become corporatised or a tool for advocacy or should we throw the baby out with the bathwater? These questions keep me up at night as I prepare to return to the newsroom and aspire to practise a journalism that stands for something, refuses to be complicit in violence against the marginalised and is rooted in transparency which Rosen described as `the new objectivity`.  The writer teaches joumalism at IBA.