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IS ACTIVIST JOURNALISM POSSIBLE?

Tensions within the professional ethos of objectivity



ADRIANA BARSOTTI

Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói – Rio de Janeiro – Brazil
ORCID: 0000-0002-7834-9937

AGOSTINHO VIEIRA

Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro – Rio de Janeiro – Brazil
ORCID: 0000-0001-5757-7861

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ABSTRACT – Objectivity helped to consolidate the idea that the journalist should be a neutral observer of reality. One of the canons of journalism, the strategy, method or ritual has been criticized over the last century, since facts are reported through selection, hierarchy and interpretation. The professional ethos, however, has been always marked by a pragmatic-functional performance that prevented reflection on the practices. In the 21st century, however, the discourse of objectivity has been increasingly scrutinised, especially by the “new journalistic arrangements” (Nonato et al., 2018) which advocate commitment to causes. The hypothesis – confirmed by the article – is that these initiatives are helping to put a strain on journalists’ professional ethos. In the context of the new journalistic ecosystem, taking a stand on causes becomes a value to be pursued, and no longer a deontological transgression. To verify it, nine journalists of these “new arrangements” were interviewed.

Key words: Journalistic objectivity. Activism. Causes. Engagement. Professional ethos.

É POSSÍVEL UM JORNALISMO ATIVISTA? As tensões no ethos profissional assentado na objetividade

RESUMO – A objetividade ajudou a consolidar a ideia de que o jornalista deveria ser um observador neutro da realidade. Um dos cânones do jornalismo, a estratégia, método ou ritual sofre críticas desde o século passado, já que os fatos são relatados mediante seleção, hierarquização e interpretação. Marcado por uma atuação pragmática-funcional, o ethos profissional, entretanto, impedia a reflexão acerca das práticas. No século XXI, no entanto, o discurso da objetividade vem sendo cada vez mais questionado, principalmente pelos “novos arranjos” jornalísticos (Nonato et al., 2018), que defendem o engajamento em torno de causas. A hipótese – confirmada pelo artigo – é que tais iniciativas estejam contribuindo para o tensionamento do ethos profissional. No contexto do novo ecossistema jornalístico, a tomada de posição passa a ser um valor a ser perseguido, e não mais uma transgressão deontológica. Para verificá-la, foram entrevistados nove jornalistas desses “novos arranjos”.

Palavras-chave: Objetividade jornalística. Ativismo. Causas. Engajamento. Ethos profissional.

¿ES POSIBLE EL PERIODISMO ACTIVISTA? Tensiones en el ethos profesional basado en la objetividad

RESUMEN – La objetividad ayudó a consolidar la idea de que el periodista debe ser un observador neutral de la realidad. Uno de los cánones del periodismo, la estrategia, método o ritual ha sido criticado desde el siglo pasado, ya que los hechos son informados a través de la selección, jerarquía e interpretación. Marcado por una actuación pragmático-funcional, el ethos profesional impidió la reflexión sobre las prácticas. En el siglo XXI, sin embargo, el discurso de la objetividad se ha visto cada vez más cuestionado, especialmente por los “nuevos arreglos periodísticos” (Nonato et al., 2018), que abogan por causas. La hipótesis – confirmada por el artículo – es que estas iniciativas están contribuyendo a la tensión del ethos profesional. En el contexto del nuevo ecosistema periodístico, tomar partido se convierte en un valor a perseguir, y ya no en una transgresión deontológica. Para comprobarlo, se entrevistó a nueve periodistas de estos “nuevos arreglos”.

Palabras clave: Objetividad periodística. Activismo. Causas. Compromiso. Ethos profesional.

1 Introduction

A few months after the murder of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis, USA, in May 2020, Professor Jeff Jarvis, from New York City University, made the following statement while speaking at the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism Conference (Abraji): “Journalists choose to use vaguer language with the intention of making their work more objective. When we use a direct approach, we come across as activists. We have to admit that we are activists”. Jarvis added that journalistic objectivity was racist and exclusionary because it mostly reflects the values of white, heteronormative males who are in charge of large newsrooms (Gilbertini & Real, 2020).

Floyd's murder became a symbol of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and also led to feelings of anger and discontent among American journalists toward their editors. The cause of this discontent was the publishing of a New York Times opinion column by an American senator who argued for the military to be deployed to subdue George Floyd protestors as well as the Philadelphia Inquirer's decision to use the headline "Buildings matter, too" for one of its articles. The New York Times editor was fired and the Philadelphia Inquirer's top editor resigned after outrage over the headline (Leão, 2020). A report commissioned by The Philadelphia Inquirer and written by Temple University professors acknowledged that the newspaper's content "favored the values of older, wealthier white males" (Downie Jr & Heyward, 2023, p. 17).

This is not the first time that journalistic objectivity has been viewed with suspicion. In academia, criticism of one of the pillars of modern journalism began in the last century. More recent criticism is directed toward the fact that journalism has race and gender (Moraes & Silva, 2019). However, discussions about one of the tenets of journalism seem to extend beyond academia and have professionals increasingly worried. It should be noted that journalism has always adopted a pragmatic approach to limit spontaneity in its practices, as noted by Genro Filho (2012).

The objective of this article is to verify whether journalistic objectivity is tensioned by journalists involved in "new alternative economic initiatives" to media corporations, according to the classification proposed by Nonato et al. (2018). These are niche initiatives that engage in causes such as the environment, the fight against social inequality, and ethnic, racial and gender equity, among others. Our hypothesis is that these initiatives contribute to the tension of the professional ethos. Taking a position has become a value that journalism strives toward, and is no longer a violation of the profession's norms.

In order to achieve our objectives, we conducted in-depth interviews with nine journalists from the five regions of Brazil who run the newsrooms at "new alternative journalistic initiatives". All these journalists have previously worked in mainstream media and are currently leading the following journalistic initiatives: Repórter Brasil, Amazônia Real, Marco Zero, Ponte Jornalismo, Alma Preta, Congresso em Foco, Canal Meio, Portal Catarinas and Projeto Colabora. We review the criticisms of objectivity through a bibliographical review and

conceptualize independent, alternative media and activist journalism in order to determine to what degree these initiatives move closer to or further away from these concepts.

2 Criticism of objectivity

Not surprisingly, the ideal of journalistic objectivity entered into the picture in the first half of the 19th century, when the American press was striving to become more widespread and using information journalism to do so – a model that guides the profession even today. Before then, journalism had been ruled by politics: newspapers held and defended certain political positions. Newspaper owners agreed with politicians who, once elected, guaranteed them good printing contracts (Schudson, 1988).

Information journalism, consolidated through the penny press, invented the modern concept of news. Coverage used to be limited to economics and politics, but the penny press had coverage of everyday life, mainly crimes and gossip. Defending “non-partisanship” became a value. “We trust that our readers will forgive us when we declare that, in terms of politics, we have none”, claimed a penny press editor (as cited in Schudson, 1988, p. 148). Without any political alignment, these newspapers succeeded in expanding their readership and advertising audience.

Objectivity is closely related to the positivist spirit of the time, notes Traquina (2005). The author states that, in the 19th century, there were two dominant poles of modern journalism: the “economic” or “commercial” pole, with news being transformed into “commodities for an increasingly profitable business”; and the “ideological” or “intellectual” pole, which identifies the press “as a public service which gives citizens what they need to exercise their democratic rights” (pp. 125–126).

However, unlike in Europe and the USA, where journalism establishes its symbolic power as a guardian of democracy, in Brazil, the social and political contexts were very different having recently ousted the monarchy. The journalistic field abroad was becoming independent from politics, while here it remained closely dependent on it. To finance their increasingly costly operations with the import of modern printing equipment, Brazilian newspapers needed funds and loans, and thus entered into partnerships with public authorities

(Barbosa, 2007). The model of information journalism only got its start in Brazil in the early 20th century, particularly from 1915 onwards (Barsotti, 2018), and consolidated itself in the 1950s (Ribeiro, 2007).

Although objectivity became rooted in professional ideology, it was not long before it began to be questioned. In the USA, shortly after World War I, journalists realized that war propaganda had manipulated the facts. It should also be noted that since 1920, philosophy, history, social sciences, and psychoanalysis had already demonstrated that men “know, see and hear the world through socially constructed filters” (Schudson, 2010, p. 16).

In the 1960s, objectivity would once again be challenged by two traditions of American journalism: new journalism and investigative journalism. Both these forms valued the active position of journalism in building reports, as opposed to the idea of the neutral observer of reality. Two conditions led to the criticism of journalism and objectivity in the USA: government manipulation of events during the Cold War and the Vietnam War, and the emergence of an “oppositional culture”, notes Schudson (2010). This culture of criticism and more aggressive and skeptical journalism was appealing to audiences. For the author, in this scenario of distrust in rationality, objectivity was a strategy in the profession.

The ideal of objectivity, understood as consensually validated statements about the world, based on a radical separation between facts and values, begins to be established. However, it appears not so much as an extension of naive empiricism and belief in facts, but as a reaction against skepticism [...] It did not represent, finally, the final expression of a belief in facts, but the imposition of a method designed for a world in which not even facts could be trusted. (Schudson, 2010, p. 144).

Gaye Tuchman also highlighted the strategic aspect of objectivity by classifying it as “a strategic ritual” that journalists use to defend themselves from errors and criticism of their work. “Attacked for a controversial presentation of ‘facts’, journalists invoke their objectivity in much the same way as a peasant wears a necklace of garlic to ward off evil spirits” (Tuchman, 1999, p. 75). Tuchman listed some of these strategies: presenting “both sides” of a news story, relating the different versions of the fact; presenting support evidence that confirms an assertion; the judicious use of quotation marks in such a way that the reporter is exempt from responsibility; the inverted pyramid technique used in the lead, where the most relevant facts appear in the first paragraph of the story.

This attempt to make it appear that “the facts speak for themselves” is characteristic of the pragmatic nature of journalism, as pointed out by Genro Filho (2012). The journalistic ethos, based on objectivity, leads to the misunderstanding that facts are related to the historical-social dimension, states Filho. “We know that facts do not previously exist as such. There is an objective flow in reality, from which facts are cut and constructed per discoveries that are both objective and subjective” (Genro Filho, 2012, p. 194).

According to Genro Filho’s analysis, journalistic objectivity implies understanding the world as an aggregate of “ready-made and finished facts”, as if they came before perception and independence concerning ideologies and “concepts of the world”. A journalist has the simple task of “scrupulously” collecting the facts “as if they were colored pebbles”. For Filho, this is a “naive vision” with a “positivist and functionalist background” (Genro Filho, 2012, p. 197). He also recognizes that journalism’s “new social modality of knowledge” has a lot of potential. He believes that “critical news” has a revolutionary perspective to it, something that “goes beyond its mere functional relationship of reproducing society” (p. 198).

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2003) also point to the pragmatic nature of objectivity, which is a method that helps journalists verify their stories. These authors, however, are wary of the pitfalls of such techniques. “Balance can lead to distortion”, they caution. Many times, seeking balance from “all sides does not result in a true reflection of reality”. For example, these authors claim that it would be a “disservice to citizens and the truth” if journalism gave space to dissonant voices, giving the impression that the scientific debate is divided, even when most scientists believe that global warming is a scientific fact or a certain medical treatment is the safest (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2003, p. 121).

Sponholz (2009) shifts the discussion around objectivity from supposed neutrality toward the need for journalistic investigation. Journalistic objectivity is taking media reality and fitting it into reality, to the outside world whose existence does not depend on who will narrate it. While seeking to approximate this reality, journalists establish a “truth as correspondence”. For there to be a correlation between social and media realities, however, there must be professional rules and standards (Bentele as cited in Sponholz, 2009). Journalistic objectivity is based on them and brings journalism closer to the scientific method, with the apprehension

and interpretation of reality. Popper argues that the chosen method should be “intersubjective” (p. 150). Just as with science, the enunciations of journalistic discourse are only valid when different observers agree with each other. “This means a journalist’s method must be transparent so that another investigator could repeat it and reach the same results” (p. 65).

Journalistic objectivity is often associated with the need to avoid value judgments. “In this way, objectivity becomes rooted within the journalist, and not within the method or the results (Sponholz, 2009, p. 170). “Journalists, like scientists or any other knowledgeable individual, evaluate or judge the object of their observation” (p. 174). “Evaluating or judging is an inherent characteristic of the knowledge process”, observes the author (p. 171).

Barsotti (2021) discusses the limits of journalistic objectivity in contemporary times, one that is laced with misinformation, social inequalities, and the algorithmic distribution of news. Efforts to establish equality (one of the tenets of objectivity) are proving difficult due to the rise of authoritarian governments that have created a market of false information, increased social inequalities, and biases of social media algorithms and mechanisms where the news circulates.

3 Alternative, independent media and activism in journalism

A number of organizations nowadays claim to be independent or alternative, observe Assis et al. (2017). These authors remind us how discussions about independent and alternative media are not new; however, they look to place it in the 21st century based on the emergence of digital native news organizations that benefit from new information and communication technologies. “After all, what makes an experience alternative in relation to others? The answer varies according to the context in question – as well as the standard to which we want to oppose”, they state (p. 10). As the authors point out, in Europe the idea of independence is related to private media which is financed by advertisers but disconnected from public authorities.

In Brazil, the “new journalistic arrangements” claim to be independent, as shown in a study by Patrício and Batista (2017). Based on their analysis of self-narratives from digital native Brazilian journalistic organizations, these authors highlight some aspects of these initiatives’ independence. In some cases, being independent is

related to simply being a media collective, while other organizations are more aligned with Public Agencies: the notion of independence is in opposition to conventional media or in relation to ownership and financing models.

Another aspect is the use of open data. In this case, independence is related to transparency. At other times, independence appears to reaffirm pre-established principles of professional ethics, such as relevance. Assis et al. (2017) say that these initiatives also show “a high degree of idealization”, which contributes to a certain fetishization of this condition” (p. 17).

One of the founding studies of alternative media comes from Downing (2001), who prefers to use the term “radical alternative media”. Downing introduces the concept of “radical alternative media” to define small-scale and diverse-format media that express “an alternative to hegemonic visions, policies, priorities and perspectives” (2001, p. V). His explanation for why he added the expression “radical” to the term “alternative media” is that “everything is an alternative to something else.” For Downing, this expression is “almost an oxymoron” (2001, p. IX). Radical alternative media generally serves two main goals, explains Downing: (a) to express opposition to sectors that are directly affiliated with the power structure; and (b) to create support, solidarity, and contact networks that oppose the policies or even the very survival of the power structure (2001, p. XI).

Atton (2007) also works with the concept of alternative media. For him, alternative media includes the media of protest groups, political organizations, and even fans and amateurs (Atton, 2004, p. 3). He notes that alternative media tends to be produced by amateurs who have little to no professional training in journalism. “Considering these practices as alternative journalism will imply examining the notions of truth, reality, objectivity, expertise, authority and credibility” (2007, p. 22) consolidated by the professional ethos of journalists. We uphold that the notions of both alternative media and independent media add little to how we think about digital native journalistic organizations because they are broad concepts and often relate to amateur productions. They also do not establish references for (re)thinking journalism and its professional ethics.

Conversely, the notion of activist journalism, as proposed by Moraes (2022), seems more promising because it tensions the epistemology of objectivity, one of the pillars of the journalistic ethos

that we believe is being called into question by digital-native news organizations. Moraes' vision of activism, however, is in no way similar to political party action. She prescribes the basic procedures of reporting, including full investigations (interviews, bibliographical research, on-site observation), fact-checking, verifying and cross-referencing information, writing that is more accessible to a wider audience, searching for varied sources, and truthfully representing what was stated and/or disclosed. She does warn however that objectivity expresses power structures. In a previous work, Moraes and Silva (2019) argued that journalistic objectivity had race and gender, claiming it was white and male.

Moraes also draws attention to the fact that the press promotes the idea of “unbiased” (objective) journalism as opposed to “contaminated” (subjective) journalism. “This exemption is a fallacy that hides practices influenced by interests (business, political, ideological, etc.) that are all placed under the discourse of neutrality” (Moraes, 2022, p. 144). For her, engaged journalism is “based on positions that oppose misogyny, color and class racism, and various other forms of otherphobia”:

I wonder if we can call issues like femicide, transphobia, and classism “causes”, and I think about the implications of choosing to be wet or not (to use a Freirian term) by these issues – as if it were possible not to be. These issues are obviously political, even though they are not valued as such by a large number of journalists (Moraes, 2022, p. 158).

Uncovering how the press works, “hacking” its methods, would be necessary to undermine naturalizations in journalism, argues Moraes. Adding to Russell's (2018) concept, the author argues that journalists should be “hacker sensitive”. The agenda, from Moraes' perspective, can become a “combat weapon” against these naturalizations, producing counter-narratives. Christofolletti and Karam (2011) have observed similarities between hacker ethics and journalistic ethics. In this case, sources and investigative methods are revealed to the reader. Transparency involves accountability (Christofolletti & Karam, 2011, p. 94).

The report *Beyond Objectivity – Producing trustworthy news in today's newsrooms* (Downie Jr & Heyward, 2023) echoes the words of Moraes (2022) and his argument that journalism has been expressing the values of white, heteronormative, middle-class men. The lack of diversity in newsrooms is highlighted as one of

the problems for the invisibility of topics relating to minorities and immigrants. The report states that objectivity should no longer be a goal in journalism. The study included interviews with 75 North American journalists and observed that a new generation of journalists is confronting newsroom rules by trying to adapt the tenets of journalism to their views on identity, cultural context, and “cause journalism” (2023, p. 6).

4 Methodology

We hypothesize that journalists who work with “new journalistic arrangements” (Nonato et al., 2018) have been putting pressure on journalistic objectivity and taking on causes. In this case, they are breaking from professional ethics and contributing to questioning the journalistic ethos of objectivity. To achieve our objectives, we conducted in-depth interviews with nine journalists who run “new arrangement” newsrooms in five regions of Brazil, as shown in table 1.

We adopt the classification proposed by Nonato et al. (2018), for whom journalistic “new economic arrangements” are ways that journalists can work independently of media conglomerates, following the decline of print media and the rise of digital media and social networks. Digital media combines the production platform and circulation of new arrangements. These authors’ classification also takes into account the plurality of organizations: companies, non-governmental organizations, non-profit associations, and collectives.

Nonato et al. (2018) also point to the different ways in which arrangements are supported, which include advertisements, sponsorships, donations, content sales, institutional support, individual financing, and voluntary work. “These arrangements are being observed by numerous private-interest institutions (universities, foundations, banks, media conglomerates) because they are aware of the potential they have”, observe the authors (2018, p. 104). We use the term “new arrangements” to define how these organizations are financed and organized, separating them from the concepts of independent and/or alternative media, as previously mentioned.

Table 1*Analyzed publications*

Media Outlet	Mission*	Journalist Interviewed	Region	Year Established*
<i>Alma Preta</i>	"To inform, make visible, and strengthen the voice of the black population"	Pedro Borges	Southeast	2015
<i>Amazônia Real</i>	"To give visibility to the populations and issues of the Amazon"	Kátia Brasil	North	2013
<i>Canal Meio</i>	"To uphold Democracy and the 1988 Constitution"	Pedro Dória	Southeast	2016
<i>#Colabora</i>	"To uphold the 17 Sustainable Development Goals"	Valquiria Daher	Southeast	2015
<i>Congresso em Foco</i>	"To defend democracy and human rights; to fight against social and regional inequalities; to fight against corruption"	Sylvio Costa	Mid-west	2004
<i>Ponte Jornalismo</i>	"To cover topics related to public security, justice, and the repressive mechanism of the state and its intersections with race, gender and class"	Fausto Salvadori	Southeast	2014
<i>Portal Catarinas</i>	"cause journalism, with feminist (and anti-racist) action to assert human rights"	Paula Guimarães	South	2016
<i>Marco Zero</i>	"To defend human rights, democracy, gender and identity issues, and citizenship rights"	Carolina Monteiro	Northeast	
<i>Repórter Brasil</i>	"to report and go public with violations of labor rights (a focus on work similar to slavery) that also cause socio-environmental damage"	Ana Magalhães	Southeast	2001

* Information obtained from the websites of journalistic arrangements and/or interviews.

The nine arrangements researched for this paper are part of Ajor (Digital Journalism Association). Created in 2021, this association is affiliated with more than one hundred digital native news websites. Many of these member websites have received important journalism

awards, such as the Gabo Award, from Fundação Gabo; five Vladimir Herzog Amnesty and Human Rights Awards; four Cláudio Weber Abramo Awards for Data Journalism; two awards for Best Digital News Startup in Latin America; and one Best Digital News Startup in the world, both awarded by WAN-IFRA (World Association of News Publishers) .

Our criteria for choosing interviewees involved a national scope, with at least one representative from each region of the country, and a diversity of topics covered by the initiatives. Two of these topics cover the environment: *Amazônia Real* and *#Colabora*. *Repórter Brasil* focuses on allegations of work akin to slavery. *Alma Preta* and *Portal Catarinas* cover race and gender issues. *Marco Zero* focuses on the defense of human rights, *Ponte Jornalismo* covers public security, and *Congresso em Foco* focuses on investigative journalism in the field of politics. *Canal Meio* is a media outlet that differs from the others in that it produces newsletters about daily news, the only initiative among this group that does not have a clearly defined coverage area.

All interviewees either have degrees in journalism or have completed some type of specialization course. They have all worked for large national communications groups, some in senior positions. All interviews were conducted via Google Meet, WhatsApp voice messaging, and email. Our methodology involved conducting semi-open interviews with all interviewees responding to a list of identical questions (to compare answers) and a few specific questions presented during the interview whenever the researchers felt it relevant to delve deeper into a particular theme or aspect (Duarte, 2015). In the case of WhatsApp voice messaging, the researchers would send a new question to the interviewees once they had answered the previous one until the topic could not be exhausted further. This same procedure was used for email responses, some interviews lasting a few days. The identities of the interviewees were not anonymous as they insisted on taking a public stance on the issues.

5 From objectivity to engagement

The results confirmed the hypothesis of this article. Eight of the nine interviewees questioned the values of objectivity (Tuchman, 1999) in professional ethics, which state that the reporter should be a neutral observer, responsible for reporting the facts without getting involved. The interviewees agreed that these

values constitute the professional ideology, but underlined the impossibility of achieving them (Genro Filho, 2012). Sylvio Costa, founder and editor of *Congresso em Foco*, believes that objectivity is “a fantasy”. Costa has worked in the industry for 45 years as a reporter, editor, and senior editor for media outlets such as *Folha de S.Paulo*, *IstoÉ*, *Correio Braziliense*, *Zero Hora* and *Gazeta Mercantil*, among others. He proposes “honesty and transparency” as new “keywords” for objectivity:

It is not typical of humans, no matter how measured they may be, to separate themselves from their views, prejudices, history, personal trajectory, race, view of the world, etc. In my opinion, the keyword should be honesty. The media outlet and the professional must be transparent and honest about their methods and procedures with their sources of information, clients, the team, and society. (S. Costa, personal communication, March 13, 2023).

Paula Guimarães, editor and co-founder of *Portal Catarinas*, subscribes to the same line of thinking. A journalist with 15 years of experience in television journalism at *SBT* and *Band*, she questions the limits of objectivity in the face of an unequal world (Barsotti, 2021). “How can one be neutral and impartial when you realize that we live in an unequal society?” She shares the same line of thought as Moraes (2022), who believes that objectivity reinforces power structures and is not capable of portraying women, black people, indigenous people, and poor people any better:

This idea of impartiality favors hegemonic discourse, the upholding of unequal power structures. The fact is that all people have a beginning, a history; they have an ideology. This vision of neutrality is a romantic and utopian one, which perpetuates inequalities and does not help to eliminate inequality. (P. Guimarães, personal communication, March 21, 2023).

Fausto Salvadori, an editor of *Ponte Jornalismo*, argues there is a certain naivety surrounding the discussion of objectivity. A journalist with over 24 years of experience at media outlets such as *Folha de S.Paulo*, *Jornal da Tarde*, *Trip* magazine, and *Galileu* magazine, he maintains that this is a market issue related to the survival of the journalistic business. In fact, objectivity was developed by information journalism at a time when American newspapers were looking at ways they could reach more audiences (Schudson, 2010).

I believe that the notions of journalistic objectivity and neutral observation in the face of reality have always been more of a commercial strategy adopted by companies than a practice of journalism. Objectivity is an attribute that adds value to the journalistic product, by selling the idea that the news consumer is buying nothing less than the truth, verified by disinterested beings who float above the real world and do not get involved with the stories. But I don't believe that journalism has ever been like this. The history of communication companies in the 20th century is the story of how their products disseminate partial views of reality, using "objectivity" to mask economic and political interests, as well as prejudiced views of the world. (F. Salvadori, personal communication, March 14, 2023).

Journalist Pedro Dória, founder of Canal Meio and columnist at Folha de S.Paulo (he also spent periods working for the Estado de S. Paulo and O Globo newspapers) has had a career spanning more than 20 years and agrees with Fausto when he says that objectivity was built toward the commercial sustainability of media outlets:

There is a certain naivety when we talk about this issue of objectivity as if it were a moral choice, an ethical choice. It is more about the way you survive in journalism as a business, it is a market issue. At the beginning of the Republic, in the 1910s or 1920s, we had around ten major newspapers in Rio de Janeiro. A newspaper for every way of thinking. Over time, the business became narrower, newspapers increased their circulation, and the number of newspapers decreased. Once you start speaking to a larger group of people, you need to neutralize your political tone. (P. Dória, personal communication, March 14, 2023).

Although they criticize the view of objectivity as it pertains to the distant observer, who listens to both sides and writes with quotation marks to build their reports (Tuchman, 1999), what we observed with all our interviewees is that they defend objectivity as a journalistic method, as noted by Schudson (2010), Kovach and Rosenstiel (2003) and Sponholz (2009). For them, criticizing objectivity as an ideology does not mean throwing aside investigation and checking techniques, following Moraes (2022).

Ana Magalhães, a journalism coordinator at Repórter Brasil and professional in the field for 22 years, defends "stringent objectivity as a method". Holding a postgraduate degree in Literary Journalism and a Master's degree in Political Science from the Autonomous University of Madrid, Magalhães has worked at Folha de S.Paulo, Agora, and O Tempo, and was a contributor at Trip and Época São Paulo magazines, among other media outlets. She is a firm believer in "double and triple checking" and transparency in reports, including links to supporting documents whenever possible:

We have to strive for objectivity in journalism. I always say that to our team. Good journalism is scientific, it has a method, and it needs to be verifiable, to have verifiable sources. A reader should be able to take your report and check what you are saying. Here at Repórter Brasil, I edit articles with the knowledge that we are going to be sued. Our subjects are big fish. We do not doubt that we will be prosecuted. Therefore, we edit the material with the certainty that we will win the processes, that everything is correct and can be proven. We double-check, triple-check, etc. (A. Magalhães, personal communication, March 10, 2023).

Valquíria Daher, founder and director of #Colabora, also rejects the idea of neutrality and impartiality; however, she believes in the use of objectivity as an investigation method and technique. With 35 years of experience in the profession, Daher has worked in the O Dia, O Globo and Jornal do Brasil newspapers as a reporter and an editor, and warns of the risks of declaratory journalism and the use of quotation marks, which could end up contributing to misinformation. The use of quotation marks is one of the tenets of journalistic objectivity, as noted by Tuchman (1999). They give the journalist a kind of neutral place, attributing the information to third parties as a way of appearing impartial or unbiased.

Despite all its problems, I believe that journalistic objectivity is still an ideal to be pursued, a method or technique that needs to be well-practiced. The role of the journalist has become more complex. There needs to be an even greater amount of information to understand that listening to both sides does not solve any problem. We must avoid using declaratory journalism as a synonym for objectivity. For example, we cannot quote a president as saying that during his/her government there was no increase in deforestation if the data shows that this is not true. (V. Daher, personal communication, March 20, 2023).

Journalist Pedro Borges, co-founder and editor-in-chief of Alma Preta, also believes in establishing objective parameters, even abandoning the ideas of neutrality and impartiality. With seven years' experience in the field, Borges has worked as an intern at TV Globo's Profissão Repórter, and as a communications advisor at the São Paulo Public Security Secretariat. He differs from the idea of the "two-sidedness" of objectivity and maintains that being objective is actually not listening to both sides, as mentioned by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2003). For example, giving a voice to denialists does not contribute to "objective journalism", given that these are sources that undermine science and, therefore, the rationality inherent to objectivity:

Neutrality and impartiality do not exist, but objectivity can be sought. In my opinion, this means not necessarily listening to both sides. Being objective, for me, means not listening to a denier. This is a waste of time. Objectivity is a method, a technique to achieve the most accurate investigation possible, a more transparent, assertive context to deliver information of the highest quality. (P. Borges, personal communication, March 14, 2023).

Another aspect that stood out among the interviewees is their consensus on the need for positioning in journalism. As Moraes (2022) defines, activism is in favor of guaranteeing human rights and against the imbalance of power. All our interviewees believe that journalistic methods do not conflict with supporting causes. On the contrary, Daher even uses the expression “weapons of journalism” while reinforcing the idea of combativeness:

#Colabora works with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of 165 goals that should be met by 2030. With themes that are very relevant to society, such as eradicating poverty and hunger, ensuring quality health and education for all, gender equality, and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, among others. The difference for us is that these causes are not just for #Colabora. They were approved by the UN representatives from 195 countries, including Brazil. Our cause is actually more about the daily struggle with the weapons of journalism so that these objectives get off the ground and become reality. (V. Daher, personal communication, March 20, 2023).

Kátia Brasil, a co-founder of Amazônia Real, also believes in “taking sides”. She has worked in journalism for more than 30 years at such media outlets as TV Cultura, O Globo, O Estado de S. Paulo, and Folha de S.Paulo. She upholds the concept of “cause journalism” which is also defended by Marco Zero, Ponte Jornalismo, and Alma Preta. This concept is in line with findings from Downie Jr and Heyward (2022).

When the British newspaper The Guardian announced it would no longer refer to global warming as global warming, opting instead to call it the Climate Crisis, it said it was supporting a cause, the cause of the planet, of humanity. Is this what being an activist means? We really need to take sides and figure out what we want as humanity. We practice cause-based journalism, which is different from being an activist. As Gabriel García Márquez said, we are the true defenders of democracy, citizenship, and life. The Real Amazon has one side, which is the forest side, the defense of indigenous peoples, quilombolas, riverside dwellers. (K. Brasil, personal communication, March 24, 2023).

Carolina Monteiro, founder of Marco Zero and director of the Social Communication graduate program at the Catholic University of Pernambuco, says that the concept of “cause journalism” has been discussed by the Pernambuco website, Alma Preta and Ponte Jornalismo. “I don’t even like that name very much, but the fact is that, yes, Marco Zero supports several causes”, explains Monteiro, who worked for 17 years at Diário de Pernambuco as an intern, a reporter, and an editor. “Among these causes is, of course, Human Rights and democracy, we have anti-racist content, we are in favor of LGBTQI+ groups”, she states (C. Monteiro, personal communication, March 15, 2023). Pedro Borges, from Alma Preta, echoes this statement:

Sometimes we think that journalism mirrors society, that it has to be neutral, impartial, and that journalists should not have a perspective on the world. This is a bourgeois liberal perspective, an outdated view of journalism. We live in an unequal society, which kills people, in a country ravaged by hunger, by people who don’t have a home, don’t have healthcare, and don’t have access to a wide array of things. Journalism cannot be indifferent to this. (P. Borges, personal communication, March 14, 2023).

Pedro also points the finger at the mainstream press. For him, the three largest newspapers in the country conceal the fact that they do not have a cause. “Doesn’t Folha de S.Paulo also have a cause, isn’t it activist? What about Estadão, isn’t it activist? O Globo? They are the biggest defenders in the market. Isn’t that activism? Actually, I think we are much more honest than they are”, he claims. Salvadori agrees: “Generally, those who wish to separate journalism and activism are trying to create a hierarchy, identifying journalism as something better, more pure and disinterested than activism”, he claims. “Those who are interested in well-researched and relevant information, and less in labels, can see that the combination of journalism and activism has produced interesting results”, states the journalist from Ponte. Journalist Ana Magalhães recalls a story that, for her, is symbolic of the attempt to disqualify new “journalistic arrangements”:

I think there is a certain prejudice against independent media. These terms, activist and militant, are pejorative. The other day, Eliane Brum wrote an exclusive on the history of the Yanomami on her new website, Sumaúma. It even led Lula to go there with a huge delegation of ministers. The ombudsman at Folha cited the report, and gave credit, but called it an “activist website”. It was an excellent, thorough, well-written, and well-researched report, which could have been published in Folha, but it was labeled activist. (A. Magalhães, personal communication, March 10, 2023).

The Journalism Code of Ethics is also used to discuss activism and engagement in journalism. “The Code of Ethics defines where we should be”, maintains Paula Guimarães. “We must be on the side of minorities, we must fight against racism, against discrimination, and be on the side of the most marginalized groups. We have a mission to change society, to do political and pedagogical work”, she concludes. Even Meio (which states on its website that “in Meio, the left and the right come together and both arguments will be given space”) argues that it has “one side”. “The cause of Meio is the defense of the values that the 1988 Constitution represents”, states Pedro Doria.

The interviewees’ responses revealed some interesting insights into how the journalistic ethos is being strained by the “new arrangements”. Firstly, they criticize objectivity and the values of neutrality and impartiality bestowed upon it by professional deontology. All the interviewees defined objectivity as a “research method” to ensure the credibility of journalism. “Transparency”, “honesty”, and “double and triple checking” are values they identified as being capable of replacing the “naivety of objectivity”. Their defense of objectivity as a method is close to Moraes’ definition (2022) that thorough investigation, data checking, confirmation, and cross-referencing of information, just to name a few, are basic premises that must be pursued when producing news. They also align with Sponholz (2009), who believes the journalistic method of investigation must be verifiable by third parties.

Secondly, the interviewees believe in taking a side in causes in the face of social inequalities in contemporary society. Taking a side – previously associated with a deontological transgression – is now a value to be pursued based on the idea that journalism is a form of knowledge that has the power to bring about change. Another point here, which reinforces the second, is the fact that these journalists oppose the discourse of impartiality in the mainstream press. They believe that the hegemonic media’s defense of “market neoliberalism” pushes journalism further away from the ideals of justice and social change by reinforcing power structures. Engagement in socially equitable causes, to which they prescribe, would reveal the potential of journalism. In this sense, they are also in line with Moraes (2022), who believes it is possible to reconcile journalistic investigation methods with supporting minorities.

We agree with Assis et al. (2017) and their claim that there is a “high degree of idealization” and “fetishization” among journalists who

call themselves independent (p. 17). “Honesty” and “transparency” become solutions to the impasses of objectivity. Even though transparency is mentioned by some of the interviewees in relation to fact-checking by third parties, they claim “honesty” as an intrinsic quality and, as a result, far from verifying. We note, like Patrício and Batista (2017), that the concept of independence in journalism practiced by digital native collectives is sometimes inexact and only reinforces values of professional deontology, such as relevance and public interest. Despite certain limitations and inconsistencies in their discourse, we believe that “new arrangement” journalists make important contributions toward the (re)thinking of journalism.

6 Final considerations

The interviews with nine journalists at the forefront of digital native journalistic “new arrangements” in Brazil confirmed our initial hypothesis that they are tensioning the professional ethos of journalistic objectivity. As we have seen, distrust of journalistic objectivity is nothing new. At the end of the First World War, journalists started to become aware of their limits. War propaganda forged and manipulated facts that they naively reproduced. The same pitfalls occurred while covering the Vietnam War.

The emergence of identity movements in the 1960s helped foster an environment of disbelief in objectivity. Investigative journalism and new journalism are two traditions that refute the idea of the neutral observer who is distant from reality. Schudson (2010) and Tuchman (1999) note that, during this time of disbelief, objectivity became a strategic method or ritual. Faced with the impossibility of objectivity, journalists use procedures to protect themselves from criticism of their work.

The 21st century would see new component parts tension objectivity. Now criticism turns to the fact that objectivity reproduces power structures and represents patterns of white and heteronormative men. Newsrooms experienced anti-racist movements, triggered by the mainstream media’s racist coverage of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Thanks to the expansion of digital media, dozens of journalistic initiatives have emerged that specialize in covering areas that often go neglected by hegemonic media. Many of these initiatives were founded by graduates of the mainstream press. This

is the scenario in which the journalists we interviewed for this paper find themselves. Despite following professional deontology during their previous experiences in hegemonic media, they are now turning against one of its tenets, objectivity, and defending journalism that stands up for causes.

Is activist journalism possible? Will a new professional ethos emerge out of activist journalism? It is still too early to definitively answer these questions given the corpus of the article and the conceptual fragility of the so-called “cause journalism” practiced by the “new arrangements”. The journalists we interviewed agree that objectivity as a method of investigation and fact-checking must be maintained, but they reject the idea of exemption and neutrality associated with journalistic objectivity. Nowadays they probably would not wear a necklace of garlic around their neck to ward off “evil spirits” (Tuchman, 1999, p. 75) and protect themselves from criticism of their work in the name of objectivity. All interviewees believe that taking a stance in journalism is a “combat weapon” (Moraes, 2022) used to expose social inequalities. Even though we observed naivety and conceptual weaknesses, we believe in the transformative power of these initiatives, that they can revolutionize journalism, as Genro Filho (2012) proposed. Reflecting on professional practices is the first step.

NOTES

- 1 New York Evening Transcript, March 10, 1834, cited by Willard G. Bleyer in the 1927 book *Main Currents in the History of American Journalism*.
- 2 According to information provided to the authors by Ajor.
- 3 Interview conducted via Google Meet on March 15, 2023.
- 4 Eliane Brum, 35 years in the profession, is one of the founders of the *Sumaúma* website, named after one of the largest trees in the Amazon. She has written a number of reports and is a winner of the *Jabuti Award*.

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ADRIANA BARSOTTI. Professor of the Postgraduate Program in Media and Daily Life at Fluminense Federal University (PPGMC-UFF) and an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Communication at the same institution. She holds a PhD in Social Communication from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). Author of the book *A Journalist in Mutation: from watchdog to audience mobilizer* and the book *A Story from the First Page: From Scream to Silence in Network Journalism*. Collaboration in this article: conceptualization, investigation, data curation, formal analysis, writing the original draft. E-mail: adrianabarsotti@id.uff.br

AGOSTINHO VIEIRA. Grad student in the Postgraduate Program of Social Communication at the Rio de Janeiro Federal University (PPGCOM-UFRJ). He has a specialization in Environmental Management from Coppe/UFRJ and in Business Management from the Institut Européen D’administration des Affaires (Insead) and the Dom Cabral Foundation. Collaboration in this article: conceptualization, investigation, data curation, formal analysis, writing (review & editing). E-mail: agostinhovieira@ufrj.gov.br

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