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NEITHER 'OBJECTIVE' NOR 'POST-MODERN'†

KENNETH L. WOODWARD*

Although I was born, raised, and educated in the Midwest, after forty years I have come to think of myself as a New Yorker. But after listening to a real New Yorker, Bill Donohue, complain about anti-Catholic bias in the media I realize that I am not a New Yorker at all. Most of his examples are from the liberal Eastern media, not the media of the Midwest, where Catholicism is more accepted as an important aspect of American culture. A real New Yorker always feels embattled.

This morning I was having breakfast at the St. Mary's Inn, and there was a fellow there who I took to be a professor from Notre Dame Law School speaking to some outsiders. He referred to our symposium on the media today, saying: "I don't read or watch the media, so I can't see what all the questions are about." I thought to myself, if he does not "read" anything, and he does not "watch" anything, how does he *know* anything? And, by anything I mean of course public events.

I mention this because I believe that what we loosely call "the media" is what we have because we no longer have public squares. No one ever asks, as they do in Shakespeare's plays, "What news from the rialto?" We do not have salons, as they did in eighteenth-century France, where all the news that was worth knowing (plus all the gossip worth gossiping) could be found. I do not think we even have many good bars anymore where you can get useful information. For better or worse, we are stuck with newspapers, magazines, television, radio, the rest of it. You can opt out of it if you want, but how then are you going to know what is going on?

† On March 31, 2005, the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy* hosted a symposium entitled *After Objectivity: What Moral Norms Should Govern News Reporting?* Mr. Woodward was the second speaker at the Symposium. His remarks have been revised for publication. See also William Donohue, Truth, Ideology, and Journalism (Mar. 31, 2005), in 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL'Y 711 (2005); Marco Bardazzi, Four Elections and a Funeral (Mar. 31, 2005), in 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL'Y 727 (2005); Matthew Sturin, If Not Objectivity, How About Honesty? (Mar. 31, 2005), in 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL'Y 733 (2005).

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Since this is an academic setting, and since Bill Donohue has fingered “post-modernism” as the ideology that undermines objectivity in the media (among other social ills), let me tell a story regarding my bouts with post-modern academics. Several years ago—it was the week that the Monica Lewinsky affair broke—I had just arrived at the National Humanities Center to work on a book. My next-door neighbor was Stanley Fish, who has made quite a name for himself as a post-modern public intellectual. In due course, Stanley introduced me to his wife, a feminist post-modernist academic, saying, “This is Ken Woodward. He works for Newsweek. He thinks journalism is objective.” Well, that rankled me because we had never talked about objectivity in journalism—and because I do not use that term. In fact, I do not know many journalists who do. Stanley, of course, was setting me up for his own defense of “the Postmodernist Turn,” meaning a triumph of the perspectival. But I had already experienced the academic version of the post-modern virus: At our sessions at the Center, it took my academic colleagues about forty minutes to clear their hermeneutical throats in an effort to explain that they were speaking, say, from a post-colonial transexual perspective of an African American born during the Vietnam war. Even ordinary conversation is punctuated with phrases like “This is where I’m coming from.”

I have never heard a journalist describe himself as a “Post-Modernist,” nor do I think, contra my friend Donohue, that it makes sense to discuss the media using that term. I do think the best reporters and editors have learned that they all have limitations of personal perspective which they need to recognize and overcome—that is, that theirs is not the only way of looking at things. And if this is post-modernism then we should have more of it. At the same time, indeed, I wonder whether “traditional American journalism once pursued pure objectivity in news reporting” as the symposium pamphlet states. I have rarely heard journalists talk about “objectivity” in relation to news reporting—and it certainly isn’t a goal in news commentary, where one is expected to give opinions. Mostly, I find that it is readers and viewers who talk about objectivity, usually to complain about the lack of it from *their* perspectives. Journalists usually complain about lack of space or time to develop complex stories. Mostly, they complain about editors. In short, I reject both post-modernism and objectivity as useful categories for discussing journalism.

One other thing I want to stress is this: that there is no such thing as “the news media,” only news mediums. The medium determines the message to a large extent so let us not confuse

radio with television, with newspapers, with magazines. Most of my work has been for magazines, though I have also written for newspapers and television. *Newsweek* once had a corporate advertising motto, "we separate facts from opinion," which was meant to distinguish it from *TIME*, the world's first newsmagazine, which for the first half-century of its existence had no bylines. *TIME* was edited as if the entire magazine had been written by a single person, and for all of these years its outlook was politically and religiously conservative. Bill Donohue must have loved it. More to the point, founding editor Henry Luce laid down a dictum that has been followed by every newsmagazine in the world. He said that a good newsmagazine story is like a good short story: it should have a beginning, a middle, and an end—every week. We know, though, that reality does not quite work out that way, that most news events do not unfold so conveniently.

In the beginning, *TIME* did not have its own reporters. The editors merely rewrote what had appeared in newspapers. The magazine was meant to entertain as well as to inform. If you were lucky it did both. Obviously, the concept of the newsmagazine evolved and continues to be reinvented for readers who rather not read. They have been evolving ever since. But the aim of entertaining by writing well remains. Entertainment can be "intellectual entertainment," and sometimes we actually achieve that. For example, every newsmagazine story must have a lead that gets the reader interested in the story and must move along to keep that reader reading through to the end of the story. It is not like a newspaper where you can start out and list the most important things that happened and then circle back to expand on previous points. But you all know this because, I trust, you all read newspapers and magazines.

More to my point, a newsmagazine must tell the reader not only what happened but also—and at the same time—what it *means*. Magazine writers and editors look for a story line and controlling themes. As an example from my own meager repertoire, I remember the Selma March with Martin Luther King. A call went out from King to the religious leaders of the country—the clergy of the country, really—saying, in effect, "come on down and join our righteous crusade." So they went. Seeing this, I wrote a story called "Selma, Civil Rights, and the Church Militant." The opening sentence stated the theme: "Like the lame to Lourdes they came—priests, ministers, nuns, rabbis, several thousand in all—sensing somehow that God was stirring the waters in Selma, Alabama." What that sentence conveyed I think, is very obvious: that the religious leaders felt a need to immerse themselves in what was going on as much as King needed them for

support, and this theme shaped the story. Our in-house editorial discussion centered on the fact that the analogy was to Lourdes and we wondered if people who were not Catholic would understand it. My senior editor, who was Jewish, and not at all religious, got it because, after all, Lourdes is part of a wider religious tradition of being "immersed" in the waters. Also, my indifferent Episcopalian editor-in-chief, Osborn Elliot, got it. So we went with it. These, then, are the kind of concrete questions that journalists discuss, not abstract issues like "objectivity."

We panelists have been asked to talk about some changes that we see in journalism. I see changes in newspapers. The *New York Times*, for instance, now uses techniques of the news magazine story, such as beginning a story with a reader-friendly concrete anecdote, which they seldom did forty years ago. I am trying to say that the kind of writing is changing. It is not like your classic story: "Yesterday, a fire broke out in some shopping center and so many homes were destroyed and so many shops were destroyed." The papers are telling a story more like news magazines do. They are addressing more often the meaning of the event even as they report the story. This is especially true if the story is a complicated one. Obviously if the story is about a fire, it does not mean a heck of a lot; but in foreign affairs the newspapers are expected to tell people "what it means." This is what news magazines have been doing all along.

So, "objectivity" is not the concept we want, it seems to me. Objectivity suggests disinterestedness. But, surely, the writer ought to be *interested* in what he or she is reporting and writing about. Clearly, objectivity does not mean "disinterestedness." It should mean "no advocacy" in the reporting. Here, editors exist to question copy for hidden assumptions and biases. I tried to explain to Stanley Fish that my copy has to go through a couple or three editors, and part of their responsibility is not to correct my English—presumably, I know how to use it—but to raise questions about what is clear and what is unclear, what is fair and what is unfair, what is adequately sourced and what is not. So magazines do have *procedures* (so do newspapers) in which the copy that is being written is being questioned. Editors ask writers and reporters, "How do you know this?" and, "On what basis do you want us to publish your saying this?"

Journalists, I think, would rather talk about "fairness" than "objectivity." To this end, they might ask whether all sides to a controversy, like the Terri Schiavo case, are represented, if not in one particular story, at least in the package of stories that you are publishing. Journalists are more likely to talk about "accuracy" or "getting it right." When Tom Brokaw signed off from NBC, he

said something to the effect of "The one thing that I'm proud of is when we got it right."

Here, I suppose, "truth" (another abstraction like "objectivity") means "factuality." This is a problem that is going on in journalism right now. If you walk into *TIME* magazine, or *Newsweek*, or *U.S. News and World Report*, you will not find the folks that used to be there. They were called "fact checkers," but their actual titles were "researchers." When you wrote your story, they came in armed with background material and challenging the text. "Now where did you get that? Why do you say that? Here it is reported differently." And so on. It was a good procedure. But we do not fact checkers anymore because publications do not have the money to hire researches as in the past. Now, the writers have to do the fact checking themselves, which has caused many more mistakes.

Unfortunately, it is possible to get your facts right but still have an inaccurate story because of the meaning assigned to those facts—what I would call a faulty "interpretive scheme." Let me give you an example that happens often in stories about religion. Six years ago, the Southern Baptist Convention decided to meet on Mormon turf. They went to Salt Lake City and held their convention there. Everyone was saying "here are two of the big evangelizing institutions and they are going to clash," and so forth. At that convention, they passed a resolution reiterating St. Paul's dictum that wives should submit to their husbands. Well, the *New York Times* had Gustav Niebuhr reporting from Salt Lake, and I can just imagine what the conversation was among the New York editors when Niebuhr told them about the resolution. "Hey guys, you won't believe this. These knuckleheads, these retrogrades, are saying that women are supposed to submit to their husbands!" So there it was on the *front page* of the *New York Times*, first column, left-hand side: "Southern Baptists Declare Wife Should 'Submit' to Her Husband."¹ The editors of the *New York Times*, and most of their readers, were shocked, shocked, shocked, that anyone would in this post-feminist era talk this way. But the truth of the matter is, it would have been news if the Southern Baptists *had not* passed that resolution because all they did is what Southern Baptists always do as Biblical literalists: they reaffirmed scripture. It would have been news if they had said "it is no longer true, Paul is passé." The *Times* got the facts right but missed the meaning.

1. Gustav Niebuhr, *Southern Baptists Declare Wife Should 'Submit' to Her Husband*, N.Y. TIMES, June 10, 1998, at A1.

I think instead of objectivity, I would demand of journalists that they be well informed. I can tell shocking stories of uninformed journalists but one shocker should suffice. We were doing a cover story on the Qur'an and the Bible and with it a timeline. For the year 600, I had written "The Rise of Islam." This editor said, "That's too long, too wordy; we've got to have something short." And then she asked, "Did Islam have a founder?" I said, "Yeah, his name was Muhammad." She asked, "Well, was he a real person or was he one of those legendary persons?" Now, this was a well-educated woman who had previously written religion for a national newspaper (courtesy dictates that I not name names).

What I look for in a journalist is akin to what Michael Novak—when he was still under the influence of theologian Bernard Lonergan—liked to call "intelligent subjectivity." It's a useful phrase. Applied to journalism it can be translated to mean while all knowledge is conditioned by the person as subject, one can overcome the limitations of individual subjectivity through intellectual effort. Post-Modernism, as I understand it, is an ideology and a procedure that would deny this overcoming. It is more than mere old-fashioned relativism, which is the way that Bill Donohue, in his remarks today, seems to understand it. Listening to him, I got the sense that he thinks "objectivity" implies that there are some universal truth out there like Platonic forms that all of us can grasp—and grasp in the same way. But I would argue that objectivity, in human affairs, especially, is not so easily achieved. Law students, above all, should understand this. Lawyers do not capture justice, as if they were caging a lion. In a trial, each side makes its argument from its own perspective and for the benefit of a client. And the assumption is that only through this adversarial *procedure* will justice be served—though of course it often isn't. Or, since this is a Catholic university, consider Sacred Scripture. The Bible speaks differently to the poor than to the well off. Indeed, the Bible itself is a tissue of internal rereadings: the later books of the Bible reinterpret the earlier ones and of course the New Testament radically reinterprets the old. And all this developed long before Friedrich Nietzsche ever wrote a word.

So let us apply Ockham's razor and not attribute the faults of journalists to Nietzsche or to Post-modern philosophers that most journalists have never heard of. Journalists err when they do not know enough about what they write about. That is why reporters are not skipped from one beat to another day after day, but are actually, after a basic apprenticeship, given beats so they become experts in particular fields. It is why magazines have spe-

cialists, or used to, in religion, science, education, business, foreign affairs, and so on. Here, the challenge to craft—and I think of journalism as a very humble craft—is to find a way of mediating the fruits of scholarship to a general audience, often by finding the right analogies. We had a Science Editor at *Newsweek*, Sharon Begley (now at the *Wall Street Journal*) who was terrific at this kind of translation, which is often a matter of finding the right analogies.

But journalists do not work in isolation. In my essay for the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*, I talk about something that is often overlooked by journalists, which is what we call “newsroom culture.” I alluded to that above in my story about the Southern Baptists and the *New York Times*. The editors at the *Times* saw that story in a totally different kind of way from the way the Southern Baptists understood what they were doing. Newsroom culture is a very real thing, and one sees it almost daily in the failure of the *Times* and other national newspapers to understand religious subcultures, especially the Evangelical subculture. Take, for instance, the famous interview in the *Washington Post* with Jimmy Carter when he was running for the Democratic nomination. He said he was “born again” and the writer interviewing him thought that Carter, a liberal Southern Baptist, belonged to some kind of cult. If readers come to trust a particular writer or particular publication often it is because they agree with that writer or that publication, and that is not a good reason. I like to think, instead, that sometimes people come to trust a writer or a magazine or a newspaper because they have found that they can trust that writer or that publication to be, on the whole, accurate and informed at least most of the time.

In conclusion, these values—fairness, accuracy, well-informed reporting, and well-informed commentary—are better achieved through newsroom *procedures* than setting moral goals or guidelines. In any case, journalism’s first commitment, I like to argue, is to language. When mistakes are made, as they often are, they are usually failures or falsifications of language—and therefore of craft. Journalism is not a science, it is not an art, but it is a craft, and a humble one at that. Occasionally, journalism does rise to the level of art, and when it does it manifests a certain excellence in the use of language. That is, morality in journalism has much to do with our commitment to language.

I leave you with that thought.

