

## CHAPTER 2

# Subjectivity as a Journalistic Ideal

*Steen Steensen, Professor, Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Norway*

*This chapter discusses different notions of subjectivity as an ideal in journalism and relates them to epistemological philosophy from Descartes to Foucault. The chapter argues that subjectivity – once a dominant ideal in journalism – again is rising in significance, and that there therefore exists a need to better understand what subjectivity as an ideal is, and can be, to journalism. The chapter argues for a distinction between byline subjectivity (the journalist’s subjectivity) and source subjectivity and discusses four different notions of subjectivity in journalism: moral, political, existential and fragmented. The chapter concludes that subjectivity should not be considered as something that opposes and obstructs objectivity; rather it should be viewed as a prerequisite for objectivity.*

**Keywords:** Journalism, philosophy of journalism, subjectivity, objectivity, professionalism

## Introduction

For several years, I worked as a feature writer for Norwegian newspapers. I did so at a time when Norwegian journalism had long been professionalized and officially detached from any outsiders’ interests. Norwegian journalists, like journalists in most other democratic countries, have, since the decline of the partisan press, adhered primarily to ideals of objectivity and independence. They have practiced those ideals in very much the same way as the description by Tuchman (1972) of how American journalists in the early 1970s perceived themselves: A journalist reports the facts, nothing more.

Yet, in my feature writing I strived for something more. I wanted to write with a personal voice. I wanted to tell stories. I tried to use colorful language in order to portray people, places and events in creative ways. I looked for emotional responses from the people I interviewed so that their specific experiences and reactions would show them as humans, not merely as fact-providers and opinion makers. In other words: I strived for subjectivity.

Subjectivity has always been important to journalism, but is often portrayed as something unwanted, something that opposes the idea of the journalist as a neutral, detached reporter of facts. One of the few scholars who has written about subjectivity in journalism, van Zoonen (1998), simply defines subjectivity as the opposite of objectivity, the contested, yet most prominent ideal in modern journalism (Mindich, 2000; Schudson, 2001). Such a view implies that subjectivity means unfair and sloppy reporting instead of fair and accurate; it means taking sides instead of being unbiased; and it means being an interested and committed insider instead of being a detached outsider (van Zoonen, 1998, pp. 128–129). She argues further that subjectivity plays a crucial part in the shaping of a journalist's organizational identity, but that it is present in some domains of journalism (typically popular journalism) while hidden in others (typically political news). Journalism should therefore “become more open about its own constructedness, subjectively and structurally, to maintain its status as a core institution of democratic societies”, argues van Zoonen (1998, p. 140).

During the last few decades, many of the assumed dichotomies in journalism, like hard/soft, tabloid/broadsheet, entertainment/information and fact/opinion, have become blurred and journalism today is a complex field of practice in which subjectivity and objectivity, emotion and rationality co-exist in various ways (Peters, 2011). It may seem as if subjectivity today plays an even more prominent role in journalism, as social media push journalists to be more personal and to a lesser degree representors of the voice of the institutions they work for (Bruns, 2012; Hermida, 2012; Steensen, 2016).

It is therefore about time that we ask how an ideal of subjectivity in journalism can best be understood and defined. This chapter aims at doing exactly that. It asks what subjectivity means and traces the understanding of subjectivity and its relation to objectivity through the history of both journalism in Western democracies and epistemological philosophy.

It seems clear that the value of subjectivity in journalism rests on the premise that one person's subjective experiences, be it the journalist's or a source's, can have meaning for others. In other words, an ideal of subjectivity in journalism seems to imply a belief in some kind of universalism in which journalism can build a bridge between the particular (subjective experiences) and the universal and common. The existence of such a bridge and what it might look like has been heavily discussed in epistemological philosophy. I will argue that the best way to defend the existence of such a bridge, and thereby the best way to defend and practice an ideal of subjectivity in journalism, is to base the ideal on an understanding of subjectivity hinted at by Wahl-Jorgensen (2013), namely as an ideal that does not oppose objectivity. I will find support for such a position in the history of journalism in Western democracies and in Sayer's (2011) arguments for the interdependence of subjectivity and objectivity.

The chapter starts out by discussing what subjectivity is and how it is articulated in journalism through either *byline* subjectivity or *source* subjectivity. The chapter then discusses different notions of subjectivity found in journalism that can be related to epistemological philosophy: moral subjectivity, political subjectivity, existential subjectivity and fragmented subjectivity.

## What is subjectivity?

What exactly is subjectivity? The word is so commonplace in everyday speech that we all have a (subjective!) opinion on what it means. We associate it with the individual and identity. When something is "subjective" it is marked by the consciousness of an individual. Thus the word presupposes, in a way, that there is something that is *not* subjective, that there is a world beyond that which is shaped by the consciousness of individuals, in other words, an "objective" world. This is a conclusion that is not without problems.

However, subjectivity and individual identity are not one and the same. Hall (2004) argues that a person's identity is the sum of his or her traits, convictions and beliefs, constituting a stable personality and mode of social behavior; while subjectivity always involves a degree of thought and self-consciousness about one's identity. At the same time, subjectivity represents a myriad of limitations on one's ability to understand and grasp the nature of one's identity (Hall, 2004, p. 3). Thus, subjectivity is how we socially construct our identity and the extent to which we are conscious of our own identity. Our subjectivity

includes all the identities we possess (such as gender, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation) while also including our own (incomplete) consciousness of ourselves. In this way, subjectivity deals both with *epistemology* (how we know what we know) and *ontology* (the nature of reality). Self-reflection and self-consciousness, combined with the relationship between the self and the world beyond the self are, therefore, of central importance when examining subjectivity as a notion, according to Hall.

The notion of the subjective, not to mention *the power of the subjective*, arose during the Renaissance with its focus on the autonomous self and thus humanism, instead of viewing the human being as a product of God and fate. Thus, during the Renaissance, the free and subjective will of the individual emerges as an important factor in human success and failure. This became central to more recent thinking, too, especially in relation to what one can actually know about the nature of reality. Perhaps the most famous example of this is the credo of French philosopher René Descartes: “I think, therefore I am”. With these words, Descartes reduced all other knowledge of reality beyond the individual’s existence to insignificance. He asked himself the question: “If I doubt everything I know, what am I then left with?” The answer was himself, his own “I”. The only thing that he could not doubt was that he was thinking and that he, therefore, existed.

This sowed the seeds of what is often referred to as the epistemological shift in philosophy, in other words, a shift towards what knowledge actually is and how we can know what we know. The subject and its relationship to the world is central to Descartes’ epistemology and, because of this, we might well refer to him as the founder of *subjective philosophy*. As a consequence, the individual and subjectivity became vitally important to thinkers who came after Descartes.

However, there is an obvious problem with Descartes’ rational presentation of the importance of the “I”, which Kant and others were concerned about. Descartes’ “I think therefore I am” presupposes that the I can see itself, something which is a practical impossibility. Kant maintains that the self cannot be experienced because the self will always be a presupposition for all experience. As Garrett Thompson puts it: “The search for the ‘I’ is pointless, because any seeking must be done by the ‘I’, and so what is sought after is already presupposed” (cited in Hall, 2004, p. 27).

Instead, Kant and several of his contemporaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Age of Enlightenment were concerned with the interaction between the subjective and the objective, or the universal. Kant's *categorical imperative* is a famous example of such thinking, which, as we will see, plays a crucial role in how the notion of the importance of the subjective functions in journalism, even today. The categorical imperative is a universal principle of morality which Kant formulated as follows: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law" (Kant, 1998, 4:402).

In other words, Kant's categorical imperative is similar to the Biblical command – as well as to corresponding rules in other religions – which is often referred to as the "Golden Rule": that one should not treat others in ways one would not like to be treated oneself. While, in a religious context, this rule is seen as an order from God, for Kant it is a moral law that springs from the person alone, despite it being innate and universal. This means that in every single human being, according to Kant, there is a bridge between the subjectively recognizable and something common or universal, according to which a person acts.

A bridge of this kind between the subjectively experienced and the common or universal forms the premise for subjectivity as an ideal in journalism. By presenting the experiences of individual people, journalism seeks to create a sense of *identification* in the general public and thereby say something about the nature of reality. For many decades in many countries, identification by focusing on the individual has been an important news criterion in journalism (see for instance Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Gans, 1979; Handgaard, Simonsen & Steensen, 2013; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Schultz, 2007). This criterion assumes that people can recognize themselves in each other's actions, reactions and emotions, and that a large number of people can identify with a single human being. Moreover, as this serves as a criterion for journalism, it means that identification is regarded as *valuable*. The thinking behind this is that an issue will resonate with more people, more effectively, if it has the potential to create a sense of identification.

The notion of identification of this kind across subjects is based on generalizability, that one person's experiences can also have validity as experiences for other people, and that this reality is thus of equal value regardless of who experiences it. This ontological stance is prevalent in much of journalism.

## Byline subjectivity and source subjectivity

On the whole, the ideal of subjectivity is articulated in two ways in journalism. First, there is a long tradition in most journalistic cultures of cultivating the journalist's own subjectivity in opinion journalism, in other words genres such as commentary, review and gossip/causerie. However, subjectivity is also cultivated in areas other than opinion journalism, particularly in the genre of reportage where, ideally, the journalist describes her own experiences and impressions with a sufficiently high degree of sympathetic insight to be of value to the reader as well as, perhaps, reflecting on what she is experiencing (Carey, 1987; Hartsock, 2009; Steensen, 2011). For example, in her analysis of American Pulitzer prize-winning news stories, Wahl-Jørgensen (2013, p. 305) found that the stories were “pervaded with subjective language” in the sense that the journalists expressed affect, judgment and appreciation in their writings, and they did so without undermining claims of objectivity, according to Wahl-Jørgensen.

We can call this aspect of the ideal of subjectivity *byline subjectivity* as it is the journalist as author who imbues the story with her subjectivity. It is, however, important to note that the byline is historically speaking a modern concept (Reich, 2010), and that I here use the phrase “byline subjectivity” only as a way of signaling that this is subjectivity related to the journalist as author, independent of the existence and function of an actual byline.

Byline subjectivity can take several different forms, as demonstrated, for example, by Habers and Borersma (2014) in their comparison of the Middle East journalism of noted British journalist Robert Fisk and Dutch journalist Arnon Grunberg. In recent years, byline subjectivity has also played an important role in new forms of journalism, particularly American television journalism where “involvement by the journalist becomes actively embraced” (Peters, 2011, p. 301).

Second, the ideal of subjectivity is cultivated in a broader sense in journalism. The subjective experience of the individual is a central ingredient in much of today's journalism, especially in Western democracies where individualization has been key to the tabloidization and popularization of journalism. A story concerning cuts in psychiatric care can, for instance, be exemplified by describing an individual's subjective experience of mental health issues. A report on increasing petrol prices is incomplete without a motorist at a petrol pump complaining about the situation while refueling and watching his money disappear. Such subjective exemplifications of sources often referred to

as “consequence experts” (Allern, 2001; Hjarvard, 1999) have become an important part of the way in which many journalists in Western democracies think and work on stories. Stories need to be exemplified and personified. We can call this aspect of the ideal of subjectivity *source subjectivity*. This increased emphasis on the individual, and thereby source subjectivity, has often been regarded as lowering the quality of journalism, but as Meijer (2001) argues, it can also be viewed as attaining a different kind of quality, namely a public or civic quality, in which emotion, everyday life and a relative sense of self have become important ingredients in journalism.

Together, these two forms of subjectivity constitute a fairly dominant ideal in journalism in Western democracies today. But they have different origins. As I will discuss in the next section, byline subjectivity was a dominant ideal in journalism in Western democracies in the pre-objectivity era, while source subjectivity is a more modern invention. Furthermore, subjectivity as an ideal in journalism has adopted different meanings at different times. While byline subjectivity, and also to a degree source subjectivity, can be said originally to constitute an ideal of *moral subjectivity* based on the Kantian moral law and belief in universalism discussed above, the rise of positivism implied that objectivity – understood as the opposite of subjectivity – was the only way of achieving the same degree of universal validity.

However, moral subjectivity is not the only notion of subjectivity we find in journalism. Later on in this chapter I will argue that the partisan press employs a kind of subjectivity we may call *political subjectivity*, which has its philosophical counterpart in group subjectivity as expressed for instance by Hegel and Marx. Furthermore, I will argue that the “rebirth” of subjectivity as a journalistic ideal in the new journalism of the 1960s in the USA has clear ties to the epistemology of existentialism, and might therefore be labeled *existential subjectivity*. And, finally, the role of subjectivity related to modern social media practices might be seen as representing an ideal of *fragmented subjectivity*, which is partly paralleled in post-structuralist philosophy.

## Moral subjectivity and early journalism

Although the notion of the subjective first made an impact during the Renaissance, it largely exists – at least in the epistemological sense of the word – in what many regard as journalism’s archetype, namely the reportage genre.

Several reportage theorists cite Herodotus, born c. 490 BC, as the author of the first examples of reportage (Bech-Karlsen, 2002; Haller, 1987; Kapuscinski, 2006). The interesting thing about Herodotus is that he assumes in his travel reports the position of a narrator characterized by what Bech-Karlsen calls “open subjectivity” (2007, p. 47). Herodotus constantly questions what he sees and is told, and allows this uncertainty about what is actually true to be visible in his writings. He presents an “I” in his reportage precisely in order to convey this uncertainty and make it visible to the reader, thereby allowing his reports to be characterized by a Cartesian, epistemological discussion: He constantly questions his certainty about reality.

Bech-Karlsen shows how an ideal of “open” subjectivity of this kind has left its mark on aspects of reportage journalism right up until modern times. It undoubtedly enjoyed its heyday in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in Europe, but also in the USA. Schudson describes American journalism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as follows:

Far from cohering around a telegraphic center, the language of dashing correspondents from Cuba just before and during the Spanish-American War were personal, colorful, and romantic. The human interest reporting of reporters enchanted with urban life was sentimental. Coverage of politics was often self-consciously sarcastic and humorous. This was not prose stripped bare. (Schudson, 2001, p. 159)

Byline subjectivity of this kind was a dominant ideal of early journalism in Western democracies, especially in the reportage genre. This ideal meant that the individual journalist’s presentation of reality was permitted to appear as subjectively filtered, resulting in a blurring of lines between representations of subjective reality and fiction, and a mixture of facts and comment. But it also meant that journalism was considered a practice suited to shed light on and convince audiences of wrong-doings, and that the journalists had a moral obligation not only to embrace such a practice, but to do so with their subjectivity as a guiding moral compass.

The epistemological rationale for subjectivity in this early journalism was in tune with Kant’s moral philosophy and belief in universalism. The journalist needed to position himself as a subject with whom the audience could identify and relate to. This identification was not primarily inter-subjective; it was rooted in what was presumed to be a common understanding of morality. Reportage journalists of the time in Europe were heavily influenced by the



social realism movement in the arts, inspired by artists (who doubled as reportage journalists) like Emile Zola, Honore de Balzac and others, but also by early modernist writers with a greater emphasis on subjective representations of reality, such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Walt Whitman (in the USA), August Strindberg and Knut Hamsun, many of whom also wrote reportages in newspapers.

Furthermore, many reportage journalists of the time in Europe and the USA saw it as a moral obligation to reveal their subjectivity in the name of transparency. Hartsock points to the Pulitzer prize-winning journalist/author/essayist Hamlin Garland, who in a journalistic essay in 1894 argued that when facing facts, a writer should reveal his individual relation to those facts in order to be “true to yourself, true to your locality and true to your time” (cited in Hartsock, 1999, p. 441). To Garland, being subjective and transparent was “the essence of veritism” (ibid.). He linked subjectivity to objectivity in a way which later positivist thinkers and professional, objective journalism would greatly contest.

## Subjectivity meets social science discourse

According to Schudson (2001), World War I created a demand in the American press for an alternative form of journalism, a journalism that was based to a far greater extent on the verification of facts, rationality and common sense. The foremost exponent of this view and, thus, the rise of the ideal of objectivity, was probably the American writer Walter Lippmann. In his book *Public Opinion* published in 1922, Lippmann (2007) argued strongly in favour of subjectivity giving way to an objective method if journalism was to serve an important social role. In other words, journalism needed to be more akin to positivist-oriented social science.

Lippmann wrote *Public Opinion* at a time when social science was beginning to emerge as an academic discipline. Hence, thinking concerning the individual and subjectivity was given a sociological slant. Sociology, in the form established by Auguste Comte and later Émile Durkheim, originated within a positivist scientific discourse and took its template from the natural sciences. Durkheim believed that human behavior could be studied using the same principles adopted by natural science to study the world. This sociological shift meant that the subjective became devalued. A distinction was made between rationality and objectivity on the one hand, and emotion, evaluation

and subjectivity on the other. The thinking was that the former, not the latter, should characterize social science. Journalism, especially in the USA, soon adopted this social science discourse, – “at a moment when science was God”, as Schudson (2001, p. 162) put it – and thus the consolidation of the ideal of objectivity as part of journalistic professionalism must be seen in this light. Journalism gained legitimacy by adopting a social science approach to the world, and this form of legitimacy exists in journalism in Western democracies right up to the present day. That being said, the positivist paradigm and the ways in which it attempts to “deny and neutralize subjectivity” in journalism (Hartsock, 1999, p. 441), did not totally prevent other forms of subjective journalism from arising. One example is the subjectivity of the partisan press.

## **Political subjectivity: The partisan press and Marxism**

In many European countries, the partisan press survived until around 1980. Clearly, journalism in the partisan press era was not concerned with being objective. Neither was it influenced by the subjective views of the individual journalist. It was somewhere in between the two, as it was the newspaper’s political line that was important and determined the ways in which a news item was angled and presented.

We find a philosophical basis for such an intermediate position in Hegel, and later Marx, and their understanding of subjectivity and the individual. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit* published in 1806 Hegel (2009) argued that individual self-consciousness does not exist in isolation – it only exists when it meets others. You can only see yourself through seeing others. For Hegel, this means that the individual cannot see other individuals in isolation; one only sees others as oneself in the other. Thus, a conflict arises between individuals in which the individual’s relationship to the other will always be based on dominance, according to Hegel. This was the starting point for Marx’s theory of class-consciousness and, hence, group subjectivity. Marx believed that, by gathering together and realizing they had a common desire for a greater degree of freedom, individuals could change their identity. Thus, identity and subjectivity were also mutable. With Hegel and Marx, thinking relating to the individual and subjectivity became heavily politicized.

Of course, the partisan press by no means came about as a Marxist idea. The point is merely that the idea of politicized group subjectivity, which Marx so strongly articulated, happened to establish a parallel to the epistemology of the partisan press. Political subjectivity in the partisan press implies a different kind of universalism and bridge between the particular and the general than that found in Kantian philosophy. It is implicitly understood in this kind of political subjectivity that there exists not one, but many bridges between the individual and the general, depending on which (political) group the individual belongs to. The universalism of subjectivity as an ideal in the partisan press is in other words a meso-universalism, compared to the macro-universalism of Kantian subjectivity – and what we might label a micro-universalism of existential and fragmented subjectivity, to be discussed later.

This meso-universalistic position is perhaps even more relevant today than during the partisan press area. The current media crisis in many Western democracies is, at least partly, linked to a metajournalistic discourse on the ability of journalism to convey a macro-universalistic view of events in the world. Especially in the USA, the term “mainstream media”, meaning traditional news institutions adhering to macro-universalistic ideals of objectivity and independence, has become discursively connected with liberal bias (Carlson, 2017, p. 163ff). Growing mistrust in mainstream media in many Western democracies is closely tied to mistrust in macro-universalism, and the growth in right-wing media outlets is closely tied to mistrust in and criticism of mainstream media. The best way for mainstream media to address this discourse of mistrust and criticism, is perhaps not to strive harder for macro-universalism, but to acknowledge that the best one can hope to achieve, is meso-universalism, in which group-subjectivity plays an important role. This does not mean that mainstream media should retreat to partisanism, but that they acknowledge and make transparent the fact that their journalism is based on certain values and ideals that are shared by many, but not by everyone.

## **New Journalism and existential subjectivity**

One day in 1962 American journalist and later author, Tom Wolfe, read his professional colleague Gay Talese’s portrait of boxer Joe Louis in *Esquire* magazine, and was struck by something he felt he had not seen before: journalism

containing intimate, scenic descriptions drawn from the boxer's private sphere. Wolfe was so inspired, he began to experiment with this way of writing himself. When he formulated his thoughts on this type of journalism, he christened it "new journalism" (Wolfe, 1975).

Wolfe emphasized in particular the subjective gaze of the personal viewpoint and what he called "saturation reporting", which meant that the journalist had to spend a great deal of time with the people he wrote about in order to really get inside their lives. The aim of the new journalists was to get involved, to be participants, in order to create a "truer" journalism. As a consequence, subjectivity was also a central ideal for the new journalists, both byline subjectivity in the sense that the journalism was strongly influenced by the subject who wrote it, and source subjectivity in the sense that many of the new journalists were concerned with the subjective perspective as well as the thoughts and feelings of their sources. The new journalists often reproduced their source's thoughts and feelings in given situations in the form of interior monologues, as if the journalist had access to what was going on inside people's heads.

In many respects, new journalism emerged as a protest against the ideal of objectivity and positivist epistemology that dominated American journalism at the time. But this did not mean that Wolfe and his peers believed that the journalism they produced could be inaccurate or less "truthful". On the contrary, Wolfe went so far as to argue that new journalism was both more accurate and more truthful than conventional journalism, precisely because it was based on painstaking research and personal involvement with the sources.

However, not all new journalists were equally concerned with making their subjectivity visible in the texts they wrote – at least not byline subjectivity. Eason (1990) makes a distinction between the realists and the modernists among the new journalists. The realists who, according to Eason, included journalists such as Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese and Truman Capote, were essentially quite conventional in terms of their epistemology and believed it was possible to "expose" an objective reality through the methods they developed and narrative story-telling techniques. The modernists among the new journalists, on the other hand, were those who truly challenged the epistemology of conventional journalism. New Journalists such as Joan Didion, Norman Mailer and Hunter S. Thompson did not believe that there was an objective reality out there that could be captured and described – rather they tried to describe "what it feels like to live in a world where there is no consensus about

a frame of reference to explain ‘what it all means’” (Eason, 1990, p. 192). Unlike the realists, these modernists did not actually believe in objectivity. They were, therefore, more in line with pre-new journalism thinking on subjectivity and epistemology that in the 1960s began to gain a foothold in the USA and became popular in Europe, namely existentialism.

In common with Descartes’ subjective philosophy, the basic premise of existentialism is that all thinking should be founded on individual experience. And, just as new journalism was a form of protest against systematized journalistic objectivity, so existentialism can be seen as a protest against the system orientation that Marx and Hegel, in particular, but also Kant, represented. Although Søren Kierkegaard is often referred to as the first existentialist philosopher, it was only after World War II and the works, first and foremost, of Jean-Paul Sartre that existentialism made a real breakthrough. Central for Sartre, as with the later modern new journalists, was the idea that it is impossible to grasp an objective reality outside of the subject. “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism,” wrote Sartre (2002, p. 29).

This does not mean that existentialism promotes selfishness. Sartre and other existentialists placed great emphasis on understanding the consequences of our choices and their effect on other people, and their thinking was therefore characterized by a fundamentally humanistic attitude. However, Sartre did not believe in Kant’s categorical imperative as the basis for such humanism. There are far too many nuances in the world for us to be able to reduce them to a single moral principle that can be of equal validity everywhere, argued Sartre. As he wrote: “There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity” (Sartre, 2002, p. 45).

This form of subjectivism also serves as a suitable description for the modern new journalists. Indeed, it may seem that there has never been a stronger correlation between journalistic practices and modern thinking in terms of the perception of subjectivity. The modern new journalists can simply be interpreted as the journalistic practitioners of existentialism.

Even though new journalism, especially the modern variant, might be considered a parenthesis in the modern history of journalism, it has clearly been influential in how feature journalism in general and literary/narrative journalism in particular have developed, and in how both journalism and society have become individualized (Coward, 2013). Emotions play a crucial role in

modern journalism (Peters, 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013), and journalism in general has been featurized, in the sense that color, personal voice and narration have become important ingredients in a variety of different journalistic genres, and that the private sphere has become more publically accessible (Steensen, 2011, 2016). In this respect, journalism is, at least to a certain degree, becoming a universe of human subjectivity, in which the value of subjective experience needs no further legitimization.

However, most journalistic practices, at least in Western democracies, still relate to an epistemology that implies that the belief in an objective reality exists. Moreover the distance between journalism and thinking about subjectivity became even greater when post-structuralism joined in and started to problematize the extent to which the subjective also was “real”.

## **Post-structuralism and fragmented subjectivity**

If the distance between philosophy and journalism was short in the 1960s, when the modern new journalists in the USA and existentialist thinking in France were hand in glove, it was possibly at its greatest in West European democracies in the 1970s and 80s, when the partisan press had fallen, or was about to fall, and the American ideal of objectivity had gained, or was in the process of gaining, a strong, cross-national foothold. New journalism, with its rebellion against the ideal of objectivity, had gained little ground, and byline subjectivity had been cleared away from journalism except in opinion journalism. Neither was source subjectivity much in evidence. The tabloidization of journalism, with its focus on the personal and preoccupation with consequence experts and “cases”, had not yet made a real breakthrough in more than a handful of countries.

At the same time, Western philosophy, especially in Europe, was characterized by a great distance from objectivity and universalism. Key figures in the post-structuralist movement, such as Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes were concerned with the idea that the “self” as portrayed by earlier thinkers, was based on a fictional construct. Instead, they claimed that the self, and thus subjectivity, was a construction of different ways of understanding and the conflicts between them. Key identity markers, such as gender, race, sexual orientation and profession, are culturally and socially constructed, and are not qualities that “actually” exist in the subject, claimed

the post-structuralists. Indeed, it is the struggle between these various constructed identity markers that constitute a person's constantly changing subjectivity. For example, Foucault defined subjectivity as: "The way in which the subject experiences himself in a game of truth where he relates to himself" (cited in Skinner, 2013, p. 913). In other words, Foucault sees the subjective as a game in which the individual, through self-consciousness, creates an illusion of truth. In this game, various roles hold a central position (as "father", as "student", as "journalist", as "homosexual", etc.) – or how one perceives these roles, how one constructs them in one's own self-consciousness.

A consequence of post-structuralist thinking is that the distinction between fact and fiction appears to be fairly meaningless. A "fact" will always be a construction which cannot be separated from all the ways of thinking, knowledge and beliefs (or discourses) that are implicit in language. And as long as the post-structuralists believe that there is no reality beyond language, journalism will remain as fictitious as a novel. It is, therefore, impossible to reconcile journalism correspondence theory, i.e., that journalism always refers to a reality beyond journalism, with post-structural thinking – at least a journalism that does not take into account the fact that reality appears different from subject to subject.

However, what can be said to be an important contribution from post-structural thinking to a valid epistemological position for journalism's ideal of subjectivity, is the awareness of the fragmented subject – in other words, that subjectivity is always composed of the many different roles adopted by every individual. An individual, therefore, has not just one but many mutable subjectivities. We may today see an ideal of subjectivity inspired by social media practices arising in journalism that addresses this post-structuralist idea of subjectivity as fluid and fragmented.

Social media provide arenas where the distinction between public and private spheres, and the different roles one can adopt in the various spheres, is partly in a state of disintegration. In one and the same medium, such as Twitter, a journalist can send private messages and disseminate news to a public without changing the media-specific context. Journalists are constantly switching in this way between such private and professional use of social media (Hedman & Djerf-Pierre, 2013).

This almost constant movement between the private and the professional makes it difficult to separate the different roles from each other. Aspects of the

private slide over into the professional sphere and, perhaps, something slips back from the professional into the private. The result is the “profersional” journalist who uses the personal and, thus, the subjective, in his or her professional working life (Steensen, 2015).

There are two ways in particular in which the “profersional” journalist presents him or herself. First, journalists present their personal opinions to a greater extent in social media than in the newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations for which they work. Second, journalists share more aspects of their private lives in social media (Steensen, 2016). This is not necessarily anything new in journalism. In reportage and feature journalism, it is not unusual for journalists to mix in details from their own private lives. But with social media, this is also becoming commonplace among journalists who normally work within a paradigm in which traditional objective news reporting still rules. News journalists in traditional media are suddenly coming out as private individuals with subjective reflections in social media, and they do so, it seems, without losing credibility as news journalists (Boehmer, 2014).

One possible reason for this is that the “profersional” journalist appears to be more human when she demonstrates a broader spectrum of roles and identities. Sayer (2011) has argued that social scientists need to take the subjectivity of both themselves as scientists and the informants they study seriously in order for the science to be more truthful and objective. This argument can be valid for journalism as well, as I will discuss next.

## The subjective as part of the objective

In his book *Why Things Matter to People*, Sayer (2011) examines the ways in which social scientists relate to their sources. Instead of observing people from a distance, in an attempt to achieve some form of objective observation in which the subjectivity of the sources is eliminated, Sayer believes that social scientists should engage to a greater degree with who their sources are. The following quotation is equally valid if we replace “social scientists” with “journalists”:

The danger is that, because, as social scientists, we mostly want to observe and explain what people do rather than cooperate with them in some practice, we will project that spectator’s relationship onto them, and fail to appreciate the import of the practices



for them, so that they appear as unfeeling actors of parts, bearers of roles, occupants of subject positions, mere causal agents. (Sayer, 2011, p. 12)

Following this argument, journalists should, therefore, involve themselves in people's lives and not simply regard them as sources, if their aim is to understand and convey what is important to people. If journalists merely adopt the role of spectator, it becomes difficult for them to see the sources as anything other than isolated roles or positions. This is in obvious contrast with the one-dimensional ideal of subjectivity that case journalism often represents, where source subjectivity is reduced to only one (constructed) role for an individual. When sources appear as cases in news stories, they risk being reduced to one thing, which conflicts with their own sense of subjectivity. Eide (2012) has for example shown how disabled people who appear as sources in the news, feel alienated from the ways in which they are represented. If subjectivity as a journalistic ideal relating to sources should adhere to an understanding of subjectivity as fragmented and fluid, journalists need to see beyond the one role ("the disabled person", "the asylum seeker") the source is meant to have in the case. To avoid this, the journalist must be involved with and genuinely interested in the people she uses as raw material in her journalism. Otherwise, the distanced gaze many journalists adopt can take them wildly off course, precisely because it is the gaze of someone who is detached and non-participating.

Sayer believes it is inappropriate to make a distinction between the objective, distanced and rational on the one hand, and the subjective, emotional and value-oriented on the other. He believes that it is only by regarding the subjective as part of the objective, emotions and values as part of the rational, that we can understand people: "It seems that becoming a social scientist involves learning to adopt this distanced relation to social life, perhaps so as to be more objective, as if we could become more objective by ignoring part of the object." (Sayer, 2011, p. 211). Again, as journalism is so strongly influenced by social science discourse, we can easily replace the term "social scientist" with "journalist" in the above quote to produce a sentence with just as much meaning. The subjective is thus a part of each human "object" – the source as well as the journalist. Ignoring subjectivity by adopting an objective and, therefore, detached stance – untouched by emotion and values – means that you are missing important aspects of the reality you want to say something about. Ignoring the subjective simply makes it harder for the journalist to say something that is true.

Sayer's argument lends legitimacy both to source subjectivity and byline subjectivity as journalistic ideals. The subjective is a part of the journalist as object, just as much as it is a part of the source as object. Taking this into consideration involves acknowledging emotions, norms and values both in oneself as journalist and in the source. If we follow Sayer's argument, it is a misconception to believe that this makes the journalist less objective. On the contrary, it makes the journalist *more* objective, in the sense of seeking the truth.

## Conclusion

I have in this chapter discussed different notions of subjectivity throughout the history of ideas and journalistic practices in Western democracies, and shown how they at times collide and at other times harmonize. In table 2.1, I lay out the four different notions of subjectivity discussed, which can be linked to both different practices in journalism and different philosophical positions.

Of course, the borders between the different notions of subjectivity are not as clear cut as Table 2.1 suggests. For instance, realist reportage and case-driven journalism might be very political, and advocacy journalism can be deeply moralistic. There are, however, a few moments in history when notions of subjectivity in journalistic practice harmonized with trends in the history of ideas. First, from the 1920s onwards positivist thinking and the belief in objectivity dominated the rise of the social sciences, while journalism (at least in the USA) became professionalized and was influenced by the same idea. This phase

**Table 2.1.** Four notions of subjectivity that can be found in both journalistic practice and philosophical thinking

	<b>Moral subjectivity</b>	<b>Political subjectivity</b>	<b>Existential subjectivity</b>	<b>Fragmented subjectivity</b>
In philosophy	Kantian universalism	Marx and Hegel's notions of group subjectivity	Existentialism	Post-structuralism
In journalism	realist reportage; case-driven journalism; tabloid journalism	The partisan press; advocacy journalism	modernist reportage; new journalism	social media journalism, case-driven journalism

implied the separation of subjectivity from objectivity, and thus a devaluation of the former. Second, existentialism and new journalism – at least parts of new journalism – were dominated by the same epistemological position simultaneously, implying a re-evaluation of subjectivity.

For most journalism in Western European democracies today, the most common of the four notions of subjectivity in Table 2.1 is still moral subjectivity. The basis of such reporting is the belief in *personification* as a news criteria, which was described in the original work on news criteria by Galtung and Ruge as “cultural idealism according to which man is the master of his own destiny and events can be seen as the outcome of an act of free will” (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). The universalism of this kind of journalistic practice is therefore cultural, implying that not just any individual experience in any part of the world would be considered newsworthy. To become a subject for journalism, a person must bear some cultural resemblance to the audience. Furthermore, the person often has experienced or witnessed something that will be perceived as morally unjust by the audience, for instance witnessed a crime, a natural disaster, or experienced some wrongdoing by others. The identification with other subjects in such case-driven journalism and realist reportage keeps alive journalism’s function as a “custodian of conscience” (Glasser & Ettema, 1989) where the standards by which the public can make moral judgments are upheld. Subjects who bear witness in journalism (sources or journalists) do so as a moral practice, which is often linked to some kind of suffering or atrocity (Tait, 2011, p. 1221).

The cultural universalism in such journalism is taken for granted and rarely problematized as part of journalistic practice. It finds its philosophical legitimacy in the universalism of Kant, which was also culturally bound and centered on moral order. However, it might be a problem for contemporary journalism that it to such an extent relies on notions of subjectivity that imply a high degree of universalism, while contemporary philosophy – and media practices related to social media – tend to do the opposite.

The challenge for journalism in Western democracies today is to find ways to make its dominant practices more in tune with contemporary thinking on subjectivity. This would imply – in Hall’s words – to recognize that subjectivity “once considered potentially knowable and conceptually one-dimensional, has been rendered various, fractured, and indefinite in recent theorizations, largely because of a new recognition of the complexity of our social roles and the multiplicity of our interactions” (2004, p. 118).

Popular journalistic practices like case-driven journalism and realist reportage, in which subjectivity is present but hidden and not reflected upon, and the general and still very much alive notion of the detached and neutral reporter, embody very different ways of thinking about subjectivity and the relationship between representation and what is being represented in journalism. While multi-subjective representations of the world are gaining popularity with the public in social media, journalism has not yet embraced the same idea. I have in this chapter suggested ways to do so inspired by Sayer's (2011) arguments about subjectivity and how to embrace it in the social sciences. A first step in this direction would be to recognize that subjectivity is not the opposite of objectivity – it is part of objectivity. In other words: It is impossible to say something true about the world if subjectivity is ignored. This may imply that journalistic institutions should strive for meso-universalism in line with Hegel's and Marx's ideas on group subjectivity instead of the macro-universalism of the ideal of objectivity. It also implies that journalists must be aware of and even make visible their own subjectivity – as they increasingly do in social media – and they must be aware of and relate to their sources not only as occupiers of one role, but as subjects with multiple identities and roles.

Journalists, editors and journalistic institutions should perhaps be more conscious of how they themselves view the world and how that affects their reporting, as well as be more involved with their sources and audiences, in order to fully understand what is important to the audience and the sources. Journalists might benefit from being humbler and less certain about their representation of people and events in the world, and maybe they should recognize and take into account the different roles and identities people have, and how social and cultural contexts affect how people view the world and themselves. Perhaps that is what is needed for journalism to still matter to people, to paraphrase Sayer.

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