

Journalism vs. Activism: How the Social Impact of Journalism Has Evolved

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## Abstract

The aim of this study was to question the objectivity norm that arose in journalism in the 20th century, and analyze what objectivity means today in the context of investigative journalism. This study examined the mission statements and objectives of the investigative nonprofits The Marshall Project and *Injustice Watch*, which are two publications with specific mission statements that cover the United States criminal justice system. The examination of these nonprofits helps explore a question of where the line is drawn between journalism and activism. The researcher interviewed 25 journalists from mainstream media outlets, the nonprofits discussed above, and other investigative nonprofit publications and foundations. Findings of the study show that nearly every journalist believes that objectivity is not an achievable concept, and each individual had a different definition or concept that they follow. The findings also showed that a large majority of mainstream journalists believe that “activism journalism” can and does exist in the newsrooms, while many nonprofit writers outright rejected the concept. The conclusion supports the idea that journalism is continuously evolving, building off of what it once was before the objectivity norm came about, and that journalists can and should have a social impact on society without being considered advocates.

*Keywords:* objectivity, activism, advocacy, social impact, social change, mainstream media, criminal justice, nonprofits, investigative journalism

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## Introduction

While the objectivity norm was commonly accepted when it arose in American journalism in the 20th century (Pressman 2018), this study has found that the once popular idea has become challenged among some professional journalists. Several factors have contributed to this shift in a lack of acceptance, such as a need for context in stories, reporting in a time where U.S. journalists are under attack by political figures and the public, and the rise of nonprofit investigative publications with a specific social mission. According to a Pew Research Center study, Americans rate the concept of “Fake News,” a political attack strategy against the media coined by President Trump, as a larger problem than racism, climate change, or terrorism. The Pew study finds that, more than making people believe false things, the rise of fake news is making it harder for people to see the truth (Graham 2019). Journalists have also been assaulted both verbally and physically for doing their jobs (Oreskes 2017), and because of increasingly digital media, newsroom jobs have dropped nearly 25 percent from 2008 to 2018 (Smith 2019). These factors have led to a need for more accurate and impactful journalism. While most modern journalists do not believe in the concept of objectivity (Calcutt 2011), the individuals interviewed in this study believe that, now more than ever, journalists have a responsibility to remain fair, balanced, ethical and independent. A number of investigative journalists interviewed throughout this study acknowledged that the reporting they do could be seen as activism or advocacy reporting by the public eye because their reporting does not follow the traditional definition of objectivity. The journalists themselves, however, reject that notion. One individual believes that journalists “should tell people what they don’t know, and that’s it” (Neff 2019). Another said that “in investigative journalism, we find a viewpoint, but we don’t advocate for it” (Aspinwall 2019). While objectivity is a contested concept in today’s newsroom, the characteristics of

journalism quoted above are what distinguishes journalism from activism or advocacy work. Throughout this study, several journalists defined what objectivity means to them, rejecting traditional definitions in favor of fairness and accuracy. They explained their reporting process, detailing how they inform readers through investigative journalism without explicitly telling them what to do or what to believe. While the interviewed individuals rejected the notion of being activists, they still acknowledged the traditional notion that information is power, and that it has the ability to create a social change.

## **Literature Review**

The topics that will be examined in this literature review include the concept of journalistic objectivity, the history and evolution of partisan and nonpartisan journalism, the use of framing theory, and the concept of journalism as activism.

### **Objectivity and the History of Professional Journalism.**

Columbia University Professor Michael Schudson describes objectivity as the chief occupational value of American journalism and the norm that historically and still today distinguishes US journalism from the dominant model of continental European journalism (Schudson 2001).

Schudson, author of the iconic study of journalistic objectivity, describes how objectivity guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts. It forces the journalist to report on news without commenting on it, slanting it, or shaping its formulation in any way. Partisan journalists, like objective journalists, typically reject inaccuracy, lying and misinformation, but partisan journalists do not hesitate to present information from the perspective of a particular party or faction (Schudson 2001).

The concept that journalism should be politically neutral, nonpartisan, professional and objective, however, did not emerge until the 19th and 20th century (McChesney 2003). As investigative journalism emerged in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the public believed that journalism was explicitly class propaganda, and certain publishers believed that they needed to have their journalism and reporters appear neutral and unbiased (McChesney 2003).

Objectivity also became a norm as journalism began to be seen as a profession and an occupation. Newspaper editors formed their own national professional association for the first

time in the early 1920s, according to the American Society of Newspaper Editors. At their opening convention, they adopted a Code of Ethics or ‘Canons of Journalism’ that included a principle of ‘Sincerity, Truthfulness, Accuracy’ and ‘Impartiality,’ with the declaration that ‘News reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind.’ Rules of objectivity also allowed growing publications to keep their reporters in check (Schudson 2001).

By the end of the 1920s, the objectivity norm became a fully formulated occupational ideal, a part of a professional project and mission, and a moral code. Objectivity was put in textbooks used in journalism schools, and asserted in codes of ethics of professional associations (Schudson 2001).

Most people think objectivity is the press’ “natural mode,” even though for most of American history newspapers were proudly partisan (Pressman 2018). TIME writer and author Matthew Pressman argued that throughout the 1950s and 1960s, objectivity became a disservice to the public as it forced journalists to report what powerful people said and did without providing context or analysis (Pressman 2018). This practice made journalists seem like passive recorders of events rather than selectors or editors (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2018). This modern notion of objectivity in journalism that Schudson discusses is largely due to the work of Walter Lippmann. Lippmann researched ways journalists could remain “clear and free of irrational, unexamined, and unacknowledged prejudgments in observing, understanding and presenting the news” (1920).

Lippmann urged journalists to acquire more of a “the scientific spirit,” and focus on a standard of empiricism, or knowledge that is derived from sense-experience and skepticism, which derived from the Enlightenment movement. He argued that it would be the only way to



create unity in a diverse world, a unity of method rather than aim. He argued that the method is objective, not the journalist (Dean 2019).

Despite Lippmann's efforts, few journalists would argue that complete objectivity is possible (Cunningham 2003). Journalists are told to be neutral yet investigative, to be disengaged but have an impact, to be fair-minded but have an edge, creating a "tortured" relationship with objectivity (Cunningham 2003). While it has become a challenged concept, objectivity has still persisted, and plenty of journalists believe in it as a necessary goal. Objectivity helps journalists make decisions quickly as a supposed disinterested observer, and it protects journalists from the consequences of what they write (Cunningham 2003). Because journalists are carriers of public discussion, they hold a special responsibility and are given special privileges when it comes to libel and shield laws. (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001), The privileges they are given, however, are based on the assumption that journalists remain objective (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001). But, objectivity can excuse lazy reporting by failing to push the story toward a deeper understanding of what is true and what is false, and is largely seen as an unachievable concept. (Cunningham 2003).

Ultimately, Pressman asks whether journalists "can be expected to report the news objectively?" And asks if they should even try (Pressman 2018).

### **Journalism as Activism**

Journalism has long been committed to unbiased reporting and shining a light on injustices in society (Blanding 2018). Some nonprofit media has attempted to measure the impact of its work by counting their philanthropic supporters, while others see their impact as foundational to audience developments and engagements (Pitt and Green-Barber 2017). But, at

its core, journalism is intended to have an impact, which is to inform the public so we can be civically engaged and hold the powerful accountable (Pitt and Green-Barber 2017).

In a Neiman Report published in 2014, Joel Simon, author and executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, asked if it is possible to draw a line between journalism, activism, and other kinds of speech, and if it is even necessary to do so. The answer can directly affect the way journalists understand their role, and questions if the rights of journalists are different from others who provide information or commentary (Simon 2014).

Ultimately, journalists agree on their purpose: to tell the truth and provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing (Kovach and Rosentiel 2001). Journalism pushes people beyond complacency and offers a voice to the forgotten. Some journalists contend that defining journalism is dangerous, because to define it is to limit it. (Kovach and Rosentiel 2001)

In 2013, *NBC*'s chief foreign correspondent Richard Engel told the U.N. Security Council that “protecting journalists these days is hard, perhaps harder than ever, because one has to tackle the question of who is a journalist and who is an activist in a way that never existed before” (Engel 2013).

Bill Keller, the editor of *The Marshall Project* and a previous editor at *The New York Times*, says he maintains the same standards at this new digital publication focused on criminal justice problems as he did at the Times. Journalists should not express personal views in news coverage. Their nonprofit aims to provide the public with information about the criminal justice system rather than advocating for particular ways to fix it (Blanding 2018).

Keller has stated that he has “read lots of advocacy journalism” but does not relate that term to *The Marshall Project*. “I still believe in the discipline of impartiality, reporting that

applies skeptical inquiry to all sides of an issue. I don't advocate equal time for points of view that can't withstand scrutiny, but I find journalism more credible if it starts with an open mind and follows the evidence," he said in a Columbia Journalism Review interview (Vernon 2017).

Despite the blurred lines between advocacy and journalism, journalism is not going to disappear or professional journalists are not going to be indistinguishable from bloggers, social media activists, or human rights advocates (Simon 2014). It also does not mean that the quality and accuracy of the information is irrelevant. On the contrary, Simon argues, because the line is growing blurrier by the day, those who define themselves as professional journalists need more than ever to maintain standards and report with seriousness and objectivity (Simon 2014).

Several news outlets have weighed in on this topic, including *CNN*. Brian Stetler of *Reliable Sources* asked Rebecca Schneid, an editor at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School student newspaper, whether she saw a difference between journalism and activism. Schneid responded by stating that "the purpose of journalism is to raise the voices of people that maybe don't have a voice...and so I think that in its own right journalism is a form of activism...Journalists can use the facts to describe an issue that plagues society...It's journalists who present these facts and elevate the voices of the oppressed that allow for actual change to occur."

Many journalists across the country responded to Schneid's quote, emphasizing the overlooked distinction between journalism and activism (Showah 2018). Robert Showah, writer and reporter for *Medium*, said that journalism is a means-driven profession. The quality of a journalist's work, he said, is "determined by the integrity and care with which it is produced."

Activism, on the other hand, is ends-centric. Activists "pursue a particular political objective and

desired outcome. They do not have to abide by centralized codes of ethics, because their means are justified by the perceived nobility of their ends” (Showah 2018).

Some journalists consider specific publications activism journalism, such as *Mother Jones*, *The Intercept*, *Brietbart*, *The Daily Signal*, and *The Chicago Reporter* (Brune 2019). While several of the publications listed above are investigative publications, each one also has an outspoken political position. In the Neiman Report, Simon stated that it is up to the journalists themselves to make distinctions between journalism and other kinds of speech, and that these distinctions will always be fluid and subject to debate (Simon 2014).

Because there is not one established or accepted definition of activism journalism, attempting to quantify the number of publications that could be considered activism journalism is difficult, further emphasizing the importance of the interviews and research conducted throughout this study.

### **Framing theory.**

The media draws the public’s attention to certain topics and has the power to decide what their audience should think about. ). Framing, as a theory of mass communication, refers to how the media packages and presents information to the public. The theory was first put forth by Erving Goffman, under the title of Frame Analysis (Goffman1972). According to the theory, the media highlights certain events and then places them within a particular context to encourage or discourage certain interpretations (Goffman 1972). Framing theory expands on the idea of the agenda-setting theory, stating that the media focuses its attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. In other words, this theory influences the perception of

the news, and not only tells the audience what to think about, but how to think about it (Mass Communications Theory, 2017),

Journalists ultimately use frames to define a specific problem, diagnose the cause of the problem, make a moral judgment about the problem and suggest remedies to the problem, all of which are fundamental foundations to investigative work (Entman 1991). In investigative journalism, journalists actively seek out topics and the essence of the issues at hand in investigative work, and their end goal is to make the reader believe and think a certain way through their research, reporting and how it is all written and presented. Framing is concerned with the way “interests, communicators, sources and culture combine to yield coherent ways of understanding the world, which are developed using all of the available verbal and visual symbolic resources” (Reese 2001). In this study, framing theory provides a strong framework for how journalists can present their values of fairness and objectivity in their reporting, and served as a useful tool to determine how journalists determine the line between a social impact and activism

## **Methodology**

### **In-depth Interviews.**

As a primarily qualitative study, in-depth interviews were conducted to gain insight from journalists working in both the mainstream media as well as at investigative nonprofit news organizations. Seventeen journalists in varying platforms and newsrooms all across the country, and six investigative nonprofit journalists from *The Marshall Project* and *Injustice Watch*, were asked an array of questions about objectivity, the evolution of journalism, and the concept of activism as journalism.

The questions were as follows:

1. How do you define objectivity?
2. Do you believe that the term “activism journalism” does or can exist in the newsroom?
3. Do you believe that journalism and activism can be one in the same?
4. How do you inform people without explicitly telling them what to do?
5. Why do you believe these niche, nonprofit publications have come to exist?

Several mainstream media journalists were interviewed at the Society of Professional Journalism Excellence in Journalism Conference in San Antonio, Texas in September of 2019. Investigative nonprofit journalists as well as other mainstream media journalists were interviewed by telephone in October of 2019.

Journalists from the following publications and organizations were interviewed and quoted:

The Marshall Project (5)

The Atlantic (4)

*Injustice Watch* (2)

CalMatters (1)

JSkills (1)

La Prensa (1)

MacArthur Foundation (1)

Newsday (1)

Report for America (1)

The Atlanta Voice (1)

The Dallas Morning News (1)

The Joyce Foundation (1)

The Texas Tribune (1)

The University of Maryland (1)

TransGriot (1)

### **Research Questions**

RQ 1: How do journalists reporting for mainstream media and investigative nonprofit publications remain objective? Is objectivity an achievable concept?

RQ2: Do journalists perceive investigative nonprofit publication's coverage of the United States criminal justice system as activism or journalism? Can it be both? Where is the line drawn and what are the major differences between the two?

### **Findings**

*Research Question 1: How do main stream media journalists and journalists reporting for investigative nonprofit publications remain objective? Is objectivity an achievable concept?*

More than 20 journalists were asked how they remain objective through their daily reporting, and what objectivity means to them.

## **New Political Climate Affects Views of Objectivity**

Some journalists said they are rejecting the traditional notion of objectivity because they believe that the rules of remaining objective have changed in today's political climate because of individual's such as President Trump stating that the public's enemy is the media, and inciting violence against reporters (Anapol 2018).

“When it comes to being objective and what objectivity means to me, you know I don't think interviewing Nazis is the other side,” Obed Manuel, a community news reporter for *The Dallas Morning News*, said. “I don't think it's fair or balanced, not in this day and age. That's not balanced to me. People's humanity is not politics,” he said.

Monica Roberts, who got her start in activism and is now the founding editor of *TransGriot* and member of the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition, said that journalists are having to react differently to the politics surrounding them.

“Because politics have changed, I think there is a disconnect now, I don't think that objectivity is the same now or can even exist, not when an entire group of people think that I shouldn't exist, that I shouldn't have basic rights, and journalists have to react to that,” she said. It's a matter of morality, it's a matter of right and wrong. Not balance.”

In an article written for *The New York Times*, Jim Rutenberg asks if normal journalistic standards apply when covering an individual such as Donald Trump, who “plays to the nation's worst racist and nationalistic tendencies (Rutenberg 2016). In an era of journalist's covering Trump's presidency, Rutenberg argues that reporters have to throw out the textbook American journalism has been using for half a century, and forget everything they know about traditional balanced reporting (Rutenberg 2016).



Jeffrey Goldberg, Editor-in-Chief of *The Atlantic*, said that journalists are “constantly trying to figure out what their role is throughout the discourse of society, especially in today’s very fractured and polarized time.”

“The Atlantic was founded in 1857, which was a very bad time in history and things were headed in a bad direction, by a group of abolitionists who created it to accomplish two things,” Goldberg said. “To bring an end to slavery and be a vehicle for the illumination and explication of the American idea. That’s still why we exist today.”

Cary Aspinwall, a reporter for *The Marshall Project*, also believes this era requires a fresh look at the concept of objectivity due to the new political climate.

“I think it’s a different time, so we follow different rules. Some think objectivity is quoting everybody, no matter who is right or wrong. It’s an ongoing debate, I think it’s important to provide different viewpoints, but to still tell the truth. I always made myself look at all of it, looking at all points of view. It’s our job to bear witness, to find the best obtainable version of the truth. Of course, not everyone is going to agree with it or think it’s the actual truth. I just know that I try to be as honest and unvarnished as I can. That’s how I remain objective. I immerse myself, talk to everybody, listen. But I make sure to use facts and documents, not just give two sides of an argument and leave it at that.”

Other journalists don’t believe journalistic practice should shift due to the political climate. Joseph Neff, another reporter for *The Marshall Project*, agrees that giving each side of an argument an equal amount of time in an article isn’t always fair, but doesn’t agree that his idea of what objectivity means is a new concept or that his reporting process has changed or evolved in today’s social and political climate. “I don’t think the rules have changed for me,” Neff said. “The mindset I have, it came through experience, working with mentors and coming into my own as a journalist, but it hasn’t changed because of today’s media environment.”

The rise in digital technology was a factor some journalists cited in the changing views of objectivity. Tom Brune, the Washington Bureau Chief at *Newsday*, said that the objectivity debate has been going on for a while, but that it has changed drastically with the rise of the internet.

“You can slice and dice what people say, and there are multiple voices like never before. So, I think that’s changed the term a bit. But I think I would define it as needing context. It has to be evidence-based. Because now more than ever there are assertions being made by a very powerful person that are not based on facts. So, I think it’s more based on credibility than objectivity.”

### **Rejecting Objectivity**

Some reporters, like Nicole Lewis of *The Marshall Project*, explicitly stated that objectivity isn’t an achievable concept.

“Any time someone is reporting on an issue, the issue is being mediated through a person’s lens, it’s inherently complicated by how the person thinks about that topic, the choices they make on what is being reported or included. All of these subjective decisions are being made by a person, and it is all impacted by their viewpoint. It’s very difficult to be neutral.”

Mari Cohen, a former fellow and writer for *Injustice Watch*, said she believes that it is normal for journalists to have an opinion, so reporters don’t necessarily have to cling to the idea of objectivity.

“Before the 21st century it was sort of expected that journalists and publications have a voice. The objectivity model we’re told to follow, I think a lot of the time, it depends on the white male perspective that is running all of these papers, so it’s not really that objective. Those opinions and that model came from someone. It’s not really taking into account or serving all the people in this country.”

So, according to Cohen, it is “impossible to be fully objective,” because the quotes and words journalists use are going to show a certain point of view. Moving forward, Cohen said reporters should be more open about their opinions.

“I think it’s better if they are more honest, and then readers can take it or leave it. I think that’s better than not having or not showing your opinion,” she said. Because, if you’re a good reporter you’re going to have opinions and it’s not reasonable for readers to think you don’t.”

Neff of *The Marshall Project* outright rejects the term.

“Objectivity is a poor metric,” he said. “It doesn’t work for me. I believe reporters should be fair. We are all human beings, we’re all subjective, the most we can do is be fair. When we cover a story, we have to be fair to those we are writing about. Even if one side comes out looking poorly, we have to give them notice, we have to let them give a defense. So rather than objective, the point is to do everything possible to be fair to everyone in a story.”

Christie Thompson, from *The Marshall Project*, acknowledged that throughout her education in 2008, objectivity was taught as a sort of false concept.

“The truth is that as humans we all have bias, in just the kinds of stories we are pursuing. It crops up in what we decide to cover. I was never trained to seek objectivity, as a human being that’s just not achievable. Pursuing the truth above all else is.”

### **Objectivity and the Reporting Process**

The interviewed journalists also spoke on their reporting process, emphasizing how they stay focused on their role and job as a reporter in a time where objectivity isn’t necessarily an accepted rule or guideline. Many emphasized the need for truth and context, and how they achieve it.

Amid these changes in journalism, Brune said that he tries to do what he's always done in his reporting. "We stick with what we know is true, stick to what you can confirm with the evidence you have, and write the best you can."

Serwer, a staff reporter for *The Atlantic*, said that he writes the truth the best he can without trying to persuade anyone.

"If I worry too much about convincing someone to do something, I feel manipulative," he said. "I'm just trying to make the best case I can for what I see happening and go from there."

Swati Sharma, the managing editor for *The Atlantic*, said she reports what she sees, and then contextualizes it, while Cohen from *Injustice Watch* said she focuses on being thorough and not relying on prior assumptions before doing the actual reporting and interviewing. Theola DeBose, founder of JSkills and a former Washington Post reporter, said that it is the journalist's job to help people better understand a complicated issue by letting them know if there are resources available that they don't know about.

### **Challenging Traditional Objectivity, New Definitions**

Other journalists who report at *The Marshall Project* and *Injustice Watch* had similar views when it came to the term objectivity, and each reporter had their own definition, fracturing the traditional definitions and interpretations of objectivity.

Several journalists reject the traditional concept of objectivity in journalism, and instead opt for terms such as "fair," "balanced," and "ethical." Others acknowledged that the concept and idea is important but isn't black or white. Ultimately, each journalist believes that the objectivity norm discussed in Schudson's "The objectivity norm in American journalism," is not

applicable today or achievable, and each individual had their own definition or differing opinions on the concept.

Emily Hoerner, who has been with *Injustice Watch* for four years, thinks that “fair” is a better word to use than objective.

“We look at issues and try to be very fair. Our mission statement, we are writing about problems and issues, things that stand in the way of justice. So when you look at something, and see that it’s not working well, and write about it, that’s having a point of view. That’s already having a point of view. So yeah it’s hard to be objective in the traditional sense.”

Cohen said her concept of fairness means “not allowing too much of the reporters own opinion to come through, and to create a balanced narrative.”

Kathy Best, director of the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism at the University of Maryland Philip Merrill College of Journalism and the previous Seattle Times editor and vice president, also has her own definition of fair.

Best used an example pertaining to climate change to make her point.

“I don’t give the person who doesn’t believe in climate change the same four paragraphs as the scientists. That’s not fair, that’s a false comparison,” she said.

Best explained that in the world of investigative journalism, you go out and you find every single fact, talk to a variety of people, and back everything up with data or documents.

“Because if you’re going to accuse someone of wrongdoing, they need to know exactly what it is you have found, what it is going to say, and you give them an opportunity to speak their side” she said. “That is what I mean by being fair. It’s not surprising people.”

Abbie VanSickle, a reporter at *The Marshall Project*, said that she thinks fairness is what objectivity used to mean, ensuring that a reporter is as close to the truth as possible.

Lewis of *The Marshall Project* prefers the term ethical.

“It’s my job to be skeptical and balanced,” she said. “Because there are not always two sides. When it comes to criminal justice reporting, there are standards. When we are thinking about stories where people are mistreated or tortured or their rights are being violated, those are the stories we are going to go after, we’ve all agreed there are a set of rights on how people should be treated. So, I think instead of objective, the word I would use is ethical. I have a set of ethics. I ask, ‘How do I represent people well, how do I not skew the truth, how do I remain accurate and balanced.’ That is more important, and more achievable than objectivity.”

*RQ2: Do journalists perceive investigative nonprofit publications’ coverage of the United States criminal justice system as activism or journalism? Can it be both?*

### **The Line Between Activism and Journalism**

The same group of journalists working at the analyzed publications, *The Marshall Project* and *Injustice Watch*, as well as the journalists working at other miscellaneous publications were also asked if they believe “activism journalism” exists, and how they report on an issue without outrightly advocating for it. Ultimately, while mainstream journalists believed that the concept of activism journalism can or does exist, the majority of individuals working for the investigative nonprofits analyzed in this study have rejected the concept, adamantly stating that if you are an activist you are not a journalist, and vice versa.

Investigative journalism did not become prominent in the United States until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most notably with Ida Tarbell’s series of articles exposing corruption in the Standard Oil Company, Upton Sinclair exposing working conditions in Chicago’s meatpacking plants, and

Lincoln Steffens coverage of political and government corruption (Dews and Young 2014). These individuals helped pave the way for journalists like Neil Sheehan, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, as well as help establish the concept that journalism can and should evoke a social change and impact. As this public service journalism has continued to grow, however, it raises the question of how involved a journalist can get in the reporting process, and where the line between journalism and activism is drawn.

“Investigative journalism can often sound like advocacy reporting,” Brune said.

Brune gave several examples of what he considers advocacy publications, including *The Chicago Reporter*, *The Nation*, *Mother Jones*, *Briart* and *The Intercept*. He went on to explain the key differences between these publications and investigative publications.

“I think the key difference, though, between advocacy journalism and investigative journalism, is that in advocacy journalism you start with a position you or your publication has, and you try your best to prove it. Investigative journalism starts with a question, as to whether something is right or wrong, and you have to prove it. You are not marshalling your arguments. You’re saying, ‘let’s look at this issue.’”

One journalist, Roxanne Eguia, the Editor-in-Chief of *La Prensa* in San Antonio, Texas, said she believes that the line between activism and journalism depends on the topic a reporter is covering.

“Here is an example,” she said.

“So, they are about to renovate the Alamo. Several indigenous organizations that are housed in San Antonio are fighting for representation in the remodeling of the Alamo because a lot of indigenous people are buried there because it was one of their missions before it was the Alamo. So, it is essentially a burial ground. We had to take a side on that. We had to ask ourselves

‘Are we going to put out this petition made by the indigenous people on our platform and get our readership involved to make sure our indigenous organizations are having this visibility in this remodeling?’ And our news team decided yes, we all agree that these indigenous organizations need representation, so we put out all of these points of contact for our readership to get involved and take a stand, because it is something that is important to so many. In that scenario it wasn’t a matter of needing to represent both sides.”

Janis Ware, publisher of *The Atlanta Voice*, thinks that journalists have a right to get involved, and a right to decide to remain objective.

“I think that we have to do both,” she said. “I think we have to remain neutral sometimes, and sometimes we have to speak up. The community needs to say what they want, we don’t always need to speak directly for them, we should be listening, and they should be able to communicate their positions on certain issues to us.”

*Report for America*, a national, nonprofit service program that places journalists into local newsrooms to report on under-covered issues and communities, uses tangible and visible social changes and impact to measure their success.

“We don’t care about page-views. We measure the success of our program in other ways, in the impact our reporting makes,” Kevin Grant, the Vice President of Report for America, said. “We care about, ‘Who did you get freed from jail,’ or ‘Did we create an uptick in voter participation?’ That’s what public service journalism is. That’s what it should be. So I think that goes hand in hand with advocating for communities, and I think you can call that activism.”

While these journalists believe that “activism journalism” can or does exist, *Texas Tribune* reporter Julie McCullough thinks the term is “a bit of an oxymoron,” and said she tries hard not



to be or call herself an activist. She makes people aware of issues, instead of telling them what to do.

“We do call ourselves non-partisan for a reason and do try to remain as straight down the middle as we can,” she said. I just think it’s important for journalists to, yes, identify problems, and not do things to change it themselves but to go talk to people who are making the changes.”

Other journalists believe there is a specific time, place and individual needed to consider it “activism.”

“I do think there is a place for it in the newsroom,” Manuel of *The Dallas Morning News*, said.

“But you can’t start out as a journalist telling people why you think this or why you think that. I think it’s really important that in this day and age where journalists are constantly being questioned, that it comes from experienced journalists.”

Ultimately Manuel said he sees journalism as asking yourself “what can you do for your community, and how can you make it better?”

Debose said she thinks that the concept of activism journalism is a return to journalism’s roots.

“It was much more partisan, it was much more one sided, this sort of rise of impartial, neutral journalism is a trend that I think is now kind of changing a little bit,” she said. “So you need to point out that history, put that into context. Like today’s *ProPublica* or *Marshall Project* was last century’s ‘blank’, you know. But yeah I think they can co-exist.”

Debose also said she believes that journalists have to evolve, and that these investigative nonprofit publications are solutions to a time where there hasn't been anything new in journalism.

"I went into journalism to help people, to help solve problems, to help people with pen and paper," she said. "They are doing the same thing, just with a stronger social focus."

One of the major differences between journalism and activism, according to Debose, is what she calls the "lone wolf syndrome."

"There's a distance in journalism because you think a certain way, you have these specific thoughts, you work in this specific way," she said. "In philanthropy, in activism, in education, you join a team and you have to work together. There's not that distance anymore, because you have to take on representing a common goal, or person, or group of people."

But the biggest difference, she said, is where the work stops.

"When you're a journalist, you write about the kids in the village who have no shoes. You don't say 'Let's envision a world where they all have shoes.' You write and point out the bad things so that other people can come in and fix it."

Kristen Mack, the communications director for the MacArthur Foundation, emphasized the difference between collaboration and competition when comparing activism and journalism.

"Philanthropy and activism, they're about collaboration, not competition," Mack said. "Journalists are constantly competing internally for the byline or externally on their beat. It's about getting the credit. That's not what activism is about. At the end of the day, activism is about making sure your cause was met, no matter who made it happen."

## Reporters' Self-Perception Not As Activists

A large majority of the interviewed reporters working at *The Marshall Project* and *Injustice Watch* reject the idea of journalism as activism, and are adamant that they are not advocates.

“I’m not an activist, I’m a journalist,” Aspinwall of *The Marshall Project* said.

“I peel back the mask but let others find solutions. That’s what investigative journalism is. It’s our job to explain things. I’m able to inform people without explicitly telling them what to do by comparing and contrasting, using academic studies. We as journalists know how to go find out what’s wrong, but it’s not our job to fix it. There are people with PhDs or whatnot who know how to fix these topics we are reporting on. Go find them. Those are the voices you want.”

Bill Keller, the founding Editor in Chief of *The Marshall Project*, came from traditional journalism, and made it very clear that the publication’s reporters are not advocates or activists, reporter Abbie VanSickle said. “We’re not advocating for a particular point of view; we are trying to understand how the criminal justice system works.”

VanSickle emphasized the power from journalism that doesn’t advocate for something, because the reporters are able to build trust with the audience when a publication doesn’t explicitly state that they are trying to achieve a certain outcome. She “expects and trusts that readers can make their own opinion.”

Brune discussed how the founder of *The Chicago Reporter* who, unlike Keller, came from an advocacy background, remained on the side of impartial journalism.

“He made sure to tell us that we would not be a voice for the minority people,” Brune said. “We would not try to persuade people with sob stories. Not that that’s a wrong way of doing it. But instead we had to show the reader what was wrong and show

them how to fix it through data and documents. We were an intentionally dispassionate voice.”

For Lewis, the clearest way she separates her reporting from activism is that she personally does not have a position in the story she is telling.

“I’m not writing policy, and I’m not dictating an outcome,” she said. “We’re not or shouldn’t be in the business of saying ‘this is how this should go.’ Our goal and mission is to shine a light on injustice, show that this is something that is happening, and then someone who is politically involved can use the report and globalize it.

Sources, such as lawyers or nonprofit organizations, are key factors in separating journalism from activism, Lewis said. “We get a lot of information from them, but we just report out what they are saying. We paint a more-full picture, but it’s really up to the people on the ground to make that happen. Once we publish, that’s the end for us.”

Neff, also at *The Marshall Project*, also brought up the difference between writing policy and writing as a journalist.

“My job as an investigative reporter is to report,” he said. “If people are being harmed, if there are abuses of power, if a number of innocent people are in prison, we report on it. I’m not a lawyer, I’m not a social worker. My job is to be loyal to my readers. It’s not about advocating or taking a stand. I don’t want anything to do in the policy world. It’s important to talk to lawyers and policy makers, but I don’t view it as ‘this should be the outcome.’”

Cohen, the former *Injustice Watch* fellow, said she thinks that there are publications that could be considered activism journalists that boast a specific viewpoint, but that *Injustice Watch* is not one of them because of their traditional reporting process.

“I think it can exist (activism journalism), it’s just a question as to whether your reporting is thorough and you’re disclosing where you’re coming from,” she said.

Cohen looked to journalists throughout history such as Ida B. Wells to prove her point.

“Activism-journalism hybrids have a long history,” she said.

“Journalists don’t just write about whatever, especially investigative journalists. You get into it because you really care about the abuses of power and want to influence it for the better and stop it. If you didn’t care about it or have an opinion it, why not find a better paying, more stable job? Reporters are motivated by activism. There’s a close relationship between both.”

There is also an implied activism that comes out of investigative reporting (Cohen 2019).

“In general, at *Injustice Watch*, a lot of the work I did there was more explaining the problem than advocating specifically for a solution,” she said. “But when you write about a wrongly persecuted person, you are kind of writing for a call to action to the prosecutor to do something, which could be considered activism.”

## Conclusion

The results of this study and the conducted interviews reflect the notion that journalism is continuously evolving, building off of the journalism that existed before the objectivity norm. While that era of journalism wasn’t necessarily known for independence or balance, objectivity has still formed the foundation for the current system of fairness used today. The study supports the idea that there is a rough consensus supporting the idea of fairness, ethics, truth, balance and context in today’s journalism rather than objectivity. This consensus allows journalists to have a social impact without being considered advocates.

With a growing need for service, watchdog and investigative journalism it is crucial to create journalism that not only has the characteristics detailed above, but is also grounded in context. Journalism with all of these characteristics has credibility and authority, and gives the reader the opportunity to learn and act on an injustice. While the individuals interviewed throughout this study were adamant that journalists are not advocates, they all agreed that journalists have a moral obligation to tell stories that deserve the public's attention, whether it be about the criminal justice system, climate change, or abuses of power.

In the first research question, "How do journalists reporting for mainstream media and investigative nonprofit publications remain objective? Is objectivity an achievable concept?" it can be concluded that many modern journalists believe objectivity is not an achievable concept, each journalist has their own set of guidelines and varying terms to replace the idea. The most common being "fair," "ethical," and "balanced."

In the second research question, "Do journalists perceive investigative nonprofit publication's coverage of the United States criminal justice system as activism or journalism? Can it be both? Where is the line drawn and what are the major differences between the two?" it can be concluded that the majority of journalists working today, whether in mainstream media or for investigative and nonprofit publications, believe in key differences and factors that set journalism and activism apart. Although there is an implied social impact involved in journalism, especially in investigative reporting, the interviewed individuals concluded that a social change evoked through journalism does not equate it to activism, although it seems like the lines could be blurred from the public's perspective.

Throughout the study, pinpointing an exact definition of “objectivity” and “activism” in the context of journalism became a challenge, as the former is a term that has evolved and changed over the last century, and the latter has very little research conducted on it.

Ultimately, this study shows the importance of credible, trustworthy, and impactful journalism. In an era where the term “Fake News” is more prominent than ever before, the President of the United States is inciting violence against reporters, and digital platforms are increasing the number of voices heard by the public, investigative and watchdog reporting that is founded in fairness, transparency and balance is more important than ever. As public distrust for the media increases, investigative nonprofits are helping cover issues that may otherwise be ignored through thorough reporting that is detailed throughout this study.

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