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Twitter and the Question of Objectivity: How Social Network Sites Influence a Journalistic Norm

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This research paper deals with the validity of the journalistic norm "objectivity" within the newly evolving context of online social network sites, in particular, Twitter. I propose that social network sites are one of today's primary battlefields on which the fight between supporters and critics of objectivity takes place. I further argue that journalism should loosen up its frenetic grip on objectivity and allow for more value-laden writing, partly because social network sites have put a new tool into journalists' hands: journalists can use Twitter as a new and innovative "quote box" by accessing tweets of politicians, athletes, celebrities, and other people alike; they can employ Twitter to exchange information with other journalists around the world; and they can easily access and deliver information as it happens. Further, Twitter proves to be helpful for consumers: they can follow a variety of news sources at the same time; they can directly interact with professional journalists; and they can act themselves as citizen journalists. The facilitated interaction between journalists and consumers, who are increasingly looking for opinion-based writing, is at the core of my claim for a less rigid reign of journalistic objectivity in favor of more value-laden reporting. Social network sites present us with a new environment in which the rules of journalistic communication have been completely altered. An appropriate communication in these online communities matters to uphold journalistic credibility and to evolve journalistic work. This can be achieved through accepting journalistic subjectivity as a complement to objectivity.

Objectivity is one of our society's most fundamental journalistic norms. Many journalists unquestioningly accept it as the basis of their work. But in the age of citizen journalism and participatory audiences, the ideal of objectivity becomes increasingly threatened. Journalists find it harder to hold on to objectivity, and questions about its sense and status arise more frequently. Social network sites are one of the primary battlefields on which the fight between supporters and critics of objectivity takes place.

Do we still need objectivity as a journalistic law set in stone? Or is it time to change this convention and allow journalists to attach value to their work? Can journalists present not only two sides of an argument but rather three, four, or five sides? Are journalists allowed to send a clear message through their writing, a message about what is right and wrong, what is good and bad? These are questions that journalists in the 21st century will have to answer. Today's journalism should loosen up its frenetic grip on objectivity and allow for more value-laden writing. Unlike any other phenomenon, social network sites have recently begun to blur the line between what is objective reporting and what is not, what

a journalist can and cannot do. Social network sites have put a new tool into the journalist's hand, a tool that is worth using. The example of Twitter shows that social network sites offer more advantages than dangers for journalism. It is time for a new generation of journalists to take over the reins and to change the conventions and norms of journalism. Objectivity should not be thrown overboard, but subjectivity should be invited onboard. Objectivity and value-judgments are not opposites but complements, and together they have the chance to enrich journalistic work and to give the audience what it is looking for.

Objectivity

Before a discussion of the specific relationship between Twitter and the journalistic norm *objectivity*, it is important to present both topics in the light of the existing scholarly literature to understand how scholars have previously dealt with objectivity. For example, an overview of the relevant literature illustrates criticisms of objectivity and suggestions for a change in its use. The review of the scholarly literature builds the basis for my own claims and suggestions.

Scholars have questioned the status and authority of objectivity far longer than journalists (Schudson, 1978; Cohen-Almagor, 2008). Authors like Schudson or Cohen-Almagor agree that we have to acknowledge the limits of objectivity, that the practice of objectivity itself is already value-laden, and that journalists should have the right to include opinion-based writing into their work. Schudson and Cohen-Almagor establish the basis of their claims in a critical analysis of the history of objectivity.

The concept of objectivity is a relatively new invention that has become immensely wide-spread and effective during the 20th century. Schudson (1978) writes that "before the 1830s, objectivity was not an issue" (p. 4). It was not until after World War I that objectivity, as a central norm for journalists, found support—when journalists' "experience of propaganda during the war and public relations thereafter convinced them that the world they reported was one that interested parties had constructed for them to report" (Schudson, 1978, p. 6). Journalists turned to objectivity in an attempt to present how the world really was, not how it was socially constructed by others. Cohen-Almagor (2008) enriches Schudson's description of the historical background of objectivity with research findings from Hackett and Zhao (1998) and Cunningham (2003) which show that journalists generally associate journalistic ethics with objectivity and that 75 percent of the interviewed journalists believe in the possibility of obtaining true facts. These findings explain why objectivity still exists as a main focus point of journalistic writing. Today's journalists follow a standard that they have learned and internalized as soon as they began to write their first news story. The study illustrates the effectiveness with which previous generations of journalists still influence today's work and how hard it will be to change the status of objectivity.

The history of objectivity illustrates that any definition of objectivity must acknowledge that it is a concept created by humans and that it follows rules established by humans. Schudson (1978) accordingly defines objectivity as follows:

> Objectivity, in this sense, means that a person's statements about the world can be trusted if they are submitted to established rules deemed legitimate by a professional community. Facts here are not aspects of the world, but consensually validated statements about it. (p. 7)

Schudson's definition foreshadows his argument that objectivity needs to be treated with care. According to Schudson, objectivity is a concept that helps to socially construct reality and the form of objectivity incorporates its own bias (Schudson, 1978). This means that the use of objectivity contains its own values and assumptions which directly create the world we perpetuate. Therefore, Schudson asks why the press should still be objective. He lists three criticisms against objectivity:

> First, there is the position that *the content of a news story rests on a set of substantive political assumptions*, assumptions whose validity is never questioned … A second position is that form constitutes content, that *the form of the news story incorporates its own bias* … A third criticism, closely related, sees the form of a news story, not as a literary form, but as a social form tightly constrained by the routines of news gathering. Here the argument is that *the process of news gathering itself constructs an image of reality which reinforces official viewpoints*. (pp. 184-185)

I based part of my research on Schudson's advice for a more careful use of objectivity in journalism. Schudson underlines that it is important for a journalist to know that objectivity itself is a lofty goal[1], and he argues for a change in journalists' awareness concerning the incorporated bias of objectivity and for "more tolerance and encouragement for a variety of ways of knowing and writing" (Schudson, 1978, p. 193). According to this claim, we should welcome non-objective writing as another voice to be heard, not as a threat to journalistic practice. Cohen-Almagor (2008) defines objectivity as "the view that one can and should separate facts and values" (p. 140). He lists four dimensions that are associated with objectivity: accuracy, truthfulness, fairness and balance, and moral neutrality. This implies that the pursuit of objective reporting requires that a journalist completely detach him- or herself from his or her work in order to present just the bare truth. Personal opinions, values, or beliefs must not influence his or her writing. Cohen-Almagor warns against such an understanding of objectivity, and like Schudson he argues for a more careful use of objectivity. Their approach to objectivity agrees with my own thesis that objectivity has become too much of an unquestioned norm that is held on to too tightly. Cohen-Almagor calls this "false notions associated

[1] Cohen-Almagor (2008) states a similar argument as Schudson, arguing that "Reporters, like all human beings, need to be aware of their biases" (p. 139)

with objectivity" (p. 136) and states that "Moral journalism will necessitate acknowledgment that objectivity is not an end in itself; that on certain matters objectivity in the sense of prescribing moral neutrality is a false idea" (p. 150). A reporter must have the choice to report opinionatedly about certain issues, especially those which threaten democracy or violate human rights. In these cases, a journalist must be aware of his role as a citizen and act accordingly.

Objectivity is still a concept that directly influences the work of almost all journalists. Fact checking, accuracy, and balance are still indicators for so-called good journalism and increase a journalist's credibility. However, objectivity has increasingly become a topic of debate among scholars. Cohen-Almagor (2008) rightfully wrote that "While journalists conceive objectivity in positive terms and see it as a concept they can and should follow, the level of skepticism regarding the concept among the educators is noticeable" (p. 142). An increasing number of journalists have also begun to question objectivity as the core concept of journalism, especially in reference to journalists' increasing usage of social network sites such as Twitter. This body of research supports my own findings and my suggestion for a new understanding of how to use objectivity. At the same time, the literature shows that scholars have yet to look more carefully at the relationship between objectivity and social network sites. My research starts at this point and hopes to offer a first step to fill this gap in the literature.

Social Network Sites

Online social network sites have recently become an important focus of scholarly research. But what constitutes an online social network site? What requirements does it have to fulfill before we can classify it as a social network site? It is important to answer these questions to provide a strong basis for a more in-depth analysis of any social network site in particular. boyd and Ellison (2007), two leading scholars in the field, provide us with a specific definition:

> We defined social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 211)

They further distinguish between 'social network sites' and 'social network*ing* sites.' According to their differentiation, the latter emphasize "relationship initiation, often among strangers" (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211), whereas people primarily use social network sites to talk with people they already know. boyd and Ellison (2007) conclude their argument with the outlook that "scholars still have a limited understanding of who is and who is not using these [social network] sites, why, and for what purposes" (p. 224). My research hopes to respond to this challenge with a focus on why and how journalists use the social network site Twitter.

Twitter

Twitter, released in 2006, is a comparatively new social network site that allows users to post 140-word long status updates called tweets, which can be directed at particular users or at all users in general and which are visible for anybody else on Twitter. Users can also follow the status updates of other people on the network. Twitter allows you to follow a person regardless of whether you have or have not a relationship to that person outside the virtual world.

According to this description, Twitter initially seems to be more of a social network*ing* site than a social network site. You neither have to friend people, nor do you have to personally know them to find out how and with whom they communicate. At the same time, I found that most people I followed for this research project (athletes, journalists, politicians, personal friends) directed their tweets at specific persons, an indication of Twitter as a social network site. The findings of Huberman, Romero, and Wu (2009) support this observation, stating that "even though users declare that they follow many people using Twitter, they only keep in touch with a small number of them" (para. 11). However, many corporations and businesses use Twitter to communicate with a vast number of people but not with someone in particular. Twitter, then, seems to be a hybrid between social network site and social networking site, combining elements of both. This duality makes it useful for journalists but also objectionable to strict supporters of objectivity. Looking at Twitter from the perspective of a current undergraduate student with an interest in journalism, I found that Twitter can be a valuable tool for journalists and citizens alike. Twitter can help the journalist to supplement the one story he or she has been working on for a long time, and it can help the consumer to find the one story he or she has been looking for.

Twitter opens up new opportunities for news consumers which directly influence objectivity. People who use Twitter to obtain their news can follow a variety of different newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, all at the same time. This allows users to get a nearly complete overview of the news, including a variety of different opinions. Twitter additionally opens up a new way of obtaining the news by directly following journalists, reporters, and broadcasters. Many people who work in the news industry use Twitter to provide their audience with information (Farhi, 2009)—and this information usually is not objective, but instead opinionated. Consumers are looking for this information. Consumers are looking for value-laden and subjective content. At the same time, Twitter gives consumers a tool to present their own news to the world. For example, people can post information about what is happening within their community when it happens. Journalists can use this information to generate news stories and to quickly find out what is happening around the world. Twitter serves as a very personal and direct connection between consumers and journalists.

Besides its advantages for news consumers, Twitter also offers a variety of benefits for journalists. For example, Twitter offers journalists a free "quote box," a way to find out what people of public interest say. I found that a vast number of celebrities from film, music, or sports have huge numbers of followers on Twitter. At the same time, these people's tweets are often directed to their particular friends on Twitter. The tweets therefore are very personal and reveal information that would otherwise not be readily available for fans or journalists. Because many celebrities, athletes, or politicians continuously tweet updates on Twitter, it can be a very useful tool for journalists to find out more about a particular person's interests or opinions to enrich a story. In this context, Spencer (2007) states that reporters predominantly use online social network sites to find backup information for stories; they do not use these sites to generate the stories themselves. He further argues that social network sites will encourage a rise of investigative journalism. In fact, the ease with which any user can track tweets of any person on Twitter surprised even me. Any tweet that is directed at a particular person contains a link to that person's Twitter account to allow for easy maneuvering through a structured chaos of information; it is very easy to investigate on Twitter.

Twitter also offers journalists the opportunity to communicate and exchange information with other journalists and additionally with a variety of readers online. Wilson (2008) states that social network sites help journalists to "[contact] others for ideas and support on tough assignments or connecting with editors for advice and job opportunities" (p. 12). He further stresses the importance of knowing about your audience and states that social network sites facilitate the interaction between journalist and reader. Wilson's statement confirms my own findings that journalists not only use Twitter to communicate amongst each other, but also to talk to their audience, for example by asking for particular opinions on a subject or by publishing interactive polls. Palser (2009) states that "Perhaps the best reason to experiment with Twitter is that it's a direct link to elusive and valuable audiences" (p. 54). She explains that "Twitter could be a way to reach younger people who are interested in certain kinds of news but don't spend all their time on news Web sites" (p. 54). Similarly, Schulte (2009) states that "Twitter followers have proven to be avid and loyal readers [of the newspapers they follow], engaging with reporters who cover fields of interest to them" (p. 23). Many users on Twitter tend to predominantly follow people to obtain information about and from them. These users use Twitter to *read*. They therefore offer the journalist an audience that is listening, an audience that is literally following the journalists' work.

Finally, Twitter offers journalists a tool for fast and easy access and delivery of information *as it happens*. Farhi (2009) states with regard to Twitter that "Its speed and brevity make it ideal for pushing out scoops and breaking news" (p. 28). He quotes Arizona State University journalism professor Dan Gillmor, who said that "journalists should view Twitter as a 'collective intelligence system' that provides early warnings about trends, people and news" (p. 29). Farhi calls Twitter a "living, breathing tip sheet for facts, new sources and story ideas" (p. 28). However, this specific argument draws a

lot of criticism from journalists who believe that journalistic norms, i.e. objectivity, become threatened in an environment where journalists use social network sites extensively for their stories.

The problem of Twitter and Objectivity

As soon as journalists started to use social network sites, critics began to point out the dangers of such sites to objective, accurate, or balanced reporting. Journalists who had internalized the norms and conventions of their organizations argued against the use of social network sites as sources, against the personal use of social network sites, and even against social network sites as a way to exchange information with other journalists. For example, Morton (2009) argues that "nothing about the new venues changes the old rules about a reporter's obligation to be, and appear to be, neutral. From that flows credibility" (p. 60). However, I did not find that a journalist's use of Twitter diminished his or her credibility in any way. Instead, it improves credibility. Because the information journalists provide on Twitter appears to be more honest and straight from the source, many readers prefer the tidbits of information that journalists offer on social network sites because they are more real. Twitter accordingly seems to help a journalists' credibility instead of threatening it. The numbers of followers and re-tweets active Twitter journalists receive underscores this notion. For example, many people used Twitter to obtain direct information from Haiti after the earthquake from journalists who used Twitter to keep their audience updated. People believed that the news they got directly from the journalists in Haiti was more accurate than the filtered news they got from other official news sources.

Other scholars question the journalistic use of social network sites in terms of its threat to democracy. Fouhy (2000) states that "if its [the web's] worst aspects diminish the audience for solid, well-crafted journalism based on time-tested values [such as objectivity or independence], and thus slow the consensus-building process, it will not be an asset for democracy" (p. 19). Yet, how can objective reporting that seeks balance even in reports about events that clearly violated democratic rights, be an asset for democracy? A journalist must have the freedom to offer clear statements against any threats to democracy in his or her writing. Twitter itself can be a viable tool to increase the democratic value of journalism because it eases the connection between journalist and audience, and because it allows journalists an improved way to listen to their audience. Twitter also relates to some of Schudson's criticisms of objectivity discussed earlier: As I stated above, Twitter allows journalists to get in direct contact with their audience. This means that journalists become less dependent on official sources because it becomes easier for them to contact a variety of other sources through Twitter. This development applies to Schudson's criticism that objectivity reiterates official viewpoints. Because a journalist now can get in touch with many different sources easily, his or her writing becomes more democratic as it incorporates a variety of different viewpoints. A journalist now has a much better chance to question the political assumptions and official

viewpoints which were accepted in the times when social network sites did not facilitate journalistic contact with sources outside the official realm. One specific example of how Twitter helped democracy was during unrest and protests during the presidential election in Iran when Iranian protesters used Twitter to communicate amongst each other and to the send news around the world. Time-tested values have to be open to change when the society that established those values is changing.

Despite the increasing presence of newspapers on social network sites such as Twitter, supporters of objectivity insist that they must preserve their norms and conventions, i.e. objectivity. Gleason (2009) explains that "Many news outlets see social networking as an essential element of their survival strategy, and some are drafting guidelines and policies for how their journalists should behave on Facebook and Twitter" (p. 6). Gleason's article shows that newspapers still hold on to objectivity as their core value, and that they do not shy away from restricting their employees to stick to that convention. For example, the prestigious newspapers the *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *New York Times* all set up specific guidelines for how their employees are supposed to use and interact on social network sites. This directly confirms Schudson's (1978) definition of objectivity when he writes that objectivity implies "statements about the world can be trusted if they are submitted to established rules deemed legitimate by a professional community" (p. 7) —objectivity, then, is not natural law but a humanly and socially constructed concept, and today's journalists attempt to preserve the power that objectivity gives them. I argue against this existing duality: on the one hand, newspapers find great success in using social network sites as another outlet for their news, on the other hand, they limit their employees' ability to use social network sites to enrich their stories, to obtain information that they might otherwise not find, and to communicate with their audience on a personal level. It is exactly this personal and opinion-based interaction between reporter and audience that readers are looking for. Journalists have among the highest numbers of followers on Twitter. Although high popularity does not necessarily mean good journalism, newspapers have to be aware of their audience and listen to its needs. Newspaper corporations also have to acknowledge that Twitter is not just a business tool; it is predominantly designed for personal use. The research on Twitter argues that newspapers will have to rely on this personal use of social network sites to offer interesting stories and capture their readers' attention. The popularity of blogs and message boards, which are full of opinion-based information, indicates that loosening the grip of objectivity might, most importantly, be a business decision.

Conclusion

The journalistic use of objectivity will not be changed overnight. It so strongly integrated into journalism that it will be hard to even reach modest changes in attitudes regarding objectivity. Schudson (1978) writes that journalists "will be encouraged to reenact the rituals of objective reporting" (p. 192) and that "There is no new ideal in journalism to successfully challenge objectivity" (p. 193). However, social network sites such as

Twitter might be the key towards a fundamental change in the treatment of objectivity. While the readership of traditional hard copy newspapers is dwindling, social network sites might be the only way for newspaper organizations to reach a large enough audience to economically survive. I found that newspapers already have a strong presence on Twitter today. Yet, based on the number of followers, audiences do not seem to be satisfied with just the bare facts anymore. People increasingly search for opinions, advice, and clear statements. Audiences want to engage in personal dialogue with the journalists who offer them the news; they want to know *who* gives them the news. Although newspapers today include opinion pieces alongside the regular articles, these stories are explicitly marked as 'value-laden' or 'representative of one possible opinion.' They are clearly separated from the other content and often demand for a second piece with the opposite opinion. These opinion pieces, then, are just another way to uphold objectivity and provide balance. Yet, supporters of objectivity forget that the concept itself is socially constructed. As I explained earlier, objectivity arose out of the uncertainty and distrust of the early 20th century. It was a concept constructed by journalists to reestablish order in a chaotic world. However, this concept does not universally apply anymore. As Twitter shows, audiences have evolved, and they do not fall as easily for propaganda anymore. Twitter users visit the website to find opinion-based news but also to compare and contrast different opinions. At the same time, users abandon newspapers because they only offer one side of the story: the objective side.

Today, many journalists use social network sites despite the criticism about objectivity and accuracy. Hermans, Vergeer, and d'Haenens (2009) write that the "implementation of technological innovations [i.e. the Internet] not only leads to changes in the daily routines of journalists, but also leads to redefining notions about themselves as professionals" (p. 139). The authors argue that the Internet facilitated newsroom routines (i.e. quicker fact-checking, less bureaucratic interaction with sources), and they suggest that the perceived threat to objectivity and credibility does not keep journalists from using the Internet as a tool for writing their stories. They use Twitter because its benefits outweigh its drawbacks. And they use Twitter because they are above all citizens of a democracy. In this context, Cohen-Almagor (2008) writes that "journalists are also citizens. They live within the democratic realm and owe democracy their allegiance. Free speech and free journalism exist because democracy makes them possible" (p. 146). A journalist, then, has a democratic obligation to present his or her opinion in cases that threaten democracy, and newspapers would be well advised to include more opinion-based articles into their presentation.

Today's young readers, who are the primary users of social network sites such as Twitter and who are simultaneously the newspapers' future audience, are not looking for value-free but for value-laden writing. These readers want to know a journalist's opinion and they want to know why a journalist has this opinion. This is how we learn, this is how we grow. Journalist Adrienne Russell (2009) summarized all this in a recently published article: "The future of journalism is here […] It is more opinionated and more fair, more

varied in form and content, more local and more national, more global and more personal" (p. 367). It is time to work with this future. It is time to work with Twitter, not as a replacement for objective journalism but as a complement to it. Twitter can help journalists to contact sources, to find information, and to stay in touch with their audiences. Journalists should not abandon objectivity, but it is time to question its authority.

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