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Why objective journalism is a Fata Morgana

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We are better informed if we accept that there is no such thing as objective journalism. In order to do so, we need journalists to acknowledge the myth.

- objective
- neutral
- rational

Or:

- subjective
- biased
- emotional

How should the media report? Of course, just as described in the first list!

For sure, journalists shouldn't be influenced by their own perception or any kind of emotional sentimentalism. Emotions have no place in the

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news; at best they are a sign of weakness and obscure the view. The people have a right to be informed in an objective and neutral way about what's going on in the world.

In Germany, this is even legally covered in specific contracts of the public broadcasters:

»In the products of the ZDF an objective overview of the world affairs should be given.« – Interstate Broadcasting Agreement of the Second German Television (ZDF) [#1]

This is also engrained in the thinking of the editor-in-chief of the Consortium of public broadcasters in Germany (ARD), who has the final say over the most popular TV news watched by more than 10 million people every night:

»[T]he neutral and objective reporting of the Tagesschau [Daily News] could be more important than ever, given the politically restless times.« – Kai Gniffke, editor-in-chief of the ARD [#2]

There is only one problem with all this: Objectivity is a myth, [#3] a Fata Morgana. [*1] The question isn't how somebody reports »objectively« and avoids »subjectivity« – because it is simply impossible to do so. [#4]

Just like with a »real« Fata Morgana, we only recognize it as one if we start moving. If we remain still, we cling to the illusion.

Only subjective news has any meaning

At first, there is always one question: How does a newsroom decide which news makes it to the frontpage and into the daily news shows? For sure, it has to fulfill certain criteria like relevance and urgency. [#5]

That's why the Olympic Games are covered while they are underway – and not two months later. And for the same reason we are informed about traffic accidents and planned tax reforms in our home country but less so

about those in China or Peru. So far, so good.

It gets trickier, when we start thinking about *how* the chosen news is covered: Why are economic growth and increased export usually described as desirable? Even though economic growth often damages the climate and therefore everybody in the end. Even though the title of being the world's export-champion ruins the life of many people in other parts of the world.

And why do journalists publish their investigations about Panama and Paradise Papers? Because they consider the behavior of the involved people and companies morally wrong and want to inform the rest of the society about their wrong-doing. [*2] Because journalism is supposed to keep those »on top« in check, because as the Fourth Estate it is supposed to function as a watchdog for the powerful.

And this is the crucial insight: These goals only have meaning because we believe in a liberal democracy.

Just compare it to the watchdog function in China, where the protection of the nation comes first. It does not matter whether we talk about an editor-in-chief, Xi Jinping, [#6] or the audience of the daily news – every human can only judge because he has values. Values that let her feel and be enraged when those »on top« or those »over there« or those »next door« are behaving against your own values.

All that has nothing to do with sentimentalism, but it is the only reason why we can distinguish between »right« and »wrong«, and therefore it is the only reason why we are capable of making decisions at all. Because they are always based on moral values and ideals; without them we are incapable of acting.

In that light, the accusations of right extremist parties all over the world, Trump and others, that the press is partisan and lying, get a completely new meaning: Journalists keep on emphasizing that they report objectively. However, that is impossible, because all reporting is influenced by certain values. If the values of the journalists do not match

those of the audience, the accusation of not reporting »objectively« is suddenly accurate. It makes no difference whether it is coming from the right or left end of the political spectrum; it does not matter whether it concerns national interests or democratic values. In the end, the claim to report »objectively« puts our democracy at risk.

The thought that there is no such thing as objectivity can be distressing. Not only for readers, listeners and viewers, but also for journalists – especially for those that proclaim the opposite.

Is that the »best obtainable version of the truth«?

After the topic has been carefully selected, the journalistic routine begins. [*3] And it comes equipped with a multitude of additional subjective decisions.

- **Words are values:** Why are the bombs of the so-called Islamic State (IS) »terror attacks« and those from the U.S. Air Force »bombings«? Why did we have a »refugee crisis« in many countries two years ago? And why did people even talk about a possible »state crisis« due to the slow process of forming a new government in Germany?

- **Artificial dichotomy:** The journalistic craft involves looking at »both sides«. That makes sense when the government and the opposition are both asked about a new draft bill. However, in many contexts it does not work. Either because there are more than two sides and next to »black« and »white« there are multiple shades of grey. Or because proportions are simply ignored, which often happens in case of climate change, when the climate scientist's position (representing the scientific consensus of 99.9% of all climate scientists) is compared to one so-called climate sceptic. [#7]

- **Negativity bias:** »If it bleeds, it leads« – the well-known slogan is still part of the manifesto of many pressrooms and results in an over-representation of single, mostly negative events in the news. Long-term – often hopeful – developments fall by the wayside. [#8] That leaves audiences not only with a world-view that is overly negative and far removed from reality, but also more stressed, helpless and eventually passive.

The result is a caricature of the basic idea of an objective reporting. A caricature that – in the long run – damages a well-functioning liberal democracy. Because the latter needs more than ill-informed, hamstrung citizens.

So, what happens if we change our position – and unmask the Fata Morgana?

Yes, it is strenuous – but worthwhile

Yes, it is strenuous to hit the road. It is unpleasant, when the Fata Morgana at the horizon dissolves into nothing but hot air. When the things that we took for granted are replaced by insecurity and vulnerability.

It does not open the doors for arbitrariness. Of course, there are facts, numbers and circumstances. The point is: Without judgment and context they have no meaning.

And it is this insight that allows us to realize *why* we choose this topic as the lead out of a potentially infinite number of topics. It allows us to accept that the research behind it is influenced by our own horizon; that the language, the pictures and sounds that we eventually choose for an article, a podcast or a video are highly influenced by our own values.

Maybe this also helps us to understand why some readers or listeners cannot deal with it. And we can still gain their trust (back), because we

honestly say why we made certain decisions – instead of selling those decisions as an objective truth.

Instead of a deeply rooted belief in a mirage we need more critical thinking, reason, #9 honesty and most of all courage – in order to accept our own constraints.

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Zusätzliche Informationen

*1 The physical phenomenon is a mirage visible when layers of air with different temperatures meet each other. Thus, it is not an optical illusion. Fata Morgana is the Italian name for Morgan le Fay from the Arthurian sorceress, who lived on the unreachable island of Avalon.

*2 Even Frederik Obermaier (Süddeutsche Zeitung), one of the journalists behind the research to the Panama Papers, is not aware of his role and responsibility as a journalist. In an interview with the Tax Justice Network he says: »We are journalist, not activist. What we do, we uncover things and then it's up to our [audience] to make their own decision what they think.«

*3 The formulation of the »best obtainable version of the truth« goes back to Carl Bernstein, who together with Bob Woodward uncovered the Watergate scandal. He says: »Our primary function as reporters, editors and news providers, whether online or in print or in TV or video, is to give our readers and viewers the best obtainable version of the truth.«

Quellen und weiterführende Links

#1 The complete legal framework of the ZDF (German, 2016)
https://www.zdf.de/zdfunternehmen/zdf-rechtsgrundlagen-und-vorschriften-100.html

#2 Quoted this lecture Gniffke gave at the university of Hamburg
https://www.wiso.uni-hamburg.de/fachbereich-sowi/professuren/lilienthal/ueber-uns/aktuelles/aktuelle-meldung-2016-12-15.html

#3 In this staged interview with himself, Jay Rosen explains what is wrong with the »View from Nowhere« (2010)
http://pressthink.org/2010/11/the-view-from-nowhere-questions-and-answers/

#4 Here, Rob Wijnberg, the founder of De Correspondent, writes about the dangerous illusion of objectivity (Dutch, 2017)
https://decorrespondent.nl/6073/waarom-objectieve-journalistiek-een-misleidende-en-gevaarlijke-illusie-is/1419007815434-70f49452

#5 The criteria of the BBC, for example, can be found here
http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines

#6 After the Chinese President Xi Jinping announced his grip on power at the end of February 2018, he briefly banned a letter from the internet (2018)
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/28/china-bans-the-letter-n-internet-xi-jinping-extends-power

#7 John Oliver tries the opposite by inviting the real percentage of climate scientists that say climate change is real on stage (2015)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05Q3C8UPoFI

#8 You want to know whether your picture of the world is also too negative?
- Try the ignorance test of the Gapminder Foundation
https://www.gapminder.org/ignorance/

#9 In his book »A rational skeptic in an irrational world« Julian Baggini
- argues for more reason in the world (which always involves judgment) (2016)
https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300208238/edge-reason