EXPLORING THE VIEW FROM NOWHERE:

STUDYING HOW JOURNALISTS OF COLOR SEE TRADITIONAL OBJECTIVITY

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THESIS APPROVAL
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EXPLORING THE VIEW FROM NOWHERE:
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ABSTRACT

After Donald Trump’s rise to power, many journalists began to reconsider the role that objectivity plays in reporting. Trump’s candidacy was filled with scandals, inflammatory statements, falsehoods and attacks on the mainstream media. The news industry was not prepared for his presidency, as many editors refused to adjust their techniques of covering such a polarizing and odd public official. However, the 2020 protests around social justice and racial equity really pushed journalists of color to challenge traditional journalistic structures, including views of traditional journalism.

The purpose of this study is to understand how the conversation around objectivity in journalism has changed in the past few years, and whether there are any objective practices that journalists want implemented or eliminated both in their newsrooms and across the industry. By studying the existing conversations around this topic, we can determine how this conversation has evolved over the past decade.
INTRODUCTION

A fundamental building block of a successful press is garnering the public’s trust. The role of an effective and healthy press is to defend democracy, to challenge the powerful and to inform the people. Both journalists and the public hold these views. According to a Gallup poll, 81% of Americans believe that news media is either critical (42%) or very important (39%) to upholding democracy (Gallup, 2020, p.2). As mediums and methods change throughout the years, our goal as journalists remains to serve and inform the public. By holding these creeds, the press would continue to gain the trust of the public and grow a healthy relationship with their audience.

However, Americans are losing faith in their news media organizations. According to a Gallup poll, Americans’ trust in news media is trending downward (Gallup, 2020, p.5). Americans that have a “great deal” or “a fair amount” of confidence in mass media to report the news “fully, accurately and fairly” fell from 55% in 1999, to a record low of 32% in 2016 but has increased slightly to 41% in 2019. (Gallup, 2020, p.5) A poll from the Pew Research Center shows that only four in ten Americans have a great deal of trust in their main news source, while eight in ten Americans have at least some trust in the accuracy of their political news (Pew Research Center, 2021).

These numbers get startling as you look at the demographic and political differences in whether Americans trust their main political news source. According to the research, only three-in-ten Republican or Republican-leaning Americans have a great deal of trust in their main news source. Only 25% of adults ages 18 to 29 have a great deal of trust in their main news source. This trend continues for Hispanic adults (24%), adults ages 30-49 (32%) and those without a college education (32%). More and more
Americans are losing faith in journalism, even in their preferred news media. The bond between the press and the people is slowly fraying.

After the election of Donald Trump, the journalism world finally began to reckon with one of the most longstanding practices in traditional journalism: journalistic objectivity. During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, Donald Trump had shown a tendency to flat-out lie, creating narratives out of thin air to fit his desired reality, even if they contradicted fact. At this point, American journalism institutions had dealt with dishonest public officials before, but Trump’s constant attacks on the press and lying to the American public left the current model of journalism “broken in ways that cannot be easily fixed by tweaking news practices” (Carlson, Robinson and Lewis, 2021, p.3). The press suffered constant abuse from the former president, forcing many newsrooms to reconsider how they would cover high-ranking officials who refuse to deal with facts.

The journalism industry was not ready for 2020. After the murder of George Floyd, millions of Americans protested in the streets against police brutality and racial injustice. However, in newsrooms across America, reporters, producers, and editors were wrestling with their own coverage of police misconduct and issues of race and identity. Journalists of color were pushing back against coverage that wasn’t direct and explicit in calling racism by its rightful name. But the industry at large was struggling with the more traditional methods of journalism, specifically the principle of journalistic objectivity.

Within the standard model of journalism, reporters are to remain objective – detaching oneself from their emotions and biases, to effectively convey the facts and to succinctly explain situations and topics to the public. (Horvit, Brooks & Moen, 2020) This hands-off approach to journalism grew in popularity in the 20th century and remains
the popular belief for traditional journalists and institutions around the globe. Many journalism professors teach of a ‘view from nowhere,’ where journalists do not choose a specific viewpoint in a story but look down into a story and only report the facts. This viewpoint sets the journalist as a third person, who watches over a situation, but is not an active participant (Rosen, 2010). In the book, *News After Trump: Journalism’s Crisis of Relevance in a Changed Media Culture* (2021), authors Matt Carlson, Sue Robinson and Seth Lewis write,

> From the view of what we call the standard model of journalism, being a moral judge is the antithesis of being balanced and objective. It requires making assumptions about motivations and intentions that cannot be verified, and therefore, are not necessarily rooted in fact (p.3).

However, that model isn’t working anymore. Americans are losing faith in one of the most fundamental institutions to keeping our democracy running. The journalism industry is failing the public. According to the Gallup poll, one of the biggest issues that the public sees in the journalism industry is bias. 83% of Americans says they see “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of political bias in their news coverage, even in their own go-to news sources (Gallup, 2020, p.2). 68% of Americans see too much bias in news reporting as “a major problem (p.2)”.

Americans are growing more concerned about bias in their news media. According to the Gallup poll, one of the biggest issues that the public sees in the journalism industry is bias. 83% of Americans says they see “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of political bias in their news coverage, even in their own go-to news sources (Gallup, 2020, p.2). 68% of Americans see too much bias in news reporting as “a major
problem (p.2)”. But I present the question, is objectivity actually to blame for both the decline in the public’s trust in media and the journalism industry’s coverage of polarizing figures like Trump?

As an undergrad, I interviewed a radio host of a popular public radio show. I asked how journalists and reporters should approach bias within their coverage. How do you remove your biases before you enter an interview? His answer: Approach every interview like a surgeon entering the operation room. In the same way a surgeon thoroughly washes their hands and arms of any bacteria before stepping into an operating room, he would sterilize himself of all his biases before entering the studio. I think about this conversation a lot and it came back to mind in 2020 during the protests. He used the word “sterilize” to describe the action of removing his biases. He told me that he would sterilize himself of his background, his opinions, his beliefs to make himself a clear canvas for the story.

But I never asked him why. Why was that the most effective way to deal with objectivity? Why should I remove every aspect of myself, everything that makes me an individual, to be perceived as fair and honest? Why remove my experiences that could help me empathize with the topic to take this stoic and detached position? Is that the best way to tell stories of the marginalized – from a distant and impersonal perspective? And, most important, in that moment where I remove myself from a story, who do I become?

As a Black journalist, I am working within a system that, for much of its history, was designated for White men. In an opinion article for the Washington Post, authors Brie Thompson-Bristol and Kathy Roberts Forde detail the history of conflating traditional views and practices of objectivity with the White perspective (Thompson-
Bristol and Roberts Forde, 2022). During the height of Jim Crow, many White journalists used their positions in newsrooms to push anti-integration ideologies, claiming that “negroes” weren’t interested in voting and that the state is “happy as it is,” and is “perfectly happy to establish ‘equal but separate’ facilities for negroes” (Thompson-Bristol and Roberts Forde, 2022). While much of society has changed, the archaic framework of traditional journalistic objectivity remains a guiding principle for new journalists across the United States (Carlson, Robinson and Lewis, 2021, p.13).

For this study I conducted a series of interviews to determine how specific journalists see the role of objectivity in political coverage. The purpose of this research was to understand how the conversation around objectivity has evolved in the last decade for journalists, specifically journalists of color. This research will help elucidate the current conversation around journalistic objectivity, understand how objectivity is defined by different communities, and determine whether objectivity, however it is defined, is a value journalists should continue striving toward. The next chapter reviews the research literature on normative theory, social responsibility theory, the histories of journalism and objectivity, and how these systems interact with the journalists who embody marginalized communities.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Background on research topic

The journalism industry was not ready for the candidacy or presidency of Donald J. Trump. As he shot up in the polls, many editors and journalists realized that the news industry was heading toward a monumental problem. In the 2016 Presidential primaries, Trump showed a tendency to disregard truth and facts that negatively impacted his public image while telling blatant lies to fit his self-created narratives. He disparaged the media, calling them “the enemy of the people.” He antagonized and harassed journalists and picked fights when they challenged his lies. But, seemingly worst of all, he disparaged facts, the basic building blocks of journalism, as media bias. When a reporter would push back with a fact, Trump would call it “fake news” and accuse the media of lying to make him look bad.

These tactics seemingly helped Trump. He ascended through the Republican primary, beating out more establishment candidates, and won the Presidential election in 2016. This presented a new problem for the media. Journalists had dealt with dishonest politicians, whether unintentionally or maliciously dishonest, before. But with the newly found power and cachet of the United States presidency, Trump’s lies could do significantly more damage and hold more weight. Editors, journalists, and reporters across the country had to consider such issues as whether they could objectively cover a political figure who would intentionally lie, often without remorse. Is constantly fact-checking the President a viable option? Should journalists continue to report what the President says even when he blatantly lies?
Beyond Trump, after George Floyd was shot and killed by Minneapolis police, journalists of color raised similar questions about covering law enforcement and issues of racial justice. Law enforcement has a history of lying to reporters, courts, and the media (Farhi & Izadi, 2020). However, because of the power the officers hold within our society, once again, journalists have often had a hard time holding them in check. The lies of some law enforcement officers have long-lasting effects and change the entire narrative behind issues of criminal justice, race, and policing.

But journalists of color went even further to question why they cover issues of race the way they do. Many journalists had issues with presenting a “neutral” approach on such a contentious, powerful, and painful issue. Wesley Lowery, formerly of the Washington Post and CBS News, tweeted on June 4:

American view-from-nowhere, ‘objectivity’-obsessed, both-sides journalism is a failed experiment. We need to fundamentally reset the norms of our field. The old way must go. We need to rebuild our industry as one that operates from a place of moral clarity. (2020)

Lowery points to an important question. If “both-sides journalism” does not work in a political environment where the truth is much harder to find and agree upon, is objectivity still a reliable principle for journalists to encourage and employ?

**Background on Normative and Social Responsibility Theories**

To evaluate the role objectivity plays in the current journalism sphere, this thesis will employ a normative approach. Normative theories allow formal critiques of the media industry. According to Baran and Davis (2021), a normative theory “explains how a media system should operate to conform to a set of ideal social values” (p.16). Simply
put, a normative theory allows an avenue for writers and researchers to critique the media as an industry, through comparative analysis, or judging the worth of the media system compared to its ideal version from the social system it operates within (p.17). Baran and Davis also write, “Study of a media system...is undertaken in the explicit belief that there is an ideal model of operation based on the values of the larger social system” (p.17).

Social responsibility theory is a type of normative theory that emphasizes the need for a press that scrutinizes authority and institutions while also providing objective and accurate reporting (Baran and Davis, 2021, p.80). The main call is to “[prioritize] cultural pluralism—by becoming the voice of all people” (p.80). We’ve heard some of these calls already, especially in the racial reckoning of 2020, where many journalists of color expressed their displeasure with the news industry’s coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests and racialized instances of crime. Many journalists of color said that the traditional idea of objectivity allows white supremacy to grow and flourish, because it uses white audiences as the standard, and uses the white viewpoint as the standard. In an article for *The Objective* (2020), writers Janelle Salanga and Siona Peterous write:

> You cannot erase racism — nor white supremacy — from a country’s DNA. After all, this is a country that was built on Black labor, all while valuing the labor of non-white folks as lesser than the labor of white people; a country where the legacy of whiteness is inseparable from journalistic standards of objectivity and ideas of success.

Social responsibility theory reaches out to the ideals of news media as a public service, where the fiscal responsibility is minimized and the public responsibility to provide ethical, self-regulated content is maximized.
Objectivity as a core principle of journalism

Since its inception, journalism has not always relied on the idea of objectivity. As a profession, journalism became common in the late 1800s (Kien, 2005, p.4). However, objectivity became core in professional journalism in the 1920s and 1930s, after a wave of professionalism and commercialization, and technological advances hit the industry. (Martine & De Maeyer, 2019, p.2). During World War I, journalists realized that it was not enough to rely on facts, as they could be manipulated and influenced by external actors with specific values and agendas (Boudana, 2016, p.602).

According to Wien, objectivity in the journalistic sense was born out of a positivist view of the world (Wien, 2005, p.4). Positivism, according to Wien, is understanding the world through our senses, and amassing knowledge of the building blocks of information from our senses. Wien believes that the positivist’s view of objectivity is binary; either one is objective or subjective. She writes:

To be objective is to say that one is content to present that which is not affected by one’s assessments, i.e., the facts. Facts are what can be experienced directly, that which others would be able to know in precisely the same way. And the true value of a fact is not under discussion (Wien, 2005, p.4).

In essence, objectivity, according to Wien, is an emphasis on the facts, on what can be proven, measured, and tested.

Some journalists interpret objectivity to mean the same as impartiality. In the late 1920s, famous journalist and media critic Walter Lippmann proposed that journalists help the audience understand events and phenomena without producing additional ideas (Boudana, 2016, p.603). In her article, “Impartiality is not fair: Toward an alternative
approach to the evaluation of content bias in news stories,” Sandrine Boudana, a lecturer at Tel Aviv University in Israel, uses an alternative model of fairness, based on the work of sociolinguist Labov, and applies the model to a newspaper article to illustrate the difference between impartiality and fairness. She categorizes the goals into two different categories: fair characterization of the actors and their actions, and fair treatment of the voices. In her work, she writes that Lippmann’s ideas and critiques of journalism at the time birthed the idea that each side must have an equal opportunity and voice in any reporting. Boudana goes further, explaining that “impartiality” can be interpreted in two distinct ways in theory: nonpartisanship, and balance. Nonpartisanship is where a journalist shows no favor toward or against any side of an issue, while balance gives equal weight and credence to each side of an issue.

Ruotsalainen, Hujanen, and Villi agree with Boudana’s description of impartiality, writing that the goal of objectivity is to “provide a balanced and impartial public presentation of the world” (Ruotsalainen, Hujanen, and Villi, 2019, p.2244). In their article, “A future of journalism beyond the objectivity-dialogue divide? Hybridity in the news of entrepreneurial journalists,” the authors theorize what the industry would look like while combining a dialogical tone (a conversational or dialogue-like tone) and certain standards of objectivity. They compare articles from five journalism outlets who employ this method of writing with work from legacy media outlets. After the content analysis, the authors write that objective reporters create a single public reality based on “impartial observation and gathering of facts” (Ruotsalainen, Hujanen, and Villi, 2019, p.2244). The single public reality is often descriptive, yet “distanced and impersonal,” according to the authors, where preference is shown to facts and experts’ quotes (p.2245).
Again, the focus in objective reporting is exact information, on facts that can be measured and proven. According to more traditional standards, journalistic objectivity as a core principle of the industry establishes trust between the reporter, the media outlet, and the audience by removing opinion, and bias and relying solely on facts and evidence (Rosen, 2010). In a self-interview, Rosen (2010) says that this position creates a sense of authority:

…it’s an attempt to secure a kind of universal legitimacy that is implicitly denied to those who stake out positions or betray a point of view. American journalists have almost a lust for the View from Nowhere because they think it has more authority than any other possible stance.

**Subjectivity is part of the job**

While abstaining from opinions and focusing on the facts sounds like a good way to tell the news, some issues with objectivity make it a problematic principle within the journalism industry. Understanding the issues that many journalists, media philosophers, and editors have with objectivity helps to shape the conversation. By assessing the arguments against objectivity, we can determine whether it is a core principle of journalism or a relic of the past.

Subjectivity – the quality of being based on or influenced by personal feelings, tastes, or opinions – is a key part of journalism. One of the most powerful arguments against objectivity says that true objective reporting is fundamentally impossible. It’s nearly impossible to separate oneself — one’s values and morals — from one’s reporting (Martine & De Maeyer, 2019, p.3). In his article, “After Objectivity?: Schudson’s sociology of journalism in the era of post-factuality,” author Brian McNair details that
objectivity is the separation of fact and values (McNair, 2017, p.1325). He quotes Michael Schudson as saying:

Facts are assertions about the world open to independent validation. They stand beyond the distorting influences of any individual’s personal preferences. Values are an individual’s conscious or unconscious preferences for what the world should be; they are ultimately subjective and so without a legitimate claim on other people. The belief in objectivity is a faith in ‘facts’, a distrust of ‘values’, and a commitment to their segregation (Schudson 1978, p.6)” (as quoted in McNair, 2017, p.1325).

In this sense, objectivity is the active work of separating one’s values from the facts of a story to inform.

However, every news story is full of values and subjection, down to each word choice a reporter makes. Because journalists are human, a view-from-nowhere approach to journalism is impossible because we are the view that people see stories and understand concepts through (Martine & De Maeyer, 2019, p.3). Wien agrees, writing “The problem is that the journalist must undertake a choice of context in which to place the facts. And this choice is his own subjective choice. This is an understanding which journalism, like science, has found it very difficult to tackle” (Wien, 2005, p.4). Every quote, phrase, and topic in a story is chosen because a reporter values those components. In essence, any story that is focused specifically on the facts tells the reader that the journalist values those facts in that context.

Through the principle of objectivity, one views the role of a journalist as to disseminate facts, and nothing else. However, our job as reporters is not just to provide
facts, but context. A famous journalism quote states, “Journalists are not stenographers.” We as journalists must be able to contextualize and explain information, and that action takes subjectivity. Margaret Sullivan, a columnist for The Washington Post, wrote about the role of journalism during the 2020 racial protests, and said she believes that journalism is more than writing “just the facts,” and “amplifying both sides.” Sullivan believes that journalism is about serving the public and making the right choices. She writes, “Every piece of reporting — written or spoken, told in text or in images — is the product of choices… We choose what to focus on, what to amplify, what to investigate and examine.” These choices, again, take a bit of subjectivity. Researching context, choosing quotes, and making edits all take active choices in the process. These choices are crucial to creating a more knowledgeable public and to understanding the role that journalism plays in society.

Objectivity concerning race, gender and sexuality

In discussing objectivity and its role in journalism today, I’d be remiss to omit that this core principle looks different for journalists depending on race, gender and sexual orientation. The racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies in this country haven’t been dismantled, and journalism is one of many industries affected by America’s ugly past. The biggest problem with objectivity as a core principle of journalism is that it centers on whiteness, specifically the White male viewpoint. The fact of the matter is that objectivity is most often synonymous with Whiteness (Wallace, 2019, p.126). In his book, The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity, Wallace agrees with this sentiment, writing, “The homogeneity of newsrooms is, in turn, protected by this thinking: white cisgender men remain the ones who can be “objective,” while
others are subjective and suspect” (Wallace, 2019, p.126). The most powerful people in the newsroom, for much of the industry’s history, have been straight, White men. Naturally, the idea of objectivity has been tainted as the world is seen through their lens, ignoring every other perspective without the capital or power to make their stories heard. Historically, journalists of color, and journalists from ethnic, sexual, and gender minorities have been disenfranchised not just from the industry, but from the “objective American viewpoint.” This objective American viewpoint sees straight, white men as the baseline, or the default, while every other minority group fades into the background.

Wesley Lowery is a Black journalist, who wrote for The Washington Post during the Ferguson protests. Lowery was also a strong voice during the racial reckoning of 2020, as he called out systemic racism in newsrooms and addressed issues with objectivity head-on. In an op-ed for the New York Times, Lowery wrote:

Since American journalism’s pivot many decades ago from an openly partisan press to a model of professed objectivity, the mainstream has allowed what it considers objective truth to be decided almost exclusively by white reporters and their mostly white bosses… The views and inclinations of whiteness are accepted as the objective neutral (Lowery, 2020).

Lowery argued that true journalism comes from the truth, and this truth-telling can begin to right the wrongs throughout American history. Jeff Tischauer and Jesse Benn expound on this point, in their article, “Whose Post-Truth Era? Confronting the Epistemological Challenges of Teaching Journalism,” where they analyze the practices that Black journalists use in the Black press to confront and discover the truth while including their identity. The authors say that journalism schools, run by straight white
men, have taught that their viewpoint is the dominant perspective. They write, “By normalizing objectivity as the primary standard journalists should aspire to while failing to acknowledge its racial connotations and implications, journalism educators have long been guilty of reinforcing an oppressive racial hierarchy” (Tischauser & Benn, 2019, p.133).

The concept of objectivity affects journalists of color differently than their white counterparts. According to research, news consumers believe that some people are predetermined to be less impartial and objective due to the color of their skin. Kelli Boling and Denetra Walker (2021) performed a case study where participants from a wide range of backgrounds watched footage of women broadcasters of color, and were told to rate their skills, including their objectivity on a scale. The participants were separated based upon their Twitter usage and news consumption, as the researchers wanted to see how both these things affect inherent bias. They discovered that 38.7% of daily news watchers believed that race and ethnicity affect your objectivity. 57.4% of Twitter users believed that the women broadcasters of color they follow online share too many opinions, and 52.6% believe they are more biased than other broadcasters. The authors write, “…this study demonstrates that race and gender can impact the ‘performance’ of a broadcaster in a way that is beyond their control” (Boling & Walker, 2021, p.8). This suggests that many viewers hold their preconceived notions about a reporter even before they report a story. This is another layer to explore related to a journalist’s presumed objectivity.
METHODOLOGY

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Since its inception in the late 1930s, reporters, media critics, and journalists of all kinds have had an idea about what journalistic objectivity means. However, between the Trump administration’s blatant attack on truth and the 2020 protests over racial justice, many journalists are discussing if objectivity is the best principle for this moment, and many more wonder if that definition should change. The current conversation around objectivity and fairness is important to the industry, as objectivity is a core principle of modern American journalism. But with many terms like bias, fairness, impartiality and objectivity flying around, where does the conversation begin, and where has it gone within the last decade? Understanding the importance of journalistic objectivity and its role in the industry, my thesis analyzes the evolving discussion around journalistic objectivity, specifically over the last ten years. The research questions for my thesis were the following:

RQ1: How do journalists feel about the objectivity standards from their current newsrooms and from the industry at-large?

RQ2: Are there any restrictions believed to promote objectivity that journalists believe should be loosened?

Over the last decade, I have observed that many journalists have soured on objectivity as a journalistic practice. While there are those who feel that it is still a good practice for new journalists to understand the industry and its standards, many feel it teaches bad or unfair practices. Many journalists believe personal views like political or religious
affiliations, or behaviors like hobbies or sexual practices, should not be reasons to decide someone is not a fair journalist.

Methods

For my research, I spoke to a wide array of journalists to see the progression of the conversation around journalistic objectivity. I conducted a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews with 10 different journalists of color, working on the ground from all over the country. This was a diverse panel of journalists, with representation by race, age, gender identity, sexual orientation and career-level. These reporters covered a wider range of topics in local and national news. I interviewed them hoping their perspective would provide depth to the conversation as they may struggle daily with these exact issues. My interviewees included journalists working in radio, television, digital, and print.

These semi-structured interviews focused on objectivity practices both in the industry at large and in the newsroom. These interviews allowed for the interviewees to fully express their ideas on how identity, bias, and objectivity intersect today. Also, some of these questions (interview schedule in Appendix) asked how their experiences affected their coverage of particular issues.

Semi-structured interviews balance the two extremes for qualitative research, being between structured and unstructured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to improvise in response to participant leads and ask follow-up questions to make sure the interviewees completely understand the topic and issue at hand. “Through face-to-face, in-depth guided conversations using semi-structured or unstructured interview questions, qualitative interviewing explores respondents’ feelings, emotions,
experiences, and values within their ‘deeply nuanced inner worlds,’” writes Brennan (2013, p. 28). In these semi-structured interviews, participants freely spoke about any issues with objectivity and address specific structural and procedural issues with specific policies from specific newsrooms. These interviews were conducted over Zoom and were both recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. All interviewees were aware they were recorded and were assured that none of their words would be shared without their permission.

After transcribing the interviews, I coded the data for common themes and significant examples, described in “Analysis and Results,” below. I followed the directions pulled from Lindlof and Taylor’s *Qualitative Communication Research Methods* (2011). I used the data collected from the analyses to suggest changes to certain newsroom practices in the Conclusion, to better promote an atmosphere of fairness and truth.
ANALYSIS & RESULTS

I spoke to several different journalists from various backgrounds, in different industries and from different age groups. What follows is an analysis of the subjects’ responses to the interview questions, in context of the research questions:

RQ1: How do journalists feel about the objectivity standards from their current newsrooms and from the industry at-large?

RQ2: Are there any restrictions believed to promote objectivity that journalists believe should be loosened?

In total, I spoke with 10 journalists working in industries including print, digital, television and radio. The subjects were in various stages of their careers, with different racial, ethnic, sexual, and social backgrounds. The participants addressed a few themes which will be explored after their summaries.

Demographics and participant summaries

Participant A is a Black male in the age range of 26-35, who lives in New York City and works as a freelance entertainment reporter in print, digital and television. He believes that some good values of journalism include integrity, trustworthiness, and honesty. To Participant A, being a journalist includes coming from a ‘neutral stance,’ and from that neutrality comes a sense of trust between the audience and a reporter or an organization. He believes that to give a full understanding of what’s happening, you must come from a place of honesty. But that honesty doesn’t mean hiding who you are. When asked if sexuality and gender affect journalists of color and their perception of objectivity, he said that he hasn’t had that experience:
I never feel like when I’m in any kind of newsroom, it’s [Participant A], the black and gay reporter. You know, just [Participant A], the reporter. And I think also too, like when I do want to discuss issues that say does regard my sexuality or anything, I’m never brushed off. I’m always supported. They’re always asking, like, how can they help support what I want to discuss or talk about, if I want to interview [someone]. You know, I feel like I’m championed.

Participant B is a Black male in the age range of 55+, who lives in Washington D.C. and works as an on-air radio host. For him, life experience – being able to look deeply at the world, and at one’s own life – is a core value of producing quality journalism. He believes a journalist must leave their opinions at the door, but one shouldn’t leave their humanity at the door. This means that a reporter must be conscious of their own humanity and must allow their lived experiences to shine through their work. It doesn’t mean picking sides or showing favoritism he says, but it means using what one has learned and experienced as a tool to help create better content, to reach out to a wider audience and to strengthen the connection between reporter and audience:

…an integral part of reporting that the average viewer, listener, or reader is looking for, in most cases, and totally needs to look for, is to see themselves in the reporting, is to, is to see their humanity in the reporting that they’re reading, listening to, or viewing. They want to see their own humanity. And that can only be conveyed, if the reporter who’s doing it is conscious of his or her own humanity.

Participant C is a Black male in the age range of 55+, who lives in New York City and works as an on-air host in radio. He holds an interesting position in the middle of both
extremes, staying somewhere between holding up traditional objectivity standards and advocating for the elimination of those standards entirely. His focus is on telling the story. According to Participant C, truthfulness, trustworthiness, and clear communication are traits that good journalists emulate. He says that he’s not sure if there’s such a thing as ‘objectivity’ as traditionally explored by journalistic institutions. He believes in being ‘fair and open-minded to listen to different points of view.’ However, he is strongly against journalists publicly expressing their political views:

My thing is people should not know. And we should not put out there our political views and views on different social issues and things like that. That’s not our place. Our place is to gather information about what others think, what others’ views are, and whether they’re relevant to the stories that we have to report.

People shouldn’t know our politics. They shouldn’t. I don’t want people knowing my politics.

Participant D is an Italian-Afro-Brazilian female in the age range of 18-25, who lives on the East Coast, and works as a freelance fashion and culture reporter. According to her, objectivity is at the core of journalism. Transparency is a core aspect of journalism, according to her and part of that transparency lies in the traditional form of journalistic objectivity. She says that fairness is the call to action that traditional objectivity sets up. However, she also struggles as a Black immigrant journalist keeping her views out of stories and covering topics that are close to her heart:

But when it comes to the Italian landscape, yes, I did feel – and I still do feel sometimes – this difficulty in being fair and objective. Because especially as a Black Italian woman as myself, it is difficult to feel detached, as sometimes the
media requires for you to be in reporting some issues. And, as a Black person, myself, sometimes it is really difficult to report these stories and not say anything, not to state our views of what is happening, especially when it comes to politics, racial issues, and all sorts of things.

Participant E is a Black female in the age range of 46-55, who lives in Indianapolis and works as an editor in print and digital. She absolutely rejects the notion of objectivity in its traditional expression. She strongly believes that journalism should be a true community service. She holds the Lowery viewpoint of journalistic objectivity, that it’s a holdover principle from a time when White men dominated the industry and doesn’t fit in today’s multicultural society. According to Participant E, true fairness looks like rigorous fact-checking and bias-checking to share the truth. She doesn’t believe that journalists should rattle off every idea in their minds, or that conflicts of interests shouldn’t be avoided; however, journalists should be free to keep their experiences while telling stories:

Objectivity does not exist. Because for something to be objective at its core, right, it would have had to be created by people who are objective at their core. The people who determine what is objective for news gathering, who are legitimate sources, what’s a legitimate story – those people were not objective, when they came up with a classification of objectivity. So, when I think of a process for rigor for journalism, I don’t call that objectivity, which is what I think objectivity is supposed to be.

Participant F is an Asian nonbinary person in the age range of 18-25, who lives in California who works as a reporter in radio and digital. According to them, accessibility
and clear communication are central to becoming a good journalist. They believe that journalism should act as political education, challenging structures and sharing resources for those in need. They’ve been struggling with the definition of objectivity, but they don’t think that traditional version of objectivity exists. They believe that journalists of color and those with marginalized identities find it harder to separate their emotions on certain political topics than White journalists because they can be impacted:

I think that separation is kind of impossible. I mean, I feel like it’s easier to make, if you are somebody whose identities are at the intersection of like, you know, the most empowered, privileged people in society. Like, if you are somebody who is like a white male, straight cis upper-class reporter, I feel like it’s a lot easier for you to be like, ‘Oh, I can stay disconnected from these issues.’ Because there’s, you know, much less of a possibility that any sort of sociopolitical issue will involve you as the affected person or the impacted person directly.

Participant G is a Hispanic male in the age range of 26-35, who lives in New York and works as an editor in print and digital. To him, communicating the truth is a goal that journalists should strive for. His views of objectivity are much more traditional. For him, objectivity is putting one’s biases to the side and reporting from a ‘straightforward lens.’ In his opinion, objectivity is ‘stating what our biases are and then trying to overcome them.’ This principle even works its way into his personal life as well, but it does present a personal challenge for him:

I personally tend to be more conservative as a journalist, not from like a political ideological standpoint, but I do try to still honor that objective, traditional background. So, for instance, I’m not registered with a party. I wouldn’t – I’m
hesitant to, you know, join groups or be part of things that may skew political. But at the other side, I think I’ve always been conflicted with that, because journalists just inherently are some of the people who keep up with the news and any given issue the most, and to exclude these people, I think is a disservice. So, I guess for me, it’s an ongoing struggle of how do I, on a human personal level, engage with the things I care about, while at the same time from a professional credibility level, make sure that I’m not being perceived or creating biases for my work?

Participant H is a Black female in the age range of 36-45, who lives in Atlanta and works as a culture reporter in print and digital. She holds the traditional view of journalistic objectivity, but she also understands the pressure for political journalists. She believes that journalists should speak about issues that impact people directly instead of issues happening on Capitol Hill that have no impact on the lives of the public. Also, she believes that journalists have issues holding conversations with those they disagree with, and need to become comfortable forming those relationships:

And I think that we, as journalists have lost that art on how to navigate those conversations, and relationships, because in order to be a good journalist, that is an art that you have to have. You have to be able to speak to people, not only speak to people, but tell the story of people that you don’t necessarily agree with. Now, do you want to do that? No, not necessarily. But should you be able to do it with a bit of ease? Yes, you should. Like I think part of the problem with journalism now is we’re just regurgitating messages on both sides, and their messages that dehumanize each side.
Participant I is a Black female in the age range of 18-25, who lives in New York and works as a labor reporter in print and digital. She is in the middle when it comes to both upholding traditional objectivity and removing the standard. Her idea of objectivity means telling the story where everyone’s perspective is included, and no one feels ‘championed or discriminated against.’ However, she also believes in prioritizing truth over objectivity, especially in situations where someone’s opinions are false.

I think it goes back to like prioritizing truth over objectivity. Because especially when we’re talking about race or like writing about our communities, there are people who have opinions that like, deserve to be said that they’re like blatantly false and harmful. And you can’t really say that this one group of people is objectively wrong while still being objective. And so, in a situation like that, I absolutely believe that you have to say the truth. So I think, for our communities in particular, it is beneficial for journalists to prioritize that that truthfulness or that sense of social responsibility over trying not to appear like you are leaning one way or the other.

Participant J is a Black male in the age range of 46-55, who lives in Atlanta and works as a freelance contributor and journalist. His definition of objectivity is all about getting the facts of a story down first. At first, he seemed to sympathize with the traditional sense of objectivity, but as the conversation continued, he said that adding that context into journalism can sometimes mean putting objectivity to the side. He says that looking at who is telling the stories and implementing more people of color and more journalists from marginalized backgrounds into newsrooms is the next step to push the industry forward:
The news media, almost since its inception, has been overwhelmingly white and male, to the lesser extent white and female. When you have one group of people telling all the stories, you’re going to get the same narratives, no matter where they are, no matter what story they’re talking about. If they’re going into communities of color, they’re going into black communities, if you’re talking to LGBTQ people, the narrative you’re going to get is going to be filtered through those voices, and there’s going to be inherent bias whether they know it or not.

In my interviews with the 10 journalists of color, I discovered many common themes that show traditional journalistic objectivity differently than what journalistic institutional across the United States present. There was no consensus answer to how the journalists of color feel about traditional objectivity practices in their newsrooms, or in the industry at-large. Objectivity, to journalists from marginalized communities, takes an entirely new meaning from person to person because of each person’s distinct background and experiences. However, the subjects presented their opinions on what practices the industry should dismiss, and how the industry should adjust its protocol when judging which perspectives are or are not objective. In my analysis of these 10 interview transcripts, participants repeatedly returned to elements of the following themes:

- The language of objectivity
- The performance of objectivity
- The influence of politics on objectivity
- The ethos of ‘traditionally objectivity’ journalism
- Identity, representation and objectivity
The language of objectivity

[One particular theme dealt with objectivity, specifically as the language a reporter uses to describe an event or issue.] Dealing specifically with language, I noticed while conducting the interviews was an aversion to the term “objectivity.” While the participants used the word in their responses, it seemed that they were more receptive to terms like “fairness,” “transparency,” or “balance” when describing their views on bias. The journalists of color I spoke to didn’t love the term “objectivity” but some of their descriptions of ethical and fair ways to cover stories sometimes reflected more traditional principles. Many journalists disagreed with the idea of promoting their political or social beliefs in public but agreed that no one is truly “objective.” In some cases, journalists welcomed the practices of traditional objectivity, but encouraged an emphasis on stories that reflect a more diverse audience.

One theme that a few subjects addressed was ‘passive language.’ Instead of journalists using active language that engages the audience and shows cause and effect, some criticized ‘the objective journalist’s’ love for passive language. Using passive language (eg: The charges were brought up against the Senator by an unnamed accuser.) refuses to show accountability, to be concise and direct or to be contextual when describing more complex situations. Rather than using active language to describe when someone does something, passive language leaves room for speculation. Some of the older, more traditional journalists push back on using active language, specifically used to call out misconduct by people in power. In his interview, Participant C pushed back on journalists calling President Trump’s lies out. In their example, they brought up the fact
that President Trump lied about the 2020 election, saying that journalists shouldn’t have that power to determine if someone is lying or not. They said the following:

“There are plenty of news organizations who flat out say that [President Trump’s] lying, that he’s telling a lie. It is still – because of my journalism upbringing – it is still hard for me to say that sentence and to say those words in a news report.

Because who are we to say that someone is lying as journalists? If we were to say something about, you know, ‘60+ judges have reviewed this, and they have found no evidence of the kind of fraud or misdealings that he claims have happened,’ then, you know, fine. But straight out saying that he lied, it’s hard for me to say.”

Participant C uses that unengaging passive language here in his example, saying that the judges found no evidence. However, by using that language in this scenario, he makes the judges bear the responsibility, not the President. A more active way to phrase this particular issue would say that the President made a claim, however, there is no evidence that backs this claim. Another subject pushed back on the use of passive language, proposing instead to focus on accuracy, rather than performance. Participant B explained this sentiment, with the example of a reporter witnessing violence, and reporting it as they saw it. He continued, saying:

“Once you’re accurate, objectivity doesn’t really enter the picture. Is what you’re reporting accurate, even though it seems as if it may favor one party over another? Yes. That’s why we have fact checkers. That’s why we have to make sure that the reporting is accurate.

Participant J echoes this idea, saying that objectivity, in his opinion, is about getting to the truth, and less about the tone that a story takes:
I think it’s really important to understand that objectivity really just means getting the truth of the story. That doesn’t mean that [objectivity] doesn’t have anything to do with the tone of the story. The tone of some stories has to be able to change, that doesn’t mean that you fudged around with the truth of the story. But we have to look at who’s telling these stories.

In their opinion, focusing on telling an accurate story without worrying about seeming biased produces work that isn’t biased. By focusing on accuracy, a journalist frees themselves on worrying about objectivity, and instead is only beholden to the truth. Language is extremely important in this discussion of objectivity, because each word a reporter chooses is subjective to their experience on an issue. Whether a President lies or speaks in err is dependent on what the reporter sees in that moment and how they interpret the situation. The public is informed through their interpretation, so deciding which words to use to describe an event is crucial to making sure stories are accurate and fair.

The performance of objectivity

A few of the subjects brought up the point that objectivity is less about a specific collection of practices and protocols and more about an overall projection of detachment. Participant I mentioned that traditional journalistic objectivity acts as a performance, saying that journalists “get obsessed with being objective.” They mentioned that journalists like the performative aspect of objectivity, without doing their duty of telling the truth:

Sometimes, journalists get obsessed with being objective. And I think about this, think about the time the New York Times first said that Donald Trump lied. And a
lot of people in the journalism community were… really shocked that they use the word lie for a US president, because some people would say that’s not objective. He’s saying it’s the truth. So maybe you should say he said this, but others disagree. And that did not come across as objective, it looked like they picked a side. But at the end of the day, they decided to tell the truth. And the story was not at the end objective. They’re very clearly saying, this is a two-party debate, and one side is not telling the truth. So, I think in situations like that, you have to prioritize you know, what is more important, appearing objective or revealing the truth to your readers?

In this quote, Participant I acknowledges the role of language in objectivity, but expands it to a performance. Objectivity, in this sense, is not just in language, but being shocked at ‘traditionally unobjective’ language. A reporter clutching their pearls at unobjective language is part of that performance. Even in a situation where the President lies, and an accurate description of the behavior is to call it a lie, a traditionally objective reporter obfuscates the truth in order to appear neutral. Blurring the truth to appear neutral and fair is part of performing objectivity. Participant E seemed to agree with the sentiment that objectivity is performed. She showed disdain toward some of the practices of journalistic objectivity, like abstaining from voting or publicly sharing your opinions. She believes that because we aren’t objective beings as people, we shouldn’t feign this performance of objectivity, if we don’t want to:

…Everybody, I think, has to call those some of those things for themselves.

Right. But a blanket policy saying, ‘Well, you know, you can’t do XYZ, if you’re
[a journalist]. Journalists are supposed to be objective.’ I don’t subscribe to that, again, depending upon the situation. I don’t.

Earlie in the answer, she refers to some practices that are sometimes frowned upon by traditional journalistic institutions like having a sign in your yard or voting. In her opinion, those practices should be up to the journalist, as long as it doesn’t cause a conflict of interest. Many high-profile journalists like Jake Tapper and Mike Allen have said they don’t vote and many other journalists follow their footsteps (Beaujon, 2016). However, according to Participant E, those performances of objectivity should be up to the individual, not the institution.

The influence of politics on objectivity

Many of the subjects attributed the shift in the discourse around journalistic objectivity to specific political events. Mainstream media’s coverage of political issues and events created the environment we work in and stirred the discussion around objectivity. One topic that subjects mentioned was the media’s coverage of the Trump administration. Participant I mentioned the first time she noticed a big shift in the industry’s understanding of objectivity was when the New York Times first said President Trump lied. She believes it came down to appearing objective and telling the truth. Essentially, the media’s tendency to remain detached from stories emboldens a public official to continue lying. Once some news organization stepped outside the boundary of what is objective, the industry exploded with critiques and pushback. According to Participant I, journalists were more focused on being objective than getting the story right. While other journalists were unhappy with the coverage, Participant I believes that the truth should be more important than a newsroom’s objectivity standards.
A major catalyst for the new discussion around journalistic objectivity was the Black Lives Matter movement. A few subjects mentioned a shift in traditional objectivity practices during the protests after the murders of Mike Brown and George Floyd, saying that unfair coverage of social justice, police brutality and racism caused journalists of color to challenge the structures of the journalism industry, including principles like objectivity. According to Participant B, the Black Lives Matter movement compelled journalists of color, specifically Black journalists, to think about how they cover instances of police interaction with Black people, and how their lived experiences influenced their reporting:

And just like, in comparison to the 1960s, it began to be increasingly important that Black reporters be in the lead of covering these interactions, because they brought not only a level of journalistic skill and integrity, they brought with them a clear understanding of exactly what these interactions are like.

The experiences that Black journalists brought to their reporting of police interactions with Black people alongside a growing movement around racial equity sparked a conversation of what the industry standard is and what it should be when covering race and police brutality.

Participant J mentioned that he noticed the shift before 2020, but noted that he first heard the discussion start during the Ferguson protests in 2014. He noticed that a lot of stories around protests and police brutality featured reporters who didn’t know how to cover these stories, so the accuracy was lost:

What I saw happen with a lot of the stories that were tied into police brutality, and were tied into protests and organized movement work, where you had people who
were removed from these communities, and you had people who didn’t understand the baseline desperation that a lot of these communities were working under. And…what you got was a lot of filtering down and a lot of watering down some of the stories that were going on…

He continued, saying that because someone doesn’t know how to describe what they’re seeing and they don’t have that knowledge bank of experience, then objectivity becomes an issue. He says:

And a lot of times when you’re dealing with somebody who doesn’t understand [the situation at hand], and understand the context of that, that’s when objectivity can be a problem, because objectivity then becomes subjectivity subject to somebody’s discernment, depending on whether they know this community or not.

Participant J believes that large political events based on race takes an understanding of race relations to accurately depict. He mentions objectivity becoming subjective to someone’s discernment, appealing to the theme of objectivity as language. In his opinion, one’s background can help inform their ability to accurately tell a story. He noticed this issue first happening in Ferguson, when White reporters didn’t understand the background or experiences of the protestors or the context of the situation. This would lead to reporters and editors “watering down some of the stories that were going on” because they didn’t have that particular context. Participant E showed a little more skepticism toward attributing this shift in discourse solely to the 2020 protests. According to her experiences, she’s seen this discourse shift happen in cycles, likening journalism’s reckoning with racism with America’s.
I’ve seen it before. So for me, the question is, ‘will it stick this time around?’ This country goes to things that are cyclical all the time, and so does journalism. They’ve been saying since the 60’s, ‘You know, we don’t have enough Black people in newsrooms.’ But hell, we still got the same number we had before, right?

She’s seen a lot of different initiatives from newsrooms that try to address the problem. However, no one have ever addressed White supremacy as the root cause. She mentions the high turnover rate for Black journalists as proof that this conversation about objectivity has gone on for a long time.

**The ethos of ‘traditionally objective’ journalism**

The traditional principle of journalistic objectivity is often described as the view from nowhere — a philosophy of detachment, isolation and passiveness. However, those adjectives don’t match the subjects’ descriptions of the central values of journalism. In their interviews, many subjects agreed that some core values and practices of the journalism industry are trustworthiness, truthfulness, clear communication, and community service. The subjects agreed that these values of trust, truth and community service are emblematic of what journalism is at its absolute best. However, these values of community and honesty aren’t related to the philosophies of traditional objectivity. That is, to be traditionally objective clashes with the subjects’ perspective of what journalism should look like. Even from the most conservative standpoint, traditional journalistic objectivity, the idea that journalists must completely remove themselves from the story they cover, seems out of place with ideals of community. Furthermore, the emphasis on detachment, especially from one’s ideals, is at odds with the very ethos of
the industry. As the humorist Finley Peter Dunne put it, the job of the newspaper is to
“comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” However, that idea of detachment —
of removing oneself from the story — doesn’t take an active role in participating within
the story. It separates the journalist from the story and from society writ large, which is
the point.

Instead of the values of traditional objectivity, subjects focused on a vision of
objectivity that upholds the values of journalism. Participant G emphasized a new focus
on transparency, instead of detachment:

I think what objectivity needs to be inclusive of now and has to really incorporate
is transparency. I think we need to be transparent about what we believe, what our
mission as journalists are, or [journalism] organizations are. And then through
that lens, and that scope, we should be doing our work.

Participant I believes that journalists of color, in particular, can be subjected to extremely
harmful rhetoric through traditional objective practices. In her opinion, journalists of
color should focus on other values, like truth, instead:

Especially when we’re talking about race or like writing about our communities,
there are people who have opinions that like, deserve to be said that they’re like
blatantly false and harmful. And you can’t really say that this one group of people
is objectively wrong while still being objective. And so, in a situation like that, I
absolutely believe that you have to say the truth. So, I think for our communities,
it is beneficial for journalists to prioritize that that truthfulness or that sense of
social responsibility over trying not to appear like you are leaning one way or the
other.
Focusing on values like truth and transparency further align with the mission of journalism. Shifting how we do objective journalism to emphasize ideals of truth and community helps journalists of color do their job more effectively and moves us closer to the ideal image of the journalism industry that the subjects explained.

**Identity, representation and objectivity**

From the interviews I conducted, many of the subjects believe that one’s background should be a benefit to finding new perspectives, angles, and voices for content. They didn’t believe that someone should hide their background or detach from their experiences to tell good stories. They didn’t label their experiences as a form of bias, but as a bank of information. Simply put, the experiences of journalists of color cannot be separated from their work. Allowing more journalists of color into the industry changes the greater view of objectivity from one centered around whiteness.

One note that many of the subjects named as a solution to the objectivity problem was hiring more journalists with diverse backgrounds. According to the subjects, diversity within the journalism industry allows for different stories to be told and different perspectives to be shared. This implies that the traditional view of objectivity is one centered around whiteness, which lines up with Lowery’s interpretation. Participant J stated blatantly that news media has become monotonous with the stories they tell, and that can impact the idea of who can be objective and who can’t. He says that when the storytellers are all from one group, you’re going to get the same narratives and the same perspectives, even when the subjects are marginalized communities. Journalism has historically been an industry dominated by White men, so the stories are all told from that perspective. Journalism needs the perspectives of marginalized communities like people
of color and the LGBTQ+ community because, oftentimes, their lives are directly impacted (and usually the worst) by the stories that journalists tell. As Participant F says,

If you hold one or more marginalized identities… suddenly the barrier between keeping your personal life out of your reporting, or… the way that you think about stories is kind of impossible.

They believe that reporters whose identities lie at the most privileged intersections can stay disconnected from the issues they report on because the consequences that reach marginalized communities will never reach them. It’s easy to detach yourself from a story if you don’t see yourself as the subject of that story. But, by lifting people of color into positions of power in the journalism industry, they are able to use their life experiences to create stories that reach more people, while changing what ‘objective reporting’ looks like in modern journalism. Participant B summarizes this point rather succinctly with rhetorical questions:

How is it that despite the progress that has been made over the course of the past 50 years, that the overwhelming majority of our leadership and management continues to be white male? Is it vaguely possible that that’s one of the reasons that this issue of objectivity keeps coming up?

Another interesting perspective came from Participant A, who said that, if the current systems don’t help journalists of color explore the limits of the industry and their abilities, then we as a community should support one another. He says that Black women have played a massive role in his own career:

…every job besides one…was from a Black woman. So, I’m just very, very grateful to be in those rooms. They also make sure that I’m compensated
correctly. They also put me up on game, they also give me the gems that I need and the advice for me to grow and flourish. I’m flourishing because of Black woman.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The 2020 protests weren’t the beginning of the objectivity conversation in the media world. We’ve seen questions about objectivity appear in mainstream media, even within the last year. In 2021, Emily Wilder was fired from her job at the Associated Press as a news associate (Cooper, 2021). According to Ryan Cooper writing in *The Week*, Wilder belonged to two pro-Palestine groups in college, and because of these political beliefs, students belonging to the Stanford College Republicans pointed a mob her way as she arrived at AP. Wilder was not working on a beat addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nevertheless, the AP fired her two weeks into her job. Meanwhile, around the same time, news broke that star CNN anchor Chris Cuomo had aided his brother and the former governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, in responding to his sexual harassment allegations. This came after Andrew Cuomo repeatedly interviewed his brother about his experience with COVID. Chris Cuomo was not immediately fired from his job at CNN, like Wilder. Instead, he stayed at the network until December, when he was fired as a result of allegations of his own sexual misconduct.

Both journalists had conflicts of interest. However, the younger, female journalist was immediately released from her position, while the seasoned White male was not immediately fired. Though these are two totally different mediums and companies, these incidences illustrate the trend in journalism which has almost always upheld White men as the standard of objectivity, no matter the conflicts of interest or the lack of integrity. This example alone shows that the systems we use to enforce objectivity are uneven. White men in the journalism industry historically have had a much longer leash for error than women, people of color or those in the LGBTQ+ community. Ryan Cooper said it
plainly, “Mainstream media would save themselves and all of us a lot of trouble if they stopped pretending like their goofy ethical rules are some eternal verities or are applied across the board” (Cooper, 2021). Sarah Jones, in an article for New York magazine, followed this point, writing:

The rules matter. They exist to protect the integrity of a news outlet and to protect the public from corruption. Instead, news outlets are failing consumers and journalists alike. They serve power rather than challenge it. The result is a weak press in a nation desperate for the truth. That’s no way to serve the public.

**Practical Implications**

These 10 interviews demonstrate that the issues that many journalists of color have had with traditional objectivity practices -- the detached view, the excessive practices and the use of passive language -- all come down to one central issue: Journalism has a diversity problem. The industry was established at a time when straight White men were in power. For years, they cultivated a system full of understandings, practices and techniques that reinforced their power. Their version of objectivity made the viewpoint of White men the default perspective for all journalists. As Participant E said, “If we were objective a long time ago, we would have covered the fact that women can't vote a whole lot differently.” The current structure of modern journalism still upholds a system that places the values of White men at the center. Understanding the impact of these practices of objectivity on the careers of journalists of color further uncovers the impact of White supremacy on our industry and thence on our society. Determination to better serve a multicultural public opens the industry to a more equitable—and excellent-- atmosphere.
Journalism as an industry was not built to accommodate many marginalized communities. Women, people of color and queer communities don’t always find safe spaces in traditional journalistic institutions. This also means that the traditional practices of journalism, and by extension, of objectivity, aren’t conducive to our experiences, our backgrounds or our lifestyles. The only way to make journalism an equitable industry for marginalized communities is by changing the rules so they fit the realities of all its participants.

Creating this new industry means including journalists from marginalized communities on positions of power within the industry. Promoting journalists from marginalized backgrounds to positions of power ensures that their voices are heard and their opinions are taken seriously. They can implement policies that help their communities and make the changes necessary to create an environment for younger journalists to learn and grow. It means retiring archaic practices and methods and implementing protocols that take experiences into account. This comes in the form of bias-checking, making sure that journalists have their content consumed by their coworkers to ensure that the coverage is accurate, fair and contextual. Newsrooms should also work to prevent conflicts of interest in every form without negating the importance of one’s background. Creating this new environment means making sure that newsrooms are transparent with their journalists, their donors and the public. Journalists of color, queer journalists and other journalists from marginalized backgrounds belong at the forefront of the industry just as much as their privileged counterparts.

Limitations and Future Research
Due to the nature of the research, it must be made clear that any assertions made in this thesis would show descriptive power, not predictive power. This project cannot solve the public trust in American journalism, nor is that the intention. Because of the limited number of subjects and the small scope of a growing conversation, the conclusion of this research is not a perfect representation of what all journalists of color believe. However, it is the beginning of documenting and analyzing a continuous conversation about the role of traditional objectivity in modern journalism and how journalists of color see these long-standing principles. More, many more such interviews are needed.

Pertaining directly to the research, the methods of finding journalists of color to speak to were not reliable. Callouts via social media and personal recommendations are not viable ways to reach a large and diverse group of subjects. Due to the timing of the research, many people were unavailable to speak. Many of the journalists I reached out to never responded to my inquiries. Most of the journalists who responded to my initial callout and sent in their contact and demographic information but did not respond to my request to set up an interview. Simply put, many journalists weren’t willing or able to give up time in their day to speak for free. This could’ve been solved with some sort of incentive, like a gift card. There was also some underrepresentation of the broad community of “journalists of color,” as most of the subjects I spoke to were Black, and all held similar backgrounds. More variety based on race, gender and sexuality could influence the results in a totally different manner.

In the future, researchers who are interested in this topic should go directly to organizations for journalists of color, or more effectively promote the interviews to reach a much wider audience. Perhaps a quantitative research study could consist of a survey,
where the questions I asked could be posed as statements. The subject would grade whether they agree with the statement on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. Surveys can be faster and might fare better than interviews in getting more people’s opinions on the topic and making sure people from all groups are heard. Also, the setup of semi-structured interviews led to different sequencing of questions, and although each subject was asked the same questions, perhaps accounting for variables in question order could produce different results.

The deck of American journalism has always been stacked unevenly and these arbitrary rules of objectivity have never supported the viewpoints or the livelihoods of journalists of color. The traditional view of objectivity has never served anyone but straight White men, and this view weakens our relationship with the public. For so long, the dominant perspective of ‘traditionally objective journalism’ reflected the ideologies that keep cishet White men in power. From the stories deemed newsworthy to the language journalists used, every aspect of journalism was built to keep a certain group in power, and to demean, belittle and trivialize the experiences of other communities. Journalism has long been used as a tool to oppress racial minorities, queer communities, disabled communities and other social, religious and political that did not keep up with the status quo. These longstanding guardrails meant that many ‘others’ were excluded from the industry. Those who joined the industry were forced to assimilate to the norms set up.

These rigid structures that uphold White supremacy became the building blocks of traditional objectivity. The industry set the perspective of straight White cisgendered Christian men as the dominant ‘objective’ point-of-view. Not only was non-whiteness
deemed biased, but it was seen as ‘not journalism.’ Stories that didn’t uphold the hegemonic structures were biased, or deemed ‘advocacy journalism.’ Eventually, the dominant perspective in mainstream media was one of detachment, of apathy. The view-from-nowhere was popularized and developed to pull journalists out of their stories and put them above the stories, and the people in them. These structures still exist today. In journalism schools across the country, young journalists are following the path of the journalists before them. The role of Whiteness in newsrooms is so strong, that even today, young journalists of color are forced to assimilate to the dominant ideologies and compromise their identities to participate.

Journalism has gone through many changes and phases, and it seems as if we are approaching the next phase. Batsell talks about the different stages of journalism in Engaged Journalism: Connecting with Digitally Empowered News Audiences. In this book, he details the old, static ways of journalism in the twentieth century:

The last half of the twentieth century was an era of disengaged journalism, at least when it came to audience interaction. During this heyday of one-way mass media. Journalists did plenty of important work to inform the public but still maintained a comfortable distance from their customers, an aloof detachment that carried a certain unacknowledged arrogance (Batsell, 2015, p.3).

The industry described above does not work for everyone. Journalism needs to work for all who choose to work in it. It is not a one-size fits all. Alamo-Pastrana and Hoynes write that journalists must confront the historic exclusion of marginalized communities:

This will require journalists to look squarely at how professional journalism fails to explain historical forms of racial exclusion and, in its inability to confront its
own enduring whiteness, helps to reproduce, even in its liberal critique of white nationalism, unremitting forms of white privilege (Alamo-Pastrana and Hoynes, 2020, p.88).

Every practice is not conducive for each industry, and even less for each set of people. The needs and experiences of journalists of color are different, so the practices to get equitable and tactful stories are different as well. The experiences of journalists of color matter. Their identities matter. Their stories matter. Excellence for journalists from marginalized communities looks different, but isn’t worse. Journalists of color are trying to fit into a system that isn’t built for us to prosper. The journalism industry was historically racially homogenous, but we need a journalism that fits the 21st century.
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APPENDIX

Below is a list of all the questions I asked the subjects.

• What do you believe are some of the central values of journalism?
• What does objectivity look like in your line of work? Do you agree with that position?
• What are some of the rules about staying impartial or objective within your newsroom? Do you agree with those rules?
• There has been a lot of pressure on journalists to be fair when covering a lot of contentious political topics. In the public’s eye, what does that fairness look like? Is there a way to keep the public’s trust outside of objectivity?
• Have you heard of the view-from-nowhere when describing objectivity? When did you first hear about this description of objectivity?
• Do you have questions about the older methods of objectivity, the ‘view-from-nowhere’?
• Has there ever been an event that made you challenge how your newsroom or industry addresses objectivity?
• What role does social media play in this conversation? How has social media affected the journalist’s ability to stay traditionally objective?
• How important is objectivity in journalism?
• During the 2020 protests, many journalists of color had spoken out against traditional ideas of objectivity. Have you noticed a change within the discussion of objectivity in the last decade?
• Are there any political events you think led the industry to this point?
• Is there a difference between the truth and the objective truth? Is there a way to tell the truth while not remaining perfectly objective?
• How do you stay objective while covering a topic you feel strongly about? Can you describe an instance of this?
• Should journalists be entirely impartial? Is that fair?
• What makes the journalist of color’s experience with objectivity different from their white counterparts?
• How do sexuality and gender play a role in the journalist’s ability to remain traditionally objective?
• How should professionals in the journalism industry react to the shifting narratives around objectivity?