



The impossibility of objectivity

Feroza Master thought objectivity was obtainable — that is, until she went to study in England

Same-sex marriage. Gay bishops. Decline of your own religion.

These are topics that may make some journalists salivate at the thought of instant front-page bylines. For those who are religious, or for those who have opinions for or against the issue, it strikes them in the gut. People carry a lifetime of experiences that shape their thoughts. Each individual also has opinions on many controversial issues. Some people have a religion. Others do not. But everyone has morals. And whether we like it or not, journalists have to report on these issues. The question is, how do we do this to the best of our ability?

I think reporters in this country are too focused on objectivity and balance. All you end up seeing in the papers is what each side says about an issue. And they ignore what the citizen says. For example, in an article published on July 21 by the *National Post* about the same-sex marriage bill becoming law, it began with the bill being signed. Then they report on politicians who support the law, and those who are against it, and if the law would ever be repealed. Then it ends with statistics on what the Canadian population thinks. According to the article: "A public opinion poll earlier this week suggested 55 per cent of Canadians would not want the law repealed." But there are no opinions from Canadians themselves. If a reporter — not necessarily the author of the article in question — were to ask him or herself what they thought of the issue — if they were for or against it — and then asked themselves their reasons, wouldn't they realize that other people in the country were going through the same thought process? Would the citizen want to see that reflected in the media? Why wasn't it reported?

I didn't always think this way.

Based on my education in Canada, I was taught that journalists believe in objectivity and balance. They believe they can erase their opinions from their articles and write about issues without any personal opinion ever touching the black-and-white page, or hitting the airwaves.

My professors always lectured that objectivity was something that can be attainable. Balance, they argued, is important because we must report all sides of the story in order to give an accurate account of events. In fact, all journalists should strive to achieve objectivity and balance in every story. I took these lessons into the workplace.

Whenever I sat down to write my script for a TV story, I would ask myself: "Am I objective? Have I balanced my story?"

By doing so I thought I was doing my job. It wasn't until many months later that my way of thinking was blown out of the water.

I wasn't satisfied with staying in Canada. I felt as a journalist I should spread my wings and

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experience other parts of the world. I went to London to get my masters degree in international journalism.

A professor with spiky white hair and square glasses taught one of my first classes. He grabbed a red dry-erase marker and scrawled the word "objectivity" on the centre of the whiteboard. He underlined it several times and asked us, "What does this word mean to you?"

"To be impartial," one student replied.

"To represent all sides of the story," another answered.

I raised my hand and said, "It's what a journalist should ultimately strive to achieve in every story."

My professor was silent. He looked about over the class and shook his head.

He replied, "Every year I ask this. Every year I get the same answers from you. It doesn't matter where you are from. You want the answer? Let me tell you the ones you gave me were wrong, wrong and wrong."

My stomach did a bit of a back flip. I felt like my world was caving in around me. How is objectivity not important to a journalist?

The professor continued, "Objectivity in journalism is rubbish. It is impossible to attain. And add to the list the concept of balance."

I was stunned. I looked about the room. My classmates were also surprised. Four years of journalism school in Canada told me that objectivity is the one thing...the THING to achieve. And now all of a sudden it means nothing? And balance — representing all sides of the story — that is also unattainable? Then what does a journalist do?

I was gobsmacked.

But as my professor began to explain his argument, it made sense.

He said many journalists have morals and opinions. Some also follow a religion. Morals, opinions and the teachings of a religion have been accumulated over a lifetime. These experiences form the way a person thinks. Like it or not, a person has an opinion on a subject. It is impossible not to have opinions on anything. And no one can just push all thought aside. Thoughts and opinions are a part of a person's mindset. Religion and morality are even more ingrained into the psyche. They form what a person is. How can someone just push aside everything they believe in and dealt with in life and suddenly become objective? In other words, a blank mind full of fact and no opinion with little to write but what various people have to say about an issue. Sure, some of you reading this would think it is possible. Some of you may think, "Hey, kid. I don't know what you're talking about, but I've been doing that for years!"

** Zoroastrianism is an ancient Iranian faith that was the religion of the Persian Empire until the Arab Invasion of 660 A.D. Zoroastrians are mostly found in Iran and India.*

You may think you're an expert at it. I don't believe you. Just because a reporter does not clearly state their opinion in an article, it will still always be there. It's in the way you structure your article. Every step you take in the information-gathering process is subjective. You decide whom to interview. You decide where their quotes will appear in your story. You decide where you get your facts. And like it or not, your opinion of the story or issue you are writing about will effect the way you write your story. You decide who appears first in the story. You choose the quotes, the facts, and the angle. It's a subjective process.

So objectivity is impossible.

As for balance, how do you know there are only two or three sides to the story? There could be multiple sides. One cannot go and get all sides of a story. And, if a reporter were to give equal weight to two sides of a story, what if one side does not have more merit than the other? It would not be truthful to give both equal weight. For example, if a majority of scientists believe the next flu pandemic is inevitable, it would not be fair to report scientists as being equally split on the issue.

Throughout my undergraduate degree, I was fascinated with the population decline and possible extinction of my religion, Zoroastrianism* in India and how it affected members of the religion around the world. I wrote many stories about it. I would push aside my own opinions and report the facts - what the Indian census said, what UNESCO says, what Zoroastrians themselves say. Some believed the decline was real. Others did not. I reported the opinions of both sides and decided to let the readers decide for themselves what to believe. But after my professor in London made his point, I decided to write about the same topic again. Before I sat down to write anything, I asked myself what I thought of the issue. I found out that I believe the decline is real and I think it is sad. Then I looked back on all my other articles from undergrad. I realized that though I had not written down my opinions in my articles, the way I structured the story revealed my opinion. I would start out with a quote from a Zoroastrian who was upset about the decline. Then I would give the Indian census numbers. Then I would have quotes from UNESCO and priests. And then for the second half of the story I had quotes from people who thought the decline was not real. I looked at newspapers and asked myself why other journalists wrote their articles in the order that they did. Was it the inverted pyramid that made them write it the way they did, or was it what their subconscious believed was most important?

Before writing another article, I told myself, "Okay, this is what I believe. Now I am aware of it. Let me look back at what information I have gathered."

My professor also said that a journalist should try to attain fairness. Not fairness to sources, but to the citizen. A journalist must adhere to the facts and make sure the citizen understands them. If

it's true that most scientists believe a pandemic is inevitable, then report that.

As for my article about Zoroastrianism, I thought the way I could be fair is to look at the issue of why some people do not believe the decline is real. I dug a little deeper. I discovered that the census numbers were not that reliable and a lot of Zoroastrians leave India for other countries. I then looked at the census of those countries. I discovered while there is a slight population decline, most people have just moved away from India.

Through this experience, I discovered that the concept of fairness lets us get to the ultimate goal: to know the facts, accurately report them and verify them. To do this, my professor said the best journalist is the one who acknowledges their opinions, their morals, their ethics and their religion.

Before you begin working on a story, you have to ask yourself where you stand on all the issues. You have to ask yourself whether you agree or disagree with what your interviewees are saying. You have to know your opinions on issues and why you think the way you do. Only then can you be aware of how your opinions could shape your story. And then when you are fully aware of your own thoughts, then look at the facts. Ask yourself what the citizen would want to know. Only then can a person attack a story that hits close to home. ☑

Feroza Master is a news reporter for Citytv in Calgary. She has also worked at the Calgary Herald and CTV News in Ottawa. She has a masters degree in international journalism from City University in London, England, and a bachelor degree in journalism from Carleton University.

The Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy

Fellowship Winner

Marie Wadden, a journalist, long concerned by the suffering of aboriginal addicts, is the winner of the 2005 Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy for her project entitled, "*Tragedy or Triumph: Canadian Public Policy and Aboriginal Addictions*".

Marie Wadden is the network producer for CBC radio in Newfoundland and Labrador. Wadden has been troubled by the persistence of addiction in aboriginal communities since she first visited Davis Inlet in 1978. The Atkinson Fellowship will provide her a year to thoroughly research and write about the issue and to propose public policy ideas for public consideration.

Wadden is the first Atkinson Fellow to come from a community east of Montreal. She began her career at CBC television in Newfoundland 27 years ago and has worked in that province and in Quebec. Wadden has won a number of awards, including a National Journalism Award (Canadian Petroleum Association, 1985), a Chris Award (from the Columbus Film and Video Festival, 1995), a Gabriel Award (National Catholic Association for Communicators, 2001), as well as several Radio Television News Directors Association Awards and Atlantic Journalism Awards.

As part of the terms of the Fellowship, Wadden will receive a stipend of \$75,000 plus an expense budget of up to \$25,000.

The Fellowship, sponsored by The Atkinson Charitable Foundation the Toronto Star and the Beland Honderich Family, is open to all senior Canadian print and broadcast journalists.

**Application forms for 2006 will be available as of January 16, 2006.
The closing date for entries is March 20, 2006**

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