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# THE UNBEARABLE LIMITATIONS OF JOURNALISM

On Press Critique and Journalism's Claim to Truth

**Marcel Broersma**

**Abstract** / Though the impossibility of a mimetic and purely objective representation of reality is commonly accepted, it is striking that journalism's claim to truth and authenticity is still so vivid in journalism and in public discourse. Its supposed ability to mirror reality by verifying true facts remains the basic assumption underlying press critique, as becomes clear in for example the books of Nick Davies and Joris Luyendijk who both criticize journalism for its inability to represent social reality accurately. This article contends that to go beyond the unbearable limitations of journalism and understand how it works, we should not approach journalism as a descriptive discourse but on the contrary as a performative discourse designed to persuade readers that what it describes is real. By successfully doing so, journalism transforms an interpretation into truth – into a reality the public can act upon. It is furthermore argued that journalism does not derive its performative power from its contents (the facts), but merely from its forms and style. News consumers tend to believe the contents that come with professional routines and conventions, justifying and masking the subjective interpretation and news selection of the individual journalist. If we acknowledge that journalism is a performative discourse it is impossible to be transparent about its limitations and its inability to discover the truth and introduce structural ambiguity in news writing as is suggested by press critics.

**Keywords** / journalism and truth / journalism discourse / journalism studies / objectivity / performativity / press critique / reflective journalism / representation

## Introduction

So far, the first decade of the 21st century seems to have been a receptive time for press critique. In 2006, Dutch Middle East correspondent Joris Luyendijk certainly hit a nerve with his book *Het zijn net mensen. Beelden van het Midden-Oosten* [*People Like Us: The Truth about Reporting the Middle East*] on his own experiences. Luyendijk argues that it is impossible to practise journalism as we know it in non-democratic states since regular practices and routines, like checking facts and balancing stories, are out of the question there. He concludes that news in general is constructed, coloured, filtered and distorted and there is not much news workers can do about it. The rules of the game prevent them from adequately representing social reality.

Luyendijk wants to let his reading audience know that what the press tells them is not *The Truth*. 'To communication scholars and journalists, this may seem self-evident; to audiences, it isn't. At least, that is what I hear from readers of my book' (Kester, 2008: 504). The general public has been quick to accept Luyendijk's image of news as a distorted and biased interpretation of reality and the reporter as an unreliable messenger, as if deep inside it already knows this inconvenient truth and was just waiting for a professional to confirm it with some authority. More than a quarter of a million copies of Luyendijk's book have been sold, it is to be translated into several languages and in the Netherlands it has been a definite factor in the public debate on journalism.

Public distrust of journalism does not seem to be limited to the Netherlands. In Great Britain, investigative reporter Nick Davies has aroused a great deal of attention with his book *Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media* (2008). Davies argues that journalism has been internally eroded and reduced to *churnalism*. Due to reduced newspaper circulation and budget cuts, the number of reporters has declined so much they cannot accurately gather and check news. They have to depend on press agencies, official sources and PR agencies to supply the raw material that is recycled virtually unedited in newspaper columns. This makes reporters vulnerable to propaganda. With many recent examples, Davies suggests how pseudo-events and stories that are inaccurate or even totally false dominate news coverage. In his epilogue, he declares the collapse of journalism, 'As it is, we are dealing with a system that is running out of control, with the logic of commerce randomly overwhelming the requirements of reporting. A conspiracy can be broken; chaos is harder to control' (Davies, 2008: 394).

Luyendijk and Davies have both been applauded by the public but reviled by their colleagues. Most journalists agree that they do indeed represent an image of social reality that is distorted in one way or another, but they consider this inherent to journalism. Journalism is not science, as the editors of an anthology with correspondents' comments on Luyendijk's book conclude (van Hoogstraten and Jinek, 2008: 13; see also Lamers, 2007). Most journalists also acknowledge the corrupting influence of commercial logic and PR on journalism via companies, lobbies and democratic and dictatorial governments alike. However, they lament the image of the journalist as a swindler who cheats the public. They argue that it might be hard to get the facts right, albeit not necessarily harder than in the past, but it is not impossible. As former *Observer* editor Roger Alton, who is heavily criticized by Davies, notes, 'You can accuse me of incompetence, of being a shitty journalist or a shallow halfwit, but to say I would deliberately lie about stuff and manipulate information – nothing could be further from the truth. It can't co-exist with your role in journalism. All one is trying to do is tell the truth' (*The Guardian*, 22 September 2008).

Many journalists emphasize that books like Luyendijk's and Davies's, which reveal the tricks of the trade and expose journalistic failure, undermine their profession. They say these two authors abuse the proverbial black sheep to sketch a panorama of journalism as a whole. To reinforce their case, Luyendijk and Davies focus on isolated incidents and forget to mention that most journalists sincerely try to present

an accurate version of current events. Moreover, Luyendijk is disqualified as a correspondent without any training or experience, so his observations and conclusions are not considered representative or reliable. He is a kind of Alice who tumbled into a strange world that was not his own (van Hoogstraten and Jinek, 2008).

Although it is easy for many journalists to accept critique, citing causes outside journalism like PR and states curbing freedom of the press, it seems much harder to accept critique on the profession itself. The positions of Luyendijk and Davies differ in this respect. Davies wants journalists to adhere to the professional standards developed in the objectivity paradigm defining Anglo-American journalism. Though he fears it might be too late – ‘the illness is terminal’ – the problem could be solved if journalists were only willing and able to do their job and uphold the objectivity norm (Davies, 2008: 397). Because of his emphasis on commercial logic and PR, both forces outside journalism, and his reproach to the *bosses* who handed the craft over to the commercial world, Davies evokes considerably more sympathy from fellow journalists than Luyendijk, although some also consider him overly pessimistic. As Peter Preston, former editor of *The Guardian*, states in a review, ‘We can’t afford not to be serious about our serious trade. But nor – like rather too many tremulous tradesmen – should we wallow in a froth of self-loathing that blots out the good and the necessary and the essential, too. Put that damned mouse back in the washing machine and get back to work, 24/7’ (*The Guardian*, 9 February 2008).

Luyendijk criticizes journalistic failure as well, and perhaps his own first and foremost, but addresses a more fundamental question when he states, ‘We must focus not on what could be done better, but on what could not be done better. If journalists did a better job, we would still have filtered, distorted, manipulated, biased and simplified coverage’ (Luyendijk, 2008). In other words, he challenges the routines and conventions of professional journalism and questions whether it can give an accurate representation of reality at all. He advocates transparency in reporting – the media should make their position and choices explicit and thus make the public media wise – and wants to introduce *structural ambiguity* to journalism. In their coverage, journalists should make it clear that it is impossible to know certain things and they are merely presenting the interpretation of reality they consider most likely. However, Luyendijk is somewhat inconsistent when he calls for the invention of new genres to cope with the epistemological limitations of journalism. He mainly detects this professional incompetence in non-democratic countries, and somehow seems to accept the professional routines in democratic societies. As long as information is verifiable, it is possible to give an accurate representation of reality. Of course this is easier in democratic countries than in police states. Davies’s exposé, though, illustrates that on a practical level, it is not that easy, and on a philosophical level there are even fewer differences (Kester, 2008; Luyendijk, 2006, 2008).

To media historians, the arguments of both these authors will seem familiar; they are old ideas parading as new. Every now and then, notably in the 1930s and 1970s, there have been waves of press criticism. By examining the relation between journalism and the truth, Davies and Luyendijk both explore a theme central to press critique throughout history. Journalism should tell the truth by presenting the facts that are out there to collect. The problem with this kind of critique is that if

journalism is viewed as a descriptive discourse, it will always fail. Most press critics view journalism within a framework of gatekeeping studies that interpret journalism as pre-eminently a process of news selection. As Mark Fishman concludes, 'This is because most researchers assumed that news either reflects or distorts reality and that reality consists of facts and events out there which exist independently of how news workers think of them and treat them in the news production process' (Fishman, 1980: 13). However, critics like Davies and Luyendijk, who challenge the adequacy of reporting as a process of selection and a process of verifying true facts, adhere to the notion of journalism as a descriptive discourse as well. Davies blames the structures journalists work in which 'positively prevent them discovering the truth' (Davies, 2008: 28). Luyendijk holds that journalism mainly tries 'to arrive at a verifiable picture of reality' (Kester, 2008: 505). The only problem is that due to practical difficulties, not all the facts are absolutely verifiable.

Here I first examine the relationship between journalism and truth. I do not do so in an ontological sense. Ever since Plato, philosophers have grappled with processes of representation and there might be some consensus now, at least in academia, about the impossibility of mirroring reality and purely objective fingerprint copies of reality. It is striking in this respect that journalism's claim to truth and authenticity is still so vivid in journalism and in public discourse, and that it is still the basic assumption underlying press critique. So I address the issue of why newspaper writing defines itself as a practice that has the ability to present a representation of reality that is true, i.e. that reflects what is happening in the real world. I then examine journalism as a performative discourse with the power to persuade people that its interpretation of the social world is legitimate (Broersma, 2010). If we accept this notion, the next question is: What makes a journalistic article convincing? I analyse what determines the persuasive power that makes us believe a representation of reality is indeed true. In my conclusion, I return to Luyendijk's argument and discuss the implications of his plea for transparency and structural ambiguity in journalism. Would it strengthen or only subvert its authority and existence? I argue that if journalism abandoned its claim to the truth, we would face a paradigm shift. It would be the end of the current Anglo-American paradigm of objective journalism.

## Journalism and Truth

It might no longer be obvious in postmodern society, but it is good to realize how important its claim to truthfulness and authenticity is to journalism. Since their advent around 1610, newspapers have been claiming to tell the truth about the world (Broersma, forthcoming). To distinguish themselves from gossip, pamphlets, newsletters and other early modern news products, newspapers promised to supply reliable information instead of opinions or fiction. The first known guidebook on journalism, written in 1695 by the German Kaspar Stieler, stated that newspaper publishers earned their reputation via the truthfulness of their reports. 'One buys and reads newspapers because one is told what is true and can be passed on. Lies have short legs and never live to be old' (Stieler, 1969: 32). Since then, not much has changed in this respect.

Journalism's claim to truth is the main feature of the journalism discourse. It is its *raison d'être*, distinguishing journalism from entertainment as well as from political opinion. This claim to truth legitimizes journalism's special position as Fourth Estate. As a trustee of the public, it professionally reports and critically investigates social reality. For the common good, it distinguishes facts from fiction, lies and biased comments. As such, this promise of truthfulness is the basis for the social code shared by journalists and their reading audience. People want journalism to provide them with certainty. They expect the craft to give reliable facts that help them make sense of situations and that they can act upon. And journalism does succeed at making people believe it is reporting *the truth*. This is why the public is so shocked if news turns out to be untrue.

If the code is violated, as in the Janet Cooke affair in 1980 or more recently the Jayson Blair fraud in 2003, the authority of journalism is endangered and there is a Pavlovian reaction (Eason, 1986). To defend journalism's special position in society and confirm the identity of the professional group, the journalist responsible for the hoax is nailed to the cross by his fellow professionals, regardless of whether he did it on purpose or just fell for it. He is exposed as a fraud or simply as incompetent, and banned from the profession. This reaction is almost an anthropological constant. There are examples throughout history and all across the globe. The message to the public is: the system works fine, and if the routines and conventions had been followed properly this never would have happened (see also Bishop, 1999). This limits the damage to journalism as a whole.

However, this discourse of truthfulness obviously masks an awkward reality. To know about events we have not witnessed ourselves, we rely on the media and journalism. But do journalists know what really happened? In 99.9 percent of cases, they were not there either. They rely on sources who might have witnessed the events or heard about them and have their own interests and reasons to cooperate. Sometimes documents, photographs or videos are available. However, their trustworthiness can be questionable, as in RATHERGATE, when CBS anchor Dan Rather was forced to resign after documents claiming President Bush Jr had evaded military service turned out to be untrue, or the same thing happened to *Daily Mirror's* editor Piers Morgan when pictures of British soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners turned out to be a hoax. As Epstein concludes, even if 'journalists had unlimited time, space, and financial resources at their disposal, they would still lack the forensic means and authority to establish the truth about a matter in serious dispute' (Epstein, 1975: 5).

In perhaps most of the cases, journalists do not know what really happened either. The relationship between a reporter and his or her sources is a voluntary one that has to be beneficial to both parties. Unlike police officers or judges, reporters have no power to force their sources to tell the truth. Using the skills and routines journalism has developed in the professionalization process since the late 19th century, they have to judge various and often conflicting views, statements and information to the best of their ability. They have to transform the facts and fit them into the media formats and forms the public is familiar with. As a result, news is a social construction that constitutes reality. Events and facts have no intrinsic importance, but simply become important because they have been selected by journalists who

adhere to a culturally and ideologically determined set of selection criteria. If the parameters change, e.g. the era, media system or cultural background, so do the perceptions of the world and the public is exposed to a different truth.

All this is well known to news production workers and at least suspected by their reading and viewing audience. Many of the subjects of news coverage or the experts complain that articles they can personally check do contain errors (Goldstein, 2007: 6–7). In the vehicles designed for the popular imagination like movies or novels, journalists are usually not depicted as very reliable and trustworthy professionals (Ehrlich, 2004). However, this paradox of journalism, this claim to tell the truth knowing it is actually impossible, seems to be an essential part of it. In a sense, journalism is like magic. The magician knows he will not actually saw the woman in two. The audience knows he won't. But they both hate the smart ass who gets up in the middle of the show and breaks the illusion by shouting, 'It's just a trick!' And then starts to explain how it works: They are not really her feet, they are just fake shoes, the girl curls up so he saws through empty space . . .

## Journalism as Performative Discourse

Press critics like Davies and Luyendijk tend to argue that the image journalism presents of social reality is manipulated and distorted. They make a big deal out of it, but actually it is only logical. The problem is that the critics essentially view journalism as a discourse that should be capable of accurately describing or mirroring social reality. Luyendijk states in his introduction that reality and images of reality diverge and defines this as a frightening problem that needs to be solved (Luyendijk, 2006: 16). However, thinking in categories like these only obscures the issue. As Fishman argues, 'it is not useful to think of news as either distorting or reflecting reality, because "realities" are made and news is part of the system that makes them' (Fishman, 1980: 12).

To go beyond the unbearable limitations of journalism and understand how it works, we should not approach journalism as a descriptive but as a performative discourse designed to persuade readers that what it describes is real, which, by successfully doing so, transforms an interpretation into truth – into a reality the public can act upon. These two sides of the performative coin are closely linked. First, there is the element of staging or restaging, telling reliable stories and thus attributing meaning to social reality. On a daily basis, journalism needs to persuade its public that what is written or broadcast actually happened in real life, that it is telling the truth. An article is convincing if it successfully establishes a sense of truthfulness. That brings us to the reverse side of the performative coin, that linguistic representations have the power to simultaneously describe and produce phenomena. They are self-fulfilling prophecies: news is true because the journalist says it to be so. Of course, I do not want to imply that the material social world is of no importance at all. But if the claims of one article are refuted by another one that claims to have new sources or facts, the new claims are also judged by their persuasive force (Broersma, 2010).

In the first instance, we might agree with press critics that the contents of a news item determine its performative power. An article is considered true if it is

factually true. By definition, however, news is incomplete and not authentic at all. In most cases, events are multi-interpretable and not verifiable by the public or even the journalist. Readers are not able to determine whether the contents of an article are true. The average reader or viewer does not know anything about events in, for example, the Middle East. But she or he still considers news items true if they are published in a well-known paper and adhere to professional routines and familiar textual conventions, and the facts seem plausible because they refer to existing public knowledge and cultural codes. So journalism does not derive its performative power from its contents (the facts), but merely from its forms and style. The content of an article is unique, but its form and style are more universal and refer to broader cultural discourses as well as accepted and widely used news conventions and routines. News consumers tend to believe the contents that come with these professional routines and conventions, justifying and masking the subjective interpretation and news selection of the individual journalist. As Michael Schudson notes, 'The power of media lies not only (and not even primarily) in its power to declare things to be true, but in its power to provide the forms in which the declarations appear' (Schudson, 1995: 109). Form and style embody the social code connecting journalists and their public. These categories make it possible to naturalize and legitimize the visions and interpretations of the social world journalism provides'.

To enforce its claim on truth and overcome its limitations, journalism has developed discursive strategies to make stories as persuasive as possible. It has done so because it is a profession that aims for a triple-A status. It wants to balance authority, autonomy and attractiveness. These goals guide the actions of journalists. To ensure the effect of authenticity and truthfulness, journalistic texts rely on a set of professional practices, routines and textual conventions developed in the 20th century to guarantee that this construction or representation process is as accurate – or mimetic – as possible. Instead of merely transmitting public speeches and texts, journalists now frame this information in a professional discourse. They have developed specific conventionalized forms articulating the routines they use. By doing so, reporters no longer simply rely on public knowledge, they include knowledge of their own (Matheson, 2000).

The objectivity norm has become the ideological basis for journalism's discursive strategy. This norm developed in American journalism at the end of the 19th century and was broadly shared in the 1920s. It was transferred to Europe and other continents where the routines and conventions central to journalism were adapted in national contexts and became widespread after the Second World War (Chalaby, 1996; Høyer, 2007; Høyer and Pottker, 2005; Wilke, 2007; Williams, 2007). The objectivity norm links up with positivism in science and philosophy, but as such it is an excellent example of what anthropologists call *Rücklauf*, a process in which a notion already debunked by scholars is embraced by the general public. The general idea behind the objectivity norm is that a true account of reality can be presented if journalists depersonalize and rationalize their working methods. If they work according to routines that follow from the norm, they will end up with unbiased truth. As Theodore Glasser strikingly notes, 'Objectivity requires only that journalists be accountable for *how* they report, not *what* they report' (cited in Goldstein, 2007:



67). The objectivity norm prescribes neutrality and only the transmission of facts and not personal opinions. Reporters have to write in a detached tone and balance stories by presenting various points of view. The objectivity norm is an important way to distinguish journalism from propaganda and PR, claim autonomy as a profession and reinforce the profession by creating and controlling a group identity. It has become a central concept in journalism's collective discourse (Schudson, 2001; Zelizer, 1993).

The form of news provides a ritual confirmation of the professional routines following from the objectivity norm. Journalism uses a twofold discursive strategy, simultaneously observing professional routines and concealing their shortcomings. On a basic level, the routines are embodied in the news items and recognized as such by the readers. Journalists quote documents from what they describe as reliable sources and quote various individuals, preferably people who are personally involved, experts and eyewitnesses. Information is attributed to these sources, which makes the facts verifiable and more reliable, especially if explicit references are made to the reliability of the sources and they are checked. Quotes from people with differing views in an article give the impression that all the sides were heard and the reporting is balanced. Journalists also try to give their own eye witness accounts of events or quotes from sources who were present at the scene. In many cases, journalists give the impression they were there even if they were not, as is not uncommon among foreign correspondents who cover large areas like the Middle East (Zelizer, 2007). The aim of all these discursive strategies is to persuade readers familiar with journalistic routines that reporters have done all they can to reveal the truth.

However, journalism also uses these textual forms to hide the shortcomings or inadequacies of the professional routines. It generally implicitly – but sometimes also explicitly – presents truth claims as facts. Seymour Hersh starts his first article on Abu Ghraib in *The New Yorker* (2004) by saying, 'The photographs tell it all.' Jan Hoedeman of *de Volkskrant* does the opposite in a controversial article on Dutch soldiers thought to have tortured Iraqis, which later proved to be untrue. He puts phrases like 'brutal tactical interrogations' and 'exceptional high sounds' in quotation marks to strengthen the force of his description without attributing them to any particular document or source (Hoedeman, 2006). Journalism also uses specific genres to suggest an article is truthful. News stories using the inverted pyramid style are designed to persuade people all the facts are being accurately and objectively presented. An interview structured around questions and answers suggests a mimetic representation of a conversation and an actual chronology and temporality. Of course this is not necessarily the case, it simply wants readers to forget it is only an interpretation of a conversation. If a reporter elaborated on his or her methods and evaluated the choices in the text, it would probably not only bore the readers, it would also undermine the persuasive power and authority of the text. Journalism aims to naturalize reality and thus cannot question its ability to reveal the truth (see also Eason, 1982).

To be persuasive and attractive, news items also have to fit into the mind frames of the general public. In order to appeal to the cultural codes and existing public knowledge, news and information are *framed* by the media. In an effort to attribute meaning to something that is unfamiliar to people, you have to relate it to some-

thing they know. Frames are 'organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world. They organize and simplify complex events and issues in order to make sense of them' (Reese, 2003: 11). Luyendijk comes to the obvious conclusion that as a correspondent, he can tell multiple stories about the same events and the media will still tend to take an angle that confirms the existing knowledge patterns (Luyendijk, 2006: 18). Although this might be too general a conclusion, it is true that journalists have to choose between various accounts of a story and the media have to appeal to broader cultural frameworks. Press critics tend to refer to framing in a normative way and overlook the fact that framing is an inevitable and necessary part of journalism for the masses.

Each style of journalism has different elements that determine its performative power. To make their representations of the social world persuasive, journalists need to embed them in the cultural codes of their own society. Elsewhere I draw a distinction between a *reflective style* in journalism and a *news style* (Broersma, 2007, 2010). The reflective style is closely connected to a partisan model of journalism that presents reality in the ideological framework of a social or political group. In this model, journalism derives its performative power from its ability to link up to the visions and knowledge of its own group. Subjectivity is not a bad thing, it is a necessity. As Schudson notes, 'Partisan journalists, like objective journalists, typically reject inaccuracy, lying and misinformation, but partisan journalists do not hesitate to present information from the perspective of a particular party or faction' (Schudson, 2001: 150). After the Second World War, most European countries followed the example of the US and switched to a news style focused on facts and information. In this model, objectivity was supposed to guarantee a neutral stance and thus the independent position of journalism as guardian of the public interest. The news style focuses on news value, up-to-the-minute reports and interviews to reveal new facts (Broersma, 2008). This can be practised in a *story model* that is emotive and has a primarily narrative character or in an *information model* that is primarily discursive and designed to appeal to reason. The main difference between the reflective and the news style is that in the reflective style, truth can only be found in a vision of social reality whereas the news style implies that truth can be found in social reality itself (the facts).

It is important to note that its performative power is essential to journalism's status and position in society. Every day, journalism stages the social world in language. Every day, its authority has to be reconfirmed. Millions of people take part in this large-scale ritual of meaning-making by the media. It is not the material, real world that guides their opinions, it is the representations of the social world in the media. Particular events are only apparent to a broader public once they become part of a journalistic discourse. This media reality has performative power. It determines what people think about and how they act, and it shapes the public debate. A mob in Jakarta burying a Geert Wilders look-a-like doll probably will not have seen *Fitna* or studied the views of this right-wing Dutch politician who caused worldwide turmoil with this anti-Muslim movie. They are just responding to what they have seen and read in the media.

## Transparency and Structural Ambiguity

Press critics like Luyendijk and Davies criticize the media for violating journalistic standards and being dishonest about the limitations of journalism. 'Why would a profession lose touch with its primary function?' Davies asks rhetorically; 'Why would truth-telling disintegrate into the mass production of ignorance?' (Davies, 2008: 45). The system crash Davies observes has more to do with journalism weakening as an economic institution than with journalism as a profession. Davies still believes in the value of objective and investigative reporting, making it possible to find and reveal the truth. 'There are still journalists who check their stories and publish the truth. But what the Cardiff research suggests is that the "everyday practices" of journalism are now the exception rather than the rule' (Davies, 2008: 53).

Luyendijk, however, is far more pessimistic. He believes that even if reporters follow all the procedures correctly, they will still end up with a distorted picture of reality. This is why he argues that journalism should be honest about its disabilities. 'Why not state this openly? There may not be truth, but it is true that there is no agreement on the truth.' He would like to introduce 'the concept of structural ambiguity, that is, ambiguity that cannot be overcome by extra efforts in reporting because it is inherent in the system', into journalism in non-democratic societies. Journalists should state in their articles that they do not know exactly what is true and what is not, and should acknowledge that they are presenting a representation they consider likely but that other versions would have been possible (Kester, 2008: 505, 504).

The call for transparency about journalism methods and the ideological positions of newspapers, the introduction of structural ambiguity into journalism by telling readers what journalists do not know, and the need for educating the public about media logic are not new ingredients in press critique. They have always been there. In his tribute to the 1979 Pulitzer Prize winners, the American reporter David Broder notes, 'I would like to see us say – over and over until the point has been made – that the newspaper that drops on your doorstep is a partial, hasty, incomplete, inevitably somewhat flawed and inaccurate rendering of some of the things we have heard about in the past twenty-four hours – distorted, despite our best efforts to eliminate gross bias – by the very process of compression that makes it possible for you to lift it from the doorstep and read it in about an hour. If we labelled the product accurately, then we could immediately add, "But it's the best we could do under the circumstances, and we will be back tomorrow, with a corrected and updated version"' (quoted in Davies, 2008: 45).

Broder's comment is almost 30 years old and the same points have been made by other press critics before and since. However, journalism still clings to its claim to the truth, and not without good reason. In the reigning Anglo-American news paradigm, transparency in global journalism nowadays, i.e. abandoning the objectivity norm and confessing that journalism is unable to accurately represent reality, would undermine its authority. Journalism's claim to truth and the objectivity norm underlying this claim are essential to a journalism that claims to serve the public interest (Ward, 2004). Moreover, people pay for the truth. They expect journalists to tell them 'how it really is' and make sense of a complicated and confusing social

reality. They want them to transform an interpretation into truth they can act upon. That does not alter the fact that people like to read about journalism, its failures and the problems facing reporters in their day-to-day jobs, as is illustrated by the sales figures of Luyendijk's and Davies's books. But that does not necessarily mean either that readers want to be bothered with the difficulties of producing news articles themselves. People like to read about film stars and Hollywood, but when they are watching a nice movie at home they do not want to see a pop-up on their TV screen showing the director explaining – in actual time – how the film was made. They do not want the illusion to be broken.

If we acknowledge that journalism is a performative discourse deriving its authority from its power to persuade people to believe it is telling the truth about the social world and from the textual forms it uses, it is impossible to be transparent about its limitations and its inability to discover the truth and introduce structural ambiguity in news writing other than in occasional reflective articles. In this line of thinking, journalism no longer naturalizes reality by implying that the words it uses correspond to the events they refer to, as in the objectivity doctrine. Instead it questions the abilities of journalism's procedures of representation. However, even though current journalism aims to persuade readers within a framework of routines and conventions that link up with the objectivity norm, it might also be possible to return to a more subjective paradigm. Then journalism would not claim to present an objectified but a mediated truth.

Journalists can withdraw from the regimen of objectivity and its formal and stylistic conventions, and can decide not to take the trouble to fit their stories into their audiences' mental framework. However, the objectivity norm is a strong instrument for maintaining internal group identity, establishing autonomy towards external groups in society like politics or business and appealing to a mass public, and the rise and fall of journalism movements aiming to break away from it show that it is not that easy. Civic journalism, focused on solving social problems rather than finding the truth, does not meet with much response in the profession. The New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s, which openly criticized professional conventions and aimed for a deeper truth by awarding the author's actions, ideas and experiences a central position in his or her articles, has not succeeded in changing journalism habits. Neither has narrative journalism or its most subjective form, personal journalism, which recounts the personal experiences of journalists (Eason, 1982; Glasser, 1999; Matheson, 2003). These movements are now all embedded in objective journalism. A really paradigmatic shift would be a return to a reflective or partisan model of journalism, expressing its subjectivity and by doing so, making explicit the principles of its procedures of representation. This would mean aiming for smaller audiences bound together by specific interests or ideologies and a journalism that derives its performative power from the ideological correspondence between a medium and its audience. But that is not what most press critics advocate.

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