

Study Sheet: Objectivity, “Fly on the Wall” and more

Quite often, readers of narrative journalism fall into a trap created by confusing the journalistic use of the term “objectivity” with how other fields or professions (or scientists) use the word. For instance, when reporters speak of “objectivity,” sometimes readers make the mistake of thinking that they mean something like being “value free,” or achieving pure disinterestedness or neutrality, as philosophers or social scientists sometimes use the term. That is, even though this meaning of objectivity has largely been discredited within the journalism trade and without, the claim still hangs around, in shorthand sayings you’ll hear, now and again. For example, you’ll sometimes hear it said that good reporters “don’t take sides,” that they “don’t let their feelings get in the way,” or that they “keep their opinions to themselves.”

In fact, those things are all quite often true—for *some* journalists, particularly those in the mainstream trade. That’s why you often hear the colloquialism “**fly on the wall**,” which means to describe how a journalist is supposed to act on the scene: impassive, neutral, unemotional, and in some cases at their best when no one notices they are there. (This **shouldn’t be confused** with the **stylistic effect** of “**dramatic or fourth wall**” **narration**, which can be created no matter how a reporter acted on the scene, or felt about it. This is just an effect of style, invisibility created by a decision about point of view.)

Rather, as far as journalism goes, objectivity is now more often understood to refer to a *method* or set of techniques many reporters use, *not to a state of being or observation that they actually achieve*. Or, to put this another way, **objectivity works more as a ritual or routine that reporters use to reassure their reader of their authority and reliability**. Or, you might say “objectivity” in journalism, these days, is better understood as a series of “checks” that many journalists go through, much like pre-flight checks an airplane pilot uses both before taking off in flight, and during it. Or, if you like, it’s akin to what a surgeon does prior to heading into the operating room: if you’re a doctor, you do everything you can to ensure that an operation is as free of contagion, faulty assumptions, and interpretive mistakes (like operating on the wrong knee) as you can make it. (For many journalists, in fact, what we often call “subjectivity” is, paradoxically, often something reporters say helps them work towards greater impartiality. They try to check for weaknesses they recognize in themselves, and then try not to let it influence their views, too much.)

For many (but not all) journalists in the mainstream, everyday print press, for instance, some of the checks prior to the story include **recusing oneself** from writing a story to which one has a personal relationship or conflict of interest. In reporting phase, a common check is trying to consult **opposing sides** of an issue, or calling every source back to make sure a quotation or factual claim is correctly **verified**. In the third writing phase, a commonplace self-check is the careful use of **attribution** when quoting (“According to the Pentagon...”), so as to make clear one’s sources for what one is calling a fact. Or, sometimes, reporters try to use neutral or **non-inflammatory language**—so, for instance, “refugees” might be called “migrants” if it can’t be proven the people the journalists are writing about have actually been exiled from their home country and can’t return.

The important thing, for our purposes, is that none of these rituals will ensure “objectivity” in the pure, philosophical sense, at all—because every act of writing will be an interpretation. And for many journalists—as we’ve already seen—“objectivity” even in the professional, journalistic sense isn’t really in the operator’s manual at all.