Affirmative Case

**Walter Cronkite, famous broadcaster and journalist who was considered the most trusted man in America, once said: “Journalism is what we need to make democracy work.” I agree with these words, and believe that the endless pursuit of truth is the key to ensuring that news media remains relevant in our democracy. Because of this, I affirm the resolution of today’s debate, which states: Resolved: In a democracy, a free press ought to prioritize objectivity over advocacy.**

**To clarify the resolution, I will define the terms “objectivity” and “advocacy”. Declan Fahy, a Professor of Communications, explains the difference between the two in 2017, writing:**

(Declan Fahy is an Associate Professor in the School of Communications at Dublin City University. “Objectivity, False Balance, and Advocacy in News Coverage of Climate Change.” Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science. 19 March 2017.)

Objectivity is a broad term, but has been commonly interpreted to mean the reporting of news in an impartial and unbiased way by finding and verifying facts, reporting facts accurately, separating facts from values, and giving two sides of an issue equal attention to make news reports balanced. Advocacy journalism, by contrast, presents news from a distinct point of view, a perspective that often aligns with a specific political ideology. It does not separate facts from values and is less concerned with presenting reports that are conventionally balanced.

**My value for this debate will be democracy, defined by Merriam-Webster as “a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people”. The resolution asks us to examine what the role and values of the press should be specifically within democracies. Therefore, the essential question of this debate is: what type of journalism will best protect democratic ideals and ensure that citizens are able to meaningfully participate in our government?**

**The criterion to support my value will be deliberation. Deliberation is explained by Professor Jennifer Eagan in 2013, who writes:**

(Jennifer L. Eagan is a Professor of Philosophy and Public Affairs & Administration at California State University. “Deliberative Democracy.” Encyclopedia Britannica. 12 March 2013.)

In deliberation, citizens exchange arguments and consider different claims that are designed to secure the public good. Through this conversation, citizens can come to an agreement about what procedure, action, or policy will best produce the public good. Deliberation is a necessary precondition for the legitimacy of democratic political decisions. Rather than thinking of political decisions as the aggregate of citizens’ preferences, deliberative democracy claims that citizens should arrive at political decisions through reason and the collection of competing arguments and viewpoints. In other words, citizens’ preferences should be shaped by deliberation in advance of decision making, rather than by self-interest. With respect to individual and collective citizen decision making, deliberative democracy shifts the emphasis from the outcome of the decision to the quality of the process.

**In order to protect democracy, we need well-informed citizens capable of having meaningful political dialogue. Without deliberation, citizens will be unable to meaningfully participate in their government or the decision-making process. Therefore, if I can prove that objectivity in the press will encourage deliberation, then objectivity will best uphold democracy, and should be prioritized.**

**Contention 1: Objectivity is essential for democracy because it creates a common foundation for deliberation.**

**In order for the democratic process to occur, citizens need a common basis of facts to ground their discussions and debate. Objective journalism is the only way to ensure that citizens have access to these facts. Introducing advocacy undermines trust in the media and causes disputes over those basic facts, making deliberation impossible. According to professor Cornelia Mothes in 2017:**

(Cornelia Mothes is a professor of media management and journalism at Macromedia University of Applied Sciences. “Biased Objectivity: An Experiment on Information Preferences of Journalists and Citizens.” Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, Volume 94, Issue 4. 2017)

In contrast to journalists, citizens are usually not committed by occupation to deal with political information in an objective way. Although democratic theories often envisage citizens making judgments based on verifiable facts and considering all sides in a political controversy (Strömbäck, 2005), citizens do not have to fear negative consequences when defying normative demands: Unlike journalists whose professional identity is strongly linked to their compliance with objectivity (Deuze, 2005), citizens do not lose their credentials as vital members of the public sphere when behaving in a way that contradicts this standard. This is not to say, however, that citizens do not feel a need for acquiring an objective worldview. On the contrary, a sense of objectivity seems indispensable for citizens to back up their decisions by differentiating between truth and deceit (Lippmann, 1920; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). This ability forms the basis of any human coexistence, as it helps to grow trust in others. It therefore becomes increasingly critical in current media environments where intentions and competence of information sources often remain vague (McQuail, Graber, & Norris, 2008; Shapiro, 2014). Accordingly, empirical research shows that citizens’ trust in information sources greatly depends on objectivity considerations: Media users conceive of news stories as the more credible and trustworthy the less they perceive them as biased and opinionated (Swasy, Tandoc, Bhandari, & Davis, 2015; Tsfati, Meyers, & Peri, 2006). In light of these findings, the objectivity norm appears essential for both journalists and citizens. Whereas journalists rely on objectivity to fulfill their social contract and maintain a professional identity, citizens depend on objectivity mainly as an assurance that the sources they encounter provide a reliable and honest portrayal of reality.

**This breakdown of trust and reliability is disastrous for democracy. If citizens cannot agree on basic facts, it breaks down political communication and opens the door to propaganda, fake news, and other disinformation. As philosopher Paul Valadier writes:**

(Paul Valadier is a French journalist and philosopher. “‘Post-truth’: A danger to democracy.” Études, Issue 5, 2017)

Human relationships need trust, one of their major ingredients, and so cannot ignore the search for truth and truthfulness. How are we to trust someone who we suspect has lied or distorted the truth? It is hard to see how democracy—and maybe human communities more broadly—could survive the institutionalization of lying, or the domination of the virtual. To repeat: democracy is not just a procedural system, and it is not just a matter of obeying arbitrary rules. It needs truth, or at least the attempt to find the truth. What exactly is our economic and financial situation? Can we ignore our international commitments, or give up on honoring our debts? These questions, and many others, all assume that we seek justice, solidarity, and a good life—things that are valuable for the lives of states as well as people. Democracy is more seriously compromised by liars than by any other breach of procedure, because liars attack language, and so the exchange between groups and people that language enables. Lying removes the possibility of that basic confidence that allows a minimum level of peace and security: if we can no longer trust another’s word, distrust reigns, and we are not far from the “state of nature” Thomas Hobbes described, where everyone lives in fear of everyone else and feels their very existence threatened. [3] It leads, therefore, to the death of any common political life. Here again, we must not be naive. Any relationship of trust can and must be tested. It must be verified, and it must demonstrate its fruitfulness. There is no absolute guarantee that our trust will not be betrayed, whether in a couple or in any other human institution. That is why we must seek the truth: we may not be sure that we will reach the truth, but we must not give up our pursuit of it. It may even be that we never reach it, whether in politics, in our relationships, or even in religion. But we have to desire the truth more than we claim to possess it, because that desire drives the researcher, awakens in the lover a delicate attention for the loved one, mobilizes a people to find solutions to its problems, and pushes us to seek justice and peace. That is why it is so worrying to hear it claimed that we have entered a post-truth era, as though the search for truth had become an old hobbyhorse, or the object of some metaphysical illusion! A major consequence of this claim is that the search for truth is extinguished; the path is then opened up to lies, to abuses of language, and to every form of demagogy—all of which, we know, are the ruin of political life. We might think here of Plato’s radical, persistent critiques of abuses of language by the Sophists, who shamelessly abused popular credulity in order to manipulate minds. Our own populists are the disturbing heirs to their legacy. Lying does not just ignore the truth, but affects the very core of human relations: our trust in others’ words.

**Objectivity in the media is essential to build trust between citizens by providing them the facts needed for deliberation. Prioritizing advocacy undermines this trust, and therefore risks democratic political life.**

**Contention 2: Objectivity is essential to prevent political polarization**

**Objective journalism is essential because it is deliberately designed for all audiences, no matter their political beliefs. When different news groups begin advocating for their own agendas, then the viewers will immediately seek out news with the same political beliefs. Instead of news and discussion with all segments of society, citizens grow segregated into their own media bubbles, creating an echo chamber where they only hear from people they already agree with. This is a dangerous process because it encourages polarization and extremism. This has been scientifically proven by professor Matthew Levandusky in 2013, who conducted a series of experiments to demonstrate:**

(Matthew S. Levendusky is a political science professor at the University of Pennsylvania. “Why do Partisan Media Polarize Viewers?” American Journal of Political Science, Volume 57, No. 3, July 2013)

This article explores partisan media's effects on attitudinal polarization. I argue that viewers' use of motivated reasoning, combined with the slanted nature of these programs, generates issue polarization. The results of my original experiments bear out this theoretical expectation. When viewers watch like-minded media that reinforce their attitudes, they become more extreme, and these effects persist for at least several days. Further, these effects are concentrated among the more informed, engaged, and extreme segments of the populace who regularly watch partisan media programs. Like-minded media take subjects who are already extreme and make them even more extreme. Thus, like-minded media polarize not by making moderate viewers more (extreme, but rather by affecting those already away from the political center.

**When citizens are only exposed to media they agree with, they don’t have external pushback to force them to moderate themselves, becoming increasingly extremist. This presents a huge problem for democracy, because citizens no longer hear from the other side to have any kind of deliberation. Not only that, but any discussion between them becomes more hostile, focused on beating their opponent rather than coming to a consensus. Democracy cannot survive unless the citizens of a country are willing to discuss their problems and compromise - by encouraging extremism, advocacy weakens this goal, demonstrating why objectivity should be our top priority. For these reasons, an objective press is better for democracy than advocacy, and I ask you to vote affirmative.**

Negative Case

**Famous journalist and White House Press Corp member Helen Thomas once said: “We don't go into journalism to be popular. It is our job to seek the truth and put constant pressure on our leaders until we get answers.” It is because I agree with these words, and believe that the media’s primary responsibility is to help create a fair and just society, that I negate the resolution, which states: Resolved: In a democracy, a free press ought to prioritize objectivity over advocacy.**

**My value for today’s debate will be justice. Justice is defined by Cornell’s Legal Information Institute as:**

(“Justice.” Legal Information Institute, June 2020. https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/justice)

The ethical, philosophical idea that people are to be treated impartially, fairly, properly, and reasonably by the law and by arbiters of the law, that laws are to ensure that no harm befalls another, and that, where harm is alleged, both the accuser and the accused receive a morally right consequence merited by their actions.

**Justice is the most important value in today’s debate, because without justice and fair treatment, we cannot achieve any other value. We can only be a moral society if we treat all people fairly - if some are treated better than others for arbitrary reasons, then that society is acting unethically.**

**My criterion to protect the value of justice will be resisting structural inequalities. A structural inequality is a form of injustice that occurs through major social structures, like law or culture. According to professors Deborah Winter and Dana Leighton:**

(Winter, D. D., & Leighton, D. C. (2001). Structural violence. In D. J. Christie, R. V. Wagner, & D. D. Winter (Eds.), Peace, conflict, and violence: Peace psychology in the 21st

century. New York: Prentice-Hall.)

Direct violence is horrific, but its brutality usually gets our attention: we notice it, and often respond to it. Structural violence, however, is almost always invisible, embedded in ubiquitous social structures, normalized by stable institutions and regular experience. Structural violence occurs whenever people are disadvantaged by political, legal, economic or cultural traditions. Because they are longstanding, structural inequities usually seem ordinary, the way things are and always have been. The chapters in this section teach us about some important but invisible forms of structural violence, and alert us to the powerful cultural mechanisms that create and maintain them over generations. Structured inequities produce suffering and death as often as direct violence does, though the damage is slower, more subtle, more common, and more difficult to repair. Globally, poverty is correlated with infant mortality, infectious disease, and shortened lifespans. Whenever people are denied access to society's resources, physical and psychological violence exists.

**Structural inequalities are the largest barrier to justice. These forms of exclusion and marginalization create harms that are widespread, but hidden from everyday discussion. Therefore, the question of this debate is: Will objectivity or advocacy best allow the press to challenge these injustices? If I can prove that advocacy would be a better tool, then you should vote negative.**

**Contention 1: Objectivity blocks the pursuit of truth and prevents accountability.**

**Demands for objectivity have stood in the way of social change, preventing the media from using its greatest strengths: truth-telling and dissent. One of the major requirements of objectivity is impartiality - journalists must not favor one interpretation or “side” of the story. This, however, results in less accurate reporting. As Sandrine Boudana explains:**

(Sandrine Boudana is a Lecturer in the Department of Communication at Tel Aviv University. “Impartiality is not fair: Toward an alternative approach to the evaluation of content bias in news stories.” Journalism, Volume 17, Issue 5. 2 March 2015)

However, non-partisanship and balance are not free of bias. As truth does not lie in the middle, reality is neither neutral nor balanced and so these criteria can rarely lead to accurate descriptions. Without accuracy, journalists are inevitably unfair to the participants in their news stories. If we concur with Labov and others that narratives necessarily imply assignment of responsibility to some of their participants, then it appears that fairness, rather than impartiality, is the best approach to accurate reporting.

**Strict objectivity is dangerous because it relies on false equivalences. Being impartial means presenting both sides as if both are equally valid, even if one side is presenting misleading information. One important example has been coverage of climate change. 99.9% of scientific studies agree that climate change is real, and is being caused by humans - and yet, to remain balanced, news media often gives more coverage to climate deniers than experts. According to a scientific analysis of news media that was reported in Grist Magazine in 2020:**

(Joseph Winters is a journalist. “The curse of ‘both-sidesism’: How climate denial skewed media coverage for 30 years.” Grist, 28 July 2020.)

Wetts analyzed 1,768 press releases from business, government, and social advocacy organizations from 1985 to 2013, categorizing them by their stance on climate action. She then ran the press releases through plagiarism detection software to see how often they were featured in the country’s largest-circulation newspapers: The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and USA Today. She found that even though 10 percent of the press releases contained messaging against climate action — arguments like, “It would be too expensive to reduce greenhouse gas emissions” — 14 percent of them wound up in print. By contrast, the more prevalent press releases arguing for personal, corporate, or political action to tackle climate change were only covered 7 percent of the time. And the least-covered press releases came from groups with the most expertise on science and technology, such as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and IBM. Edward Mailbach, director of the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communications, called these conclusions unsettling. “Rather than marginalize self-interested voices and give prominence to expert voices, these papers did just the opposite,” he said. How to explain the results? Wetts said one reason for the imbalance might be tied to journalistic norms of objectivity, which reporters and editors often interpret as a need to give at least two sides to every story, no matter the science. She called this “false balance,” because it can put unsubstantiated opinions on the same footing as well-established facts. In the case of climate change, she said that the practice has lent legitimacy to those who deny climate change, leading readers to believe that denial is “more than a fringe stance.” Previous research has suggested that this practice — also known as “bothsidesism” — began to decline in the mid-2000s. But Wetts’ analysis found no statistically significant change in coverage over the 30-year period of the study. She also said that the trend couldn’t be explained by excessive coverage of anti-climate press releases in the business-friendly Wall Street Journal. Claims that steps to curb carbon emissions would be too costly or undermine U.S. energy independence, for instance, also found favor in the liberal-leaning New York Times.

**By relying on objectivity, the news media has misled the public by amplifying climate change denial and boosting misinformation. However, the harms of objectivity can go even further. One primary goal of journalism is to hold powerful people accountable to the public, and to challenge official narratives. However, prioritizing objectivity causes journalists to be afraid of “picking sides,” meaning they can be forced to simply repeat what officials say without context or pushback. This is proven by journalism after World War II, when “objectivity” was at its peak. According to professor of journalism Matthew Pressman:**

(Matthew Pressman is a professor of journalism at Seton Hall University. “Journalistic Objectivity Evolved the Way it Did for a Reason.” Time Magazine, 5 November 2018)

Objectivity was far from perfect, though. As practiced in the 1940s and ’50s, it turned journalists into stenographers: they simply reported what powerful people said and did, without providing context or analysis. As the famous radio commentator Elmer Davis noted in 1953, that kind of objectivity “lets the public be imposed on by the charlatan with the most brazen front.” The charlatan Davis had in mind was Sen. Joseph McCarthy, who had a knack for dominating the news cycle with sensational, unsubstantiated attacks. Journalists considered McCarthy a dangerous demagogue and said so in opinion articles, even as copious, respectful news coverage fueled his rise. (The 2016 campaign was a replay of this phenomenon, some have argued.) In response to McCarthy — and to TV news, which threatened to put newspapers out of business — the press changed its definition of objectivity. From the 1960s on, journalists routinely included analysis and interpretation in their reports — not “just the facts.”

**Contention 2: Media advocacy is essential to challenge those in power.. Think of the journalists who broke the Watergate scandal and revealed crimes by President Nixon, or the Pentagon Papers detailing our involvement in the Vietnam war. In fact, media advocacy was crucial to the founding of our country itself. As Thomas Del Beccaro writes for the Washington Times in 2016:**

(Thomas G. Del Beccaro is the former chair of the California Republican Party. “America’s Tradition of Media Bias.” The Washington Times, 18 October 2016)

Media bias has actually been the norm in America history. For instance, the American Revolution was sparked by an intensely biased or partisan media. Pamphleteers like Sam Adams fought English-sympathetic newspapers by sensationalizing the early conflict in his writings.Thomas Paine’s “Common Sense” was described as “fanatical” and literally transformed the colonists’ view of King George with such lines as: “Even brutes don’t devour their young, nor savages make war upon their families.” It was so influential, that no less than John Adams would say, perhaps jealously, that “history is to ascribe the American Revolution to Thomas Paine.”

**Media advocacy has a long history of being used for social change. However, strict demands for objectivity blocks movements for justice.**

**Although objectivity may sound desirable, in practice, it has blocked our search for truth and prevented journalists from challenging those in power. Because of this, strict demands for objectivity blocks movements for social justice. Objectivity prevents us from recognizing and challenging inequalities and abuses of power in our society. Only advocacy allows us to recognize that sometimes, the truth does not lie exactly in the middle, and to present the context and analysis needed to inform the public about the truth. For this reason, advocacy is a better tool to achieve justice than objectivity, and I ask you to vote negative in today’s debate.**