

Chapter 45. A Queer Perspective on Teaching Positionality and Objectivity in Journalistic Writing

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For over a decade now, I've worked as a journalism educator, and during that time, I've noted a change in how students wish to discuss objectivity in their work. Recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the January 6th insurrection at the U.S. capital have further complicated my students' thinking about using objectivity in journalism. Students feel pressure to separate balanced reporting from a "both sides" approach that can aid in the propagation of half-truths and disinformation.

In and of itself, objectivity is a position. Taking "an outside" or "objective" position places some value in understanding where reporters locate themselves to their story and audience. Objectivity stems from the assumption that reporting will always be neutral when covering a story. However, I often ask my students whose position is considered neutral in constructing an objective story. In my experience, there is an answer to this question, especially for journalists with identities like my own.

I am Bisexual, and as such, I am a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. When I was a young reporter, being "out" was considered a hindrance to many hiring editors. As a journalism student, I was warned that my "outside activities," including attending Pride events or going out with other Queer people, might present a problem for getting a job. My sexuality, perceived or real, potentially reflected a bias in my reporting. My classmates were not always questioned about where and who they spent their time with, including religious affiliations or organizations that potentially held a political perspective to their reporting. These experiences forever shaped how I engaged with the concept of objectivity in journalism, which has continued into my teaching.

While I do not think of myself as a capital Q—Queer theorist or Queer researcher—my identity, as is true for my heterosexual colleagues, shapes my perspectives, analyses, and writing. And in my opinion, that is not a hindrance but an advantage to my ability to find and write stories that are often neglected or underserved. Initially, I would not discuss my identity openly with my students, but I have recently changed this practice. Not only do I "out" myself each semester, but I also use both critical media literacy and feminist approaches to examine objectivity in all my lessons. I include questions about whose position is viewed as objective from a historical lens and in current coverage. I aim to push students to think of objectivity as part of positionality in journalistic writing.

It is a disservice in today's political environment not to discuss positionality in reporting. Objectivity has become a weapon against reporters actively seeking truth. An inconvenient fact counter to political rhetoric is frequently questioned as an example of a reporter's bias. While I left the profession many years ago, I see students struggling with this critique, especially when there are so many notable national examples of presidential candidates and congressional representatives referring to the press as biased, inaccurate, or slanted.

A few years ago, a student in my journalism history course told me they believed they could not double major in journalism and social justice because the two had different professional aims. I was astonished that the student had come to view journalism as outside the work of social justice when there were many examples we had discussed in the class of reporters using their coverage to call attention to injustices and corruption, from muckrakers to the reporters covering the Anti-War and Civil Rights movements.

Journalists are also community members. Those communities are drawn along geographic, social, and, yes, political lines. Asking students to examine who they are and what they seek to report is a vital first step in addressing their position in their reporting. Evaluating how the audience will be positioned in their reporting is also important. Through my own experiences, I encourage my students to evaluate their position against that of the "objective" position their critics wish them to occupy. My Queer identity positions me differently than my heterosexual colleagues, but my reporting is not any more biased than theirs by virtue of our identities alone. Through me, my students have found it is not a question of finding a neutral perspective but rather a balanced one that offers critical insights into their reporting.