

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THE OPPRESSIVE OBJECTIVITY STANDARD IN
WESTERN MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

by
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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As a journalist from Beirut covering Lebanon and Syria, I have moved between mainstream institutions including the Washington Post and the Telegraph, to lesser known local media sites such as Daraj media and Megaphone. All too often, American and British journalists dominate mainstream media offices. They work in the name of the “objectivity” standard, washing down reports on exploitation, poverty and police brutality with robotic tones, neutral words, and empty quotes from corrupt authoritarian political figures. This raises a question: What does it mean to choose neutrality when covering a region plagued by dictatorships and injustice?

I aim to interrogate and draw attention to the standard of ‘objectivity’ within prominent Western mainstream media, including its role as a catalyst in silencing authentic voices from the Middle East and how this could cause a great deal of harm in a region of conflict. The rules surrounding this journalistic standard ultimately lead towards dry reports that fail to contextualize on-the-ground realities and subtly label local voices as too “emotional”, “attached” and “biased”.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

To begin, it feels right to express the reason this study was born in the first place, a reason I admit is clouded in exasperation and irritation. For a child with above-average writing talent and an inherited and enforced knowledge of politics, a path of journalistic studies made the most sense, although I didn't consider the limitations of my passport before I made the leap. In 2012, I arrived to Lebanon as young wide-eyed Syrian national, fresh out of the events of the Arab Spring and the Syrian Crisis, and I enrolled in the "Media Studies Program" at the American University of Beirut.

Upon graduation, I began to understand the true bearings of Syrian documents on Lebanese land. I was here on a student residency, which meant I would receive a lot of rejections as I attempted to be employed, especially in the field of journalism. I interned often, doors slamming in my face as soon as I asked for a salary. Soon enough, I got lucky with the chance to be employed at the Washington Post, as a news assistant, a position I didn't understand the political nuances of until later. At the time, I was over the moon. As my career began to roll out, I moved around from one media institution to the other, the Washington Post position on my CV serving as an excellent selling point. I continued to land jobs at international papers as a news assistant and then at local media hubs as a journalist.

As the days passed, I noticed some of the patterns that my more critical professors had warned me about, ranging from Western media's sensationalism of the Middle East, all the way to the subtle racist undertones in news reporting and journalistic interviews that cover "the developing world". Edward Said's Orientalism

would invade my thoughts at different junctures on the job, a rite of passage it seemed for any young Arab academic as they engage with foreign institutions for whatever reason in their career; an engagement that is difficult to avoid. Indeed, frustration with Western media frameworks when applied to the Middle East's diverse context (or any post-colonial context, for the matter) seemed all too common for young Arab journalists. As the political correctness movement soared in my "come-up" and more of us became all too aware of phrases like "white privilege" and "Islamophobia", complaints amongst local Arab journalists were often exchanged in educated conversations during "elite" social gatherings, colored by ramblings about how our realities were construed in the media.

Still, as I continued to report anonymously on Syria in frustration, it seemed other factors, much less picked apart, soon began to tear away at my motivation. I would ask myself whether I could truly continue to work in the field, a profession riddled with horrid news ingested casually during the day. Concepts such as "narrative fatigue" would bother me when stories about refugees would be rejected, or when I would update a correspondent I was assisting about the death of three people in the North of Syria only to find out that it wasn't so "news-worthy". It wasn't long before I received the dreaded label amongst young Arab journalists, one they avoid at all costs to secure their jobs at Western media institutions: I was too 'close to the story', or 'too subjective'.

Perhaps I'm not meant to be a journalist then, I thought. I loved telling people's stories but grew weary of phrases or words deemed 'too emotional' being crossed out of my articles. I felt pitied often, as my more compassionate foreign counterparts would nod their heads when I would ramble about the seemingly arbitrary rules that would

obstruct me from using terms like ‘massacre’ or ‘apartheid’ on grounds that it was ‘opinionated language’ that took away from the validity of my reporting. I consistently felt at odds with the work I do and the institutions I was employed at; I felt I should tackle what I know most in my stories, and yet I had to appear to be un-invested emotionally in order to be taken seriously. It felt incredibly contradictory: surely, if I were to report on an issue I was experiencing too or one that was ‘close to home’, it would make the reporting all the more true, relevant, and accurate? I learned quickly that that was in fact, not the case. Instead, new employers were quick to teach me that the further you are from a story, the more detached, distant, and neutral, the better. As a journalist, you are meant to disengage from all angles, in the name of Western journalism’s God: “the objectivity standard”.

At a surface level, the level I was blissfully swimming in when I learned of the concept in university classes, the objectivity standard appears pretty concrete and logical. If we want to inform people of the closest version of true and accurate facts of an event, we must adhere to certain rules that rid us of all our human biases. We cannot be narrating completely skewed points of views on occurrences, for there will then be hundreds of versions of the truth, some done blatantly in the form of propaganda and others through prejudiced delusional accidents. Well then that would reasonably lead us to conclude that those who are indeed “by nature” detached from the story or those who aren’t naturally detached but capable of detaching themselves from it are better suited to tell it, others be damned.

To say the least, that conclusion was less than satisfactory to me; call it a stubbornness mixed with a strong inability to admit fault, something about conceding that I was simply a bad journalist for not possessing this ability seemed wrong, and the

longer I thought about this concept the more questions were raised around its validity in my mind.

Were all subjective accounts of events simply invalid? Does objectivity include neutrality, and if so, what does this say about us, when we cover regions with blatant injustices and human rights violations with a neutral tone? What is the objective of journalism then in the first place? Is it to passively inform curious readers of events? Or should it play a more active role, one many in the field imagine they are indeed fulfilling, a role of accountability to leaders and change to harmful political landscapes? And if it was indeed an active role we are seeking... are neutral tones and washed down phrases really the way to go about doing so? When do the “best practices” of journalism begin to cause an imbalance or a glitch in the news industry’s moral compass to reporting truths? Where do we draw the line between the passive language of professionalism and suppressed voices in the field?

Perhaps it’s the millennial in me, but throughout my academic career it seemed I was consistently taught that skepticism towards the basic institutional structures that built our world as it is organized today is in fact how knowledge seeking disciplines are honed and sustained over time. Tainted with a violent history of colonialism and war, often at a deeper glance, most infrastructures can be broken down to reveal systems that maintain the same status quo that they might be seeking to dismantle; as cliché as it sounds, the world functions like a well-oiled machine where the elite get richer and the oppressors become more powerful. So, how could the field of journalism be any different?

Somehow it seemed it was always better for a pair of “fresh eyes” to do the reporting on the field - on behalf of the fanatic and subjective natives that couldn’t do so

themselves. The same rules do not apply, or seem out of place, of course, when the situation is reversed. It is not considered common sense, for example, to send a non-American to cover the US elections in Washington, so that they provide a “fresh gaze” and distance from the story. It simply seems out of place and antithetical when these mechanisms of policing local news coverage and media reporting were to be applied within their own contexts. This rhetoric is reminiscent of colonial language used back in the day, where the white man simply had to take the reins and colonize, for the people of the land were far too savage and ignorant to know what was best for them.

I began this research perhaps, with a biased goal in mind; to conclude that the standard of objectivity in Western media is an oppressive one, one that ends up silencing authentic Arab voice in the Middle East and doesn't permit them to narrate their own stories to the world. Naturally, as my research progressed, many nuances emerged and made the thesis standpoint more complex. Although the main argument remains true to itself, pointing to the objectivity standard being inherently oppressive, there are many subtleties to be considered. I am in no way stating that only an Arab should narrate Arab stories to the world, but rather that there is a blatant inequity in the field, one we should pay more attention to. I would at the very least hope that the arguments presented in this thesis start a conversation around the validity of these concepts.

A. Thesis Breakdown/Methodology

This thesis stands to investigate the Western objectivity standard in journalism when it is applied to covering conflict zones with a colonial history (or present), such as the Middle East. It will aim to engage with several ideas: firstly, and mainly, that this

standard ultimately ends up silencing authentic Arab (or native) voices from telling their own stories, whether this was an intended consequence of the journalistic norms that lie in sinister silence underneath this standard or not. Secondly, I plan to prove that the actual meaning of this standard is quite malleable when put into praxis; many journalists differ on their definitions of it, and often it takes on whatever form the code of ethics a specific institution upholds- biases included. Thirdly, I intend on exploring the idea that this standard ends up being harmful in a myriad of other ways, including creating a protective layer around the status quo, perpetuating elitism, and its fundamentally colonial ethos, and finally polarizing subjects that shouldn't have been up for debate in the first place.

I will be doing so through both primary and secondary research. My secondary research will include literature that has brought forth many valid criticisms of the objectivity standard, as well as feminist methodologies that hail more subjective forms of information gathering and knowledge production as superior, or at least a method that is less problematic.

For my primary research, I will be intertwining a series of quotes taken from interviews I've conducted with 29 journalists/editors/TV reporters in Lebanon as a case study. These journalists are of different age groups and ethnicities (some are white and British/American/Swiss, and others are Arab and local), who work for both local and international media outlets and platforms. The information gathered from these interviews will be used qualitatively in the form of quotes throughout the thesis at different junctures, as well as comparatively in some cases when contrasting diverse attitudes amongst the different genres of journalists. For their own safety and job security, all of the real names of the journalists have been replaced with pseudo-names

so that they remain unidentifiable and are able to respond to my questions honestly. I provided each of them with a consent form that promises that their identities will remain anonymous and that I will not use any specific scenarios they provide me with that will easily identify them to those who may know them; instead I used these examples to strengthen my arguments and help me understand different occurrences in the Lebanese media scene.

A few things to note: I've used the term 'Western' already quite loosely and will continue to do so throughout the rest of the work, however often I am referring to English or American positionalities; this is especially the case for the interviews conducted, as a majority of the foreign 'Western' correspondents stationed in Beirut are British or American. Another critical concept, the elephant in the room throughout this entire piece, will be the identity politics I perhaps quite messily discuss in the chapters to come. Since the concepts can get quite complicated, I'd like to narrow down the conversation to the lens of 'privilege', a theme that will be bounced around often at a later stage of this work. This will be made clearer as you read on. Thirdly, there are many different fields intersecting within journalism, and there is a clear difference between reporters and journalists; however, for the sake of clarity, I will be mostly discussing opinion piece writers and reporters- i.e., those who are meant to simply report the news. The rules of the objectivity standard however tend to overlap, and many feature writers find themselves adhering to at least some of the rules under the objectivity standard. Thus, I will be perhaps jumbling the categories at points, just as they are often mixed in the digital sphere of online newspapers, within which they exist. However, I would hope that this mixture wouldn't really serve to go against my argument.

CHAPTER II

OBJECTIVITY DEFINED

A. Evolving Meanings Over Time

To fully understand how we arrived at the frivolous standard of objectivity we have today, we need to do a brief but deep dive into where this “objectivity” came from in the first place and why it is so well-respected and widely adhered-to. It should be noted though before we begin that a large emphasis in this chapter was placed on recounting US-American history of journalism and the objectivity standard, although the first newspapers in the world appeared in Europe, circulating around France and Germany. This isn’t to suggest that there aren’t other more global factors that influenced the birth of the standard (as I mentioned earlier, the scientific method coming out of Europe played a huge role in influencing American rationale), but rather to limit the scope of this research given that it will be focusing primarily on American and British media cultures in covering the Middle East. This is also due to the obvious language barrier that would come up otherwise. This will remain the case for the rest of the analysis in the thesis.

Some quick research about the history of the American media will almost always lead you directly to the penny press- the first popular press in the 1830s (Glasser, 1984, pg. 13). It was named as such for being more affordable (priced at a penny) to the masses than other collections of writings sold back in the day. Thus, the penny press was not affiliated with any political parties nor the business elite (Glasser, 1984, pg. 13), and it was in these writings that we first saw a non-partisan shift towards

a more neutral perspective of writing, although it had not all the way arrived at what we deem an “objective” piece of writing today (Boudana, 2011, p.386).

The mid 1800s was a transformative period in the United States and around the world in general, as radical changes in printing technology and other technological advances began to rapidly cause social, economic and political shifts in the fabric of American society. Other than the penny press, the advent of the telegraph separated communication from transportation for the first time, making a large dent in the way American journalism functioned (Glasser, 1984, pg.13). The Associated Press formed back then in an attempt to monopolize on this new tech, as well as, and other printing technology such as the steam-powered and rotary printing made structural changes to the writings (Glasser, 1984, pg.13).

Still, although we began to inch closer to what we deem to be an ‘objective news report’ like we have today, the publications distributed in the late 1800s included a lot larger and more variable of a range of writing genres (Forde & A. Foss, 2012, p. 124). Trade publications were a lot more popular than ‘pure’ newspapers, such as the Journal in 1884, the Writer in 1887, Editor and Publisher in 1901, and the Journalist in 1907, and they would provide their readers, most of whom were working class, with broad choices ranging from journalistic writing to imaginative literature (Forde & A. Foss, 2012, p. 124).

In fact, many forms of news reports during that time would co-exist together in one American periodical; according to Kathy Roberts Forde and Katherine A. Foss in their piece entitled “The Facts-the Color!-the Facts”: The Idea of a Report in American Print Culture, 1885-1910,” these periodicals included “partisan reports in newspapers and magazines associated with political parties; educational and story-based reports in

the ethnic press of immigrant communities; the reform-minded, advocacy report of the black press; and the competing styles of report featured in urban newspapers, such as the sensational narrative reports of the yellow press (Yellow journalism or ‘yellow press’ are American terms for journalism or newspapers that would offer inaccurate or under-researched news) and the informational reports of the more "respectable" urban papers... these varied forms of report appeared next to fictional stories in both magazines and newspapers of the period” (Forde & A. Foss, 2012, p. 125). During that time, rigid normative professionalized standards had not yet been imposed on the whole field, and newspapers were like “salad bowls” mixing news with advertisements and fiction all on one page (Forde & A. Foss, 2012, p. 125).

Before the 1920s, it would be difficult to describe American newspapers as completely non-partisan; however, after a wave of newspapers shutting down and others merging after the 1920s, it made sense for the little newspapers left to attempt to appeal to a large part of the public, and overt partisanship wouldn’t efficiently do so (Pressman, 2018, pg. 15). As the century began arriving towards an end, “news moved to the forefront, and opinions retreated farther back in the paper” (Stoker, 1995, p. 6).

This move towards more ‘objective news’ was both influenced by a need to appeal to a larger audience, but also by the growing popularity of the ‘scientific method’ at the time (Glasser, 1984, pg.13). By the late 1800s to the beginning of the 1920s, empirical ‘facts’ were critical in narrating true accounts of events, and this focus-on-facts empiricism began to rise (Boudana, 2011, p.386). At the time reporters would pride themselves on ‘sticking to the facts’ and hailed a presentation of them without interpretation or opinion in a neutral third-person voice as the correct method through which one constructs a news report (Forde & A. Foss, 2012, p. 125).

According to Forde & A. Foss, during this time “the formerly distinct but fluid genres of literature and journalism separated into rigidly exclusive categories of public expression... Literature became highbrow. Journalism became lowbrow. Even lowbrow journalism had its cultural distinctions, the neutral, fact-based news report being the most respected form of expression and the narrative or story, report among the least,” (Forde & A. Foss, 2012 p. 127).

This transformation could be traced back to the New York Times, particularly when editor Carr Van Anda was given full control over operation of the paper in 1904 (Stoker, 1995, p.7). Van Anda was famously fond of this scientific approach of news gathering, and he completely stripped away literary qualities in news reports, stating that “humor blurred the reader’s confidence in the reliability of what he was reading” (Stoker, 1995, p.7). He was also one of the first editors to completely ban reporters from expressing their opinions, or taking any sides in their reporting, stating that, "they may state the facts, but inferences are to be left to the editorial page or to the understanding of the reader" (Fine, 1968, p. 74-75). The New York Times, being as influential as it was, helped set a trend for this new process of ‘respectable’ news reporting (Stoker, 1995, p.7).

The focus on pure facts however began to evolve shortly after the First World War, which showed the public that facts by themselves “could easily be manufactured to serve propaganda purposes,” (Boudana, 2011, p.386). Soon, a more ‘realistic’ form of news reporting that involved placing fact into context, more similar to the one we see in newspapers today, replaced the romantic idealism of the early to mid-nineteenth century (Forde & A. Foss, 2012 p.126). In fact, Harlan S. Stensaas, whose PhD was a content analysis of selected U.S. Daily Newspapers from 1865 to 1954, found that only

one third of the news stories in the late 1800s adhered to the newer tenets of objectivity, but that their number doubled after the first World War, with 80% of them reflecting objectivity (Stoker, 1995, p. 7).

A couple of slightly opposing key figures emerged during this time (the 1920s-1930s), offering their own distinct definitions of the objectivity standard to the world. These were New York World's editor Walter Lippmann and Journalism Professor Nelson Crawford (Stoker, 1995). Crawford had less trust in journalist's own abilities to remain unbiased, fearing that at any moment one might be misled unless they follow a very rigid set of rules (Stoker, 1995, p. 7). While his approach also placed lots of weight on "objective facts", he was quite uncompromising in insisting that reporters must be directed by a definite standard and that harsh guidelines should be put into place about what can or can't be printed (Stoker, 1995, p.7).

Lippmann's application of the objectivity standard on the other hand, while also being based on some form of empiricist knowledge gathering and a neutral mindset, placed more responsibility on the journalists and encouraged them to place those facts into context and provide background to the reader (Stoker, 1995, p.7). Lippmann expected journalists to make sense of and interpret the news, which meant a lot of responsibility would be placed on the careful training of intelligent reporters and editors, and trust will be placed in their objective judgements (Stoker, 1995, p.7). He made it clear however that journalists must keep their opinions out of their reports, making a clear distinction between opinions and judgements (Lippmann, 1920, p.32). This later sparked criticism however, that those judgements are simply biased opinions in disguise, but I will discuss this in further detail later (Pressman, 2018).

In his book “Liberty and the news”, a collection of essays written in 1920, Lippmann complains of a rancid state of journalism and highlights the significance of the task of disseminating news, stating “The news of the day as it reaches the newspaper office is an incredible medley of fact, propaganda, rumor, suspicion, clues, hopes, and fears, and the task of selecting and ordering that news is one of the truly sacred and priestly offices in a democracy...For the newspaper is the only serious book most people read. It is the only book they read every day. Now the power to determine each day what shall seem important and what shall be neglected is a power unlike any that has been exercised since the Pope lost his hold on the secular mind” (Lippmann, 1920, p.15).

Lippmann was also one of the first editors to impose a distinction out of authoritative sources of information vs. other kinds of sources, insisting that journalists must ensure that their sources are more or less “official” (Lippmann, 1920, p.27). His definition of objectivity, although debatably not practiced in the manner it was intended to be, is at the very least one most journalists and media academics refer to in modern-day ideological understandings of the concept. During the time Lippmann was writing, most news institutions began to professionalize and standardize the field, with codes of ethics disseminated and schools of journalism becoming more widespread.

Still, much like today, the 1920s up until the 1960s was a time riddled with public debates on the objectivity standard and what sorts of procedures journalists should be following with many varying attempts of application. Earlier practices with a focus on pure facts and official sourcing turned some journalists into stenographers, simply retorting what the elite said, recounting what they did with no extra interpretation (Pressman, 2018). Later in the 1960s, attempts to apply a more

‘Lippmann-esque’ objectivity with context began to unfold, but the result, much like today, lead to objectivity being more ideologically followed but not necessarily practiced in its pure form in newsrooms (Stoker, 1995, p. 8). This is where perception of journalists and editors comes in, which will be discussed in further detail in later chapters, whereby editors may perceive that they are being governed by the ‘democratic’ aspects of objectivity but really being governed more on the basis of self-protection, profit control and competition (Stoker, 1995, p.8).

B. Where Are We Today?

All these factors provided the backbone of the wide spectrum of understandings and applications of the objectivity standard that we see in the eclectic media landscape today, and with the advent of articles and news pieces on the internet and social media, representation of the standard has become a lot more diluted and complex. Still, earlier analysis of the culture of the standard still rings true today.

According to Theodore L. Glasser, in his piece entitled “Objectivity Precludes Responsibility”, the “objective” way had become the respectable way of doing reporting, and that it is respectable “because it is reliable, and it is reliable because it is standardized” (Glasser, 1984, pg. 13). There has become a preoccupation with how our news is presented, overshadowing “any concern for the validity of the realities” the journalists are trying to present (Glasser, 1984, pg.13). At the same time while there is this preoccupation, in a busy newsroom what ultimately ends up happening is a complete breakdown of the ideological definition of this objectivity to simply mean that “reporters should keep their opinions out of stories,” as the real application of the standard will simply prove too rigorous and difficult for a competitive newsroom

(Stoker, 1995, p. 8). Indeed, nowadays if there is one faction of the definition journalists will agree on, it's the 'no opinions' part of the definition. Of course, other rules born in the 1900s will often make their way into the newsrooms of today, although with a varying degree of application depending on the positionality of the newspaper and the case being reported. These include interviewing only 'official' sources, and juxtaposing two clashing truth-claims, or what is informally known as the 'two sides of the story' style of reporting, i.e. remaining neutral when reporting on conflicts.

Of course, the objectivity standard was met with criticism and resistance by some journalists in the past; many before me had seen these contradictions and flaws in how we think about the standard, but their efforts didn't really do much to derail the media landscape. Rolling Stone's journalist Hunter S. Thompson said objective journalism was simply a "pompous contradiction in terms", and New York Times editor Tom Wicker said objectivity "privileged the perspectives of the powerful and caused journalists to withhold their knowledge from readers" (Pressman, 2018). Others, especially younger reporters back in the day, had a radical view on scrapping objectivity all together, a statistic I found still holds today, especially when those younger journalists belong to marginalized communities.

When one delves into the advent of objectivity as a journalistic concept, and attempts to understand its broad range of applications, both in the past and nowadays, it's quite an overwhelming and confusing task, one that in itself mocks the label of 'standard' in its title. The more one attempts to break it down, the more categories, qualities, opposing rules and definitions, contexts, variables and layers reveal themselves making it impossible to truly 'standardize' the concept. This in itself, I believe to be a giant contradiction and valid criticism that arises, perhaps due to the

malleability of the conscious mind attached to those attempting to apply this standard, otherwise known as mere subjective human beings. In essence, journalism is the incidence of human beings narrating other human being's stories, and applying a rigid objective standard to this phenomenon likens itself to feeble attempts to mold and regulate fluidity itself; much like a child with cookie cutter shapes in a pool of water.

In a large way, I agree with much of the criticizing literature that has been published in the past, and I will be compiling the most critical arguments made by those authors alongside my field research to make a compelling case about why they're particularly accurate when applied to 'objective' reporting in conflict zones like the Middle East.

Below you will see that I've decided to categorize the many criticisms of the objectivity standard under two groupings (presented in two chapters): "Is it a Standard? Is it Really?" and "The Moral Implications".

The "Is it a Standard? Is it Really?" chapter will include the first batch of criticisms that all fall under a similar theme, specifically a theme that revolves around disproving that the objectivity standard is indeed- a standard. I will be looking at not only how the objectivity standard escapes a standard concrete definition, but also revealing that even if one were to commit to a single version of the objectivity standard, one will be bombarded by a myriad of hurdles and obstructions that will ultimately make it impossible to fully apply it on the field in real time. These include epistemological hurdles, from inconsistent understandings of what constitutes a fact and what kind of biases are acceptable, to real tangible hurdles that are necessarily born out of the infrastructure of the media world, i.e. factors like institutional politics or what type of person the editor you end up working under is. This chapter ultimately aims to point out that the "standard" is neither standard by definition nor by application.

On the other hand, as obvious from its name, “The Moral Implications” chapter will group all the ethical concerns that arise with what we know the objectivity standard to mean today. Even looking at the many different definitions that will arise in the earlier chapter, there are serious moral implications correlated with each/all of them that will be discussed here. Hence, while the earlier chapter is concerned with refuting the idea that the notion of objectivity can be standardized in the first place, this chapter will look at whether it is even morally desirable to apply any of these understandings into practice anyway (spoiler alert: it isn’t). This will include describing Glasser’s infamous criticism that states that objectivity creates detached journalists, as well as investigating characteristics of the standard that could possibly create rifts in public opinion, ultimately leading to dangerous repercussions for any given population.

CHAPTER II

IS IT A STANDARD, IS IT REALLY?

A. Widely Differing Definitions

“An analysis of the criticisms reveals that most scholars actually fail to define journalistic objectivity,” (Boudana, 2011, pg. 385).

I found this quote to be exceptionally accurate when I went about doing my field research. This first section of criticisms I will investigate, and perhaps the one with the widest range of characteristics and blurring parallels, has to do with the definition of objectivity itself. As I alluded in the historical overview, the objectivity standard’s definition has often fluctuated over time, and we will soon witness how this extensively flexible quality has ultimately led to a widely non-unified idea of what the standard is, and what it should incorporate, amongst most journalists (including the ones I interviewed).

In fact, distinctions in the definition varied so uncontrollably among those I interviewed, that it should be noted that the alterations I end up grouping and mentioning are merely the ones which in my opinion necessarily impose problematic and contradictory applications of the standard. One section of differences for example, had to do with the fact that some believed ‘neutrality’ to be a feature that necessarily falls under objectivity, while others wholly dismissed its association, a disparity which in itself gives birth to a plethora of complications.

To obscure things further, some correlated their definition of objectivity with the part they assumed journalists should play in relation to the general public; this I found to be totally in line with what Morten Skovsgaard, Erik Albaek, Peter Bro and Claes de

Vreese had concluded in their paper “A reality check: How journalists’ role perceptions impact their implementation of the objectivity norm.” In this piece, the writers explain that “the role that journalists perceive themselves to have in society can explain a part of their perception and implementation of the objectivity norm” (Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese, 2013, pg.23). The fact that they say that it can explain a “part” is critical here, because while the correlation made sense to me logically and did explain some attitudes I discovered on the field, many other practices seemed to ignore this connection entirely.

Quite frankly, if there is one deduction I can conclude with absolute certainty after having finished writing these chapters, it would be about the utter confusion and lack of a grasp those in the field have of the field itself.

1. Differences in Initial Definition

In this section of the chapter we will look at basic differences in the definition of the term, based on the responses given when the journalists I interviewed were asked to simply explain what the objectivity standard meant to them (with no other inferring dynamics looming over the actual implementation of the standard). In most interviews, this was the first question I asked, and it was posed as such: “*Could you, in your own understanding and words, define the objectivity standard?*”

Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese had actually provided a list of the ‘dimensions’ of objectivity in their academic piece that I mentioned above, which ended up serving as a very useful guideline under which I grouped all the alternative definitions I got from my interviews. I will categorize the different responses I got from the journalists I spoke to using their four dimensions of objectivity: no subjectivity, hard

facts, balance, and value judgments (Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese, 2013, pg. 25). I will provide brief descriptions of what they group under each defining category in the coming paragraphs.

The ‘No Subjectivity’ category refers to those who relate objectivity to journalists being detached observers of the object they report about. “This means that journalists should not allow their own opinions to affect the presentation of the reported. News reporting is not affected by subjective beliefs or opinions” (Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese, 2013, pg. 25). In my research, this notion could be seen in phrases such as ‘removing your own biases’, ‘no opinions or personal views in the reports’.

The ‘Hard Facts’ category refers to those who believe objectivity to be connected to the notions of accuracy and factuality” (Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese, 2013, pg. 25). In my research, the interviewees alluded to this by saying: ‘information used in reports needs to be fact-driven’, ‘you need to use accurate numbers’, you need to simply ‘not lie.

Those who hold ‘Balance’ to be the most important category in the standard define objectivity by “The balancing of accounts. According to this idea, the journalist should not be a referee and judge one account of reality to be better than another. One must balance the conflicting views in the journalistic account and leave the judgment to the receiver” (Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese, 2013, pg. 25). In my research, I grouped answers such as ‘covering all sides of the story’, ‘giving all sides equal space’, and ‘remaining neutral with neutral language under this category

Those who include the ‘Value judgments’ in their definitions are the journalists who emphasize that value judgements are unavoidable, “not necessarily denouncing objectivity but claiming to implement it in a different way than mainstream journalists.

It means not restricting oneself to mere descriptions of reality but aim at value judgments according to political, social, or moral standards” (Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese, 2013, pg. 25). In my research those were the ones who defined objectivity by using phrases such as: ‘covering all sides but not giving them equal space’, and instead ‘including context that exposes how the sides are NOT equal’.

Of course, in agreement with the writers who had originally outlined these categories, it should be noted that they are not mutually exclusive. Many of the journalists I interviewed had one or more of these dimensions laced within their definitions of objectivity. Although some hailed “balance” and “no neutrality” as critical, they would seemingly totally abandon these concepts later and indeed make a moral judgement about a case, if presented with one which they believed to be impossible to be neutral about. This sort of utter inconsistency is a theme that will repeat itself in basically everything I mention in the coming paragraphs.

a. No Subjectivity

Five out of the 29 journalists I interviewed (four of which were primarily white foreigners- American/British) included the removal of one’s own biases as integral to the process of objectivity. This was expressed using terms such as “leaving own prejudices aside” or “removing your own bias”. It is important to note that the majority of those who mentioned this later remarked that this was impossible to do 100%, but that one should at least strive to at least be aware of one’s biases in order to subtract them to the furthest extent possible from the news piece.

Three others, not including the five mentioned above, cited that being objective means not including your opinion whatsoever in your reporting (all of these were local

Lebanese journalists). However, when most of the journalists I interviewed were specifically asked what the difference between a news report and an opinion piece is, it was almost split in half with 59% making a clear distinction, insisting that no opinions were allowed in objective news reports (41% conceded to a sort of hidden opinion necessarily ending up in the final copy), although this rule was absent from their initial definition of objectivity. When I probed further asking whether an opinion is allowed to be present in a news report under any specific circumstance however, 28/29 journalists replied with a convinced “absolutely not”. This was in fact one of the only questions I found the majority agreed on without question.

b. Hard Facts

Nine out of 29 journalists [no interesting identity correlation] included terms in their objectivity standard definition that fall under this category, including but not limited to: “Facts”, “fact-driven information”, “accuracy when representing facts”, “empirically describing what I saw”, “factually proven information”, and “numbers”.

c. Balance

These last two groupings (3 and 4 ‘Value Judgements’ below) were the ones that had me feeling like I was banging my head on different walls, as they are totally opposing each other, and yet journalists seem to lean on either side depending on the case they’re dealing with. While the general consensus was that in every news story there are many sides and stakeholders that should be represented, the disagreement came when discussing whether all those sides should get equal spaces in the final news

piece, and whether the journalist should make sure to take a neutral and distanced stance within all those sides or instead make a moral judgement about them.

From my interviews with the journalists I collected the following statistics in response to the question: *“Does neutrality fall under objectivity?”*

- **79%** (23 journalists) said No, **21%** (6 journalists) said Yes.
- **76% of the local journalists** (16) said No, **24% of them** (5) said Yes.
- **87% of the foreign journalists** (7) said No, **13% of them** (1) said Yes.

Six journalists out of the 29 stated that they believed that objectivity meant giving equal space to all sides and committing to a neutral position no matter what the topic one is discussing might be. It should be noted however that this wasn't always stated with blind and gratified persuasion, but rather those who assumed this weren't big fans of this particular attribute (much like the many who criticized the objectivity standard in the past by likening it to neutrality).

Interestingly, I found that those who were convinced that the objectivity standard implies giving all sides equal space with neutral language were all hired and/or freelancing for Western publications rather than local ones (5 of them were Lebanese working for a Western media organization, one who was British working for a Western media organization). These numbers are too low and only suggest anecdotal evidence, but perhaps future research could point us to whether this neutrality and “all-side”-ness is indeed a pressure felt more cripplingly by local Arab journalists who are covering their own region, but adhering to Western newspaper guidelines.

The inconsistency that came up with the journalists surrounding this question is most prevalent in this example, in which one journalist had originally vehemently stated that being objective means remaining neutral and giving all sides of the story equal

space with no exception, but backtracked a few moments later when asked about Lebanon in specific. My parts of the dialogue are indicated in italics.

Ghiwa: “If you don't say that the Lebanese political elite is corrupt, even in your reporting, not only on social media, in a way you're complicit, and you're not credible. So, I think for Lebanon, the lines are not as clear cut, as in other countries.”

“But then how are you neutral and giving all sides equal space?”

Ghiwa: “We're not on all sides then I guess. Oh God, I don't know. You're making me rethink my whole life.”

This happened a lot.

d. Value Judgements

This was by far the most common answer to “*How in your own words do you define objectivity*”, and was often given quite fervently, in a manner that exposes some prior pondering and discussion given to the topic. 15 out of 29 journalists gave a version of the answer that was along the lines of ‘yes, we have to give all sides space in your news report, but not equally so, and definitely not neutrally.’

The phrase ‘context’ was used often amongst these responses, as if that in itself would dissolve the subjectivity of those writing the piece. Indeed, the new trend in defining the standard insists that neutrality is not in fact objective, but rather giving more weight to the victim's side in the story is the true objectivity. Here many conceded that to be objective you must present the contextual reality, which much of the time is not a neutral, equally quantified one.

Nadine: “You cannot define objectivity, because what if the reality is not objective? I have to put it in context. Context is the whole story, not just what you see. You’re objective when you show that the story isn’t balanced.”

Already when looking quite briefly at the basic differences in responses (most blatantly those who believe in neutrality in contrast with those who don’t) you can see why this kind of criticism relies on questioning why we seem to be so passionately committed to a standard that in itself escapes real standardizing.

Let’s complicate things even further, shall we?

2. Differences in Definition Depending on Journalist Perceptions

“One of the consistent findings in studies of journalistic role perceptions is that journalists adhere to several more or less contradictory role perceptions at the same time.” (Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese, 2013, pg. 27).

In this section, we will continue to investigate how the definitions of the objectivity norm vary wildly, but more specifically now due to the perceptions of the journalists towards themselves and their roles in society. Just as Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese have so poignantly mentioned in the quote above, even though they were able to define different role perceptions the journalists could have of themselves, these were not mutually exclusive and often were mixed in together in a very contradicting manner (notice a theme?). Sometimes it may have seemed like the journalist felt quite strongly that his role was ultimately passive for example, but then would exhibit quite active intentions in later questions.

In Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese’s research, they outlined four different role perceptions that I will describe briefly for the purposes of this chapter: the ‘passive mirror’, ‘watchdog’, ‘public forum’ and ‘public mobilizer’.

I found it difficult to group the journalists I interviewed very clearly under these roles, but I did interpret that some answers did correlate quite clearly with these notions, and ultimately, I was at the very least able to gain a general understanding about whether they leaned towards a more active or passive role.

The questions I would pose would be as such:

“Do you believe a journalist should play a more passive or active role in society?”

When my interviewees would ask me to clarify, I’d often do so in these general terms:

“If a journalist is covering a crisis or conflict in the news, do you think they should play a part (even if it’s a very small part and not entirely their responsibility) in resolving the crisis or conflict (i.e. working actively)? Or is their job simply to relay events without assuming any part of responsibility (i.e. working passively)?”

The statistics that resulted from my analysis were as follows:

- **45%** (13 journalists) said Active, **31%** (9 journalists) said Passive, **24%** (7 journalists) gave conflicting responses.
- **48% of the local journalists** (10) said Active, **28% of them** (6) said Passive, **24%** (5) gave conflicting responses.
- **37% of the foreign journalists** (3) said Active, **13% of them** (1) said Passive, **50%** (4) gave conflicting responses.

Interestingly, when questioned on these perceptions, the older generation of journalists, ones who perhaps had given courses or talks along the courses of their careers, seemed a lot surer about their answers than the younger generation (many of whom seemed to be considering things for the first time upon being asked).

The **passive mirror** role related to journalists who believe that they merely function as disseminators of information, like a mirror. These journalists believe that “they are able to exclude their own beliefs from their reports and record reality as it is rather than construct the news” (Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese, 2013, pg. 27). It’s difficult to find a journalist who purely believes their role to be passive, but you will find that many will state that they must remain neutral with regards to what they are reporting on (which is the clearest correlation between journalist role perception and objectivity definition- passive mirrors believe in neutrality). This is reiterated in the Skovsgaard & co piece, “The most consistent finding is that journalists supporting an impartial (or neutral) and unbiased news media over advocacy news media show greater support for objectivity” (Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese, 2013, pg. 27).

The **watchdog** role could be considered the total opposite of a passive mirror, as this role requires journalists to make moral evaluations of the information they’re disseminating, with clear measures of the notions of “right and wrong” (i.e. in total contrast to remaining neutral). These journalists feel that they must protect the public from the those in power by keeping a watchful eye on them, and therefore end up being more critical in their reporting than most (Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese, 2013, pg. 27). Investigative journalists often find themselves perceiving their role as such more than others.

The **public forum** and the **public mobilizer** roles can be considered sort of in the subtler middle range between the two mentioned above. The public forum role is closer to the passive mirror role, in that they still simply disseminate information but they actively attempt to do so through the voices of the public, or ‘regular people’. The public mobilizer role does the same but takes it one active step further (closer to a

watchdog) in “leading the public towards distinct solutions to societal problems” (Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, and de Vreese, 2013, pg. 27).

I have to admit that when I first began my research I assumed that that I would discover that a lot of local journalists would feel, similar to me, that their roles should be more active, therefore leaning more towards objectivity not incorporating neutrality; this I thought would be the case as many local journalists are stakeholders in what they’re reporting on, as opposed to foreign journalists who could comfortably come in with an outsider view. Foreign journalists (I assumed) would have an easier time distancing themselves from the information they’re disseminating, without unconsciously (or consciously, for that matter) being motivated by some utilitarian societal goal, given that their news subjects ultimately do not directly affect them. This hypothesis was proven only semi-accurate however, because while these notions were indeed expressed in many instances, I discovered that some local journalists actually seemed to be pretty convinced of the “passive” information disseminator role, while other foreign reporters had more active intentions towards their reporting.

Some journalists I interviewed seemed to be inclining towards passivity as a whole, but much more so towards the public forum role, meaning their definition of objectivity relied heavily on the concept of balance of sides, since they believed their job to simply be relaying the public’s opinions without any moral evaluation of them. Indeed, I found this correlation quite clear in two journalists with their responses to both the definition of objectivity question and then later the passive/active question (both had over 15 years of experience in the journalism field, but one worked for local media and one for Western.)

When Dounia (local) was asked about her own passivity or activity, she stated that journalists need to try their best to be passive, saying: “You can be a journalist and have an opinion, we're all human beings. But when you are reporting on a story, you're not telling them what to think about your story... When you're reporting, when you're investigating, you might write things you don't like, and you will have to publish them.”

And when asked about the definition of objectivity, indeed it included the ‘balance of all sides’ response: “I think objectivity is really giving the same amount of right to respond. You don't give somebody five words, and then give somebody five lines. You give people, ethically, the right context, you explain properly, what they are saying whether you like it or you don't. You really challenge yourself to be fair.”

Hadeel (Western) when asked to define objectivity also said: “Objectivity is, first of all, to cover the story from both sides. It's not enough to do one side of the story and then to leave the other side. If you don't reach everyone, you become affiliated, or you're taking sides. It's not acceptable to take sides.”

Then later, although it was a sort of unclear response to the passive/active question, Hadeel leans towards passivity by at the very least denying the active role saying: “I'm not representing any party. We don't have affiliations. It's not my job. It's not my job to make people go to the street and demonstrate.”

In fact, I found that most people seemed to agree in large part with the public mobilizer role or watchdog roles and the objectivity definitions that came with it. Here, those who believe their role involves public mobilizing seemed to think that objectivity means showing all sides as well, but not necessarily in a balanced manner. Much like section D of the above varying definitions, many of these journalists made sure to mention that you don't need to give all sides the same amount of space, especially if the

reality of the situation isn't balanced. The phrase "contextualizing" was used amongst these journalists often again here as well. I found there to be a lot of layover between the watchdog and public mobilizer role, with some believing in one of the roles or both, with contradicting correlations to the active/passive question. Indeed, some would dismiss objectivity without contextualizing, saying that it is not enough when one is engaged in an active journalistic role to simply be objective, whereas others would contend that you do end up engaging in an active role by being objective.

Let me present you with some examples:

Yousef seemed to be leaning more towards a public forum role plus a passive mirror role, but he implies that by taking on that role one could provide the tools for public mobilizing. Technically Yousef is stating that by being neutral one can still expose the lack of neutrality in a situation.

Yousef defined objectivity by saying, "All stakeholder positions are included. It doesn't express bias to one particular side of the narrative. It tries its best to incorporate all sides of the narrative. It's based on facts and figures that are sourced from credible and reliable sources."

Then he goes on to reject active journalism as his direct responsibility, but rather adheres it to a bonus side effect of his work: "I don't think it should be a responsibility for journalists to resolve whatever crisis is unfolding at all. I think the primary main and only responsibility of a journalist should be to be a vessel for credible, factual and objective information, but it's a very important and powerful thing, because then that allows other people to use that information to take action, whether in terms of policy or at the level of the international community."

Toufik on the other end believes that a journalist should play a passive mirror role alongside a more active watchdog role, and indeed his objectivity definition is more lenient than Yousef's, but also alludes that objectivity should help show the imbalance of reality rather than force a balance:

In response to the passive/active dilemma Toufik states, "Part of it is holding a mirror to society, but you also have an active role in shedding light on things that are important, but that are not generally amplified."

Earlier he had equally mixed stances in his definition of objectivity: "Objectivity includes power dynamics, structure and context. You can show the absurdity of situation by picking an objective stance. If someone did more harm than other person, objectivity isn't diminishing that so they can be on equal sides. Objectivity is actually seeing what it is and what it includes, and who did worse things to the other."

Below we can observe an example of an extremely active journalist Bilal, a young Lebanese reporter who works in local media. Bilal sort of alluded that objectivity on its own is not enough, and that contextualizing should happen alongside it (here, unlike Toufik who modified his definition of objectivity to include contextualizing, Bilal says it has to come alongside objectivity that isn't enough on its own). He also leaned very clearly on a more active role a journalist should play in society, both that of watchdog and public mobilizer.

"Objectivity is just not lying," Bilal explains. "You saw someone fall, objectivity is you saying that person fell, but then you have to contextualize. And contextualizing does not mean that something is less objective, it just means that something is more complex, I don't think that compromises the credibility of what you're saying."

“Objectivity is not enough because objective to whom? For example, when we say electricity shortage in Lebanon, that's objective, but then when we talk about the electricity shortage in a refugee camp, that will not have water if there is no electricity... that's why you should contextualize, because if you report it as just we're going to run out of electricity for three days, that's objective, but then people are not going to understand the repercussions of that. That's why contextualization is what makes the news accessible and holds people accountable and challenges the dominant narrative.”

Then to the passive/active question he explains:

“Considering that we come from countries that have been colonized, countries that have suffered at the hands of the West, I think that we need to instigate something, and we need to encourage people to act. We shouldn't just, report passively like this is what happened, we should say that this is what happened. and something should be done about that.”

To be totally frank I had thought that most local journalists would answer in the same manner Bilal did, but I was mistaken.

Instead I also encountered many of those who gave me contradictory responses, such as in Reem's case, who had originally alluded to the totally passive-mirror role a journalist should take on, but then later implied that one needs the total opposite characteristics.

“You deliver news, you're the middleman in conveying the news between the local community and the international community,” explained Reem. “Your responsibility is to convey what you see. An active role in resolving a crisis, I don't really think that's a journalist's job.”

Later, in response to a question I asked her about the values a journalist should have she replied:

“I believe that anyone who goes into a job such as journalism or writing, it has to be that you're doing something for the greater good, and not simply for yourself, not for selfish reasons. And if the end result of that isn't that you were trying to change a certain government that might be oppressive towards its people, or certain policies that marginalize communities, then what are you contributing other than just simply regurgitating facts about people's miserable states of being or miserable events?”

When I pointed this contradiction to her, explaining that what she just said implies that to be a good journalist you must be an active one, she responded by changing her mind and saying: “You're right, actually I think journalists, for me have to have an active role in society, in what information they're disseminating, and also what opinion they're sharing.”

a. The Activism Question

Without getting into too much detail about what I hypothesize to be the politics behind calling local journalists out for being “too activisty”, I think it would be suitable to add the activism question to the journalists' role perception section.

The conversation around whether a journalist could be an activist and report the news at the same time is a widespread one, and debated quite intensely in journalistic circles. While many on the one hand believe that a good journalist always ends up supporting some kind of cause, for in not doing so he/she virtually have no real passion they're using to fuel their work, many on the other

hand fear they will lose “reliability” among readers or rather fear the loss of work opportunities in large Western newspapers for exhibiting a clear “bias”, the enemy of objective Western journalism.

When I asked my interviewees if a journalist could be an activist at the same time, 72% of them said yes (15 local journalists and 6 foreign ones), while 28% of them said no (6 local journalists and 2 foreign jouranalists). Of the 72%, 23% said yes but also added that they mean yes theoretically, but that it would be really difficult to implement this in the real world. A local journalist Joseph put it this way:

“I think the real challenge would lie in separating both.”

The debate was made even more abundantly clear in a Western journalist’s confused response to the question:

Tiffany: “I think it’s to do with the readers trust in you. If they know that you’re a journalist and an activist, the barrier between the op-ed and the news report has become very porous...”

But then later she states: “George Orwell, he wrote that stories that seek to persuade the reader that the world should be different have much more power than neutral stories; You can’t sustain a long form piece of journalism without a reason for reading it and a reason for writing it, and the reason for writing it is usually you think that something is wrong, or that the world should change in some way. It’s rarely for just the sake of information. So then then you’re like, okay, well, is that journalism? Or is that activism?”

Indeed, many questions arise here; what do we mean by an “activist”? Do we simply mean posting one’s opinion on Twitter? Taking part in a women’s march?

Organizing a black lives matter rally? At what point can one call themselves an activist? Also, how does all of this intersect with the golden “no opinions in reports” rule?

The same sort of confusion appears again in another Western journalist’s response to this question:

Melissa: “For some journalists, journalism is their activism in a way, by writing about certain issues, talking to certain people, investigating corruption and wrongdoing and things like that. But then it's like, Okay, can you be a journalist and attend protests and express your solidarity with certain causes? I think, yes, of course you can. But can you be an organizer? That's where it becomes tricky. If you want to be an organizer kind of activist and... Actually, I do think you can, it's just you have to tread carefully and make sure that the actual journalism you're doing is still...to some extent objective.”

Her train of thought concludes as such: “Obviously, you're going to have, I don't want to say agenda because it's such a negative word, but you have a point to what you're writing. You might be writing about topics you really care about. In a way, that's going to be really good, because the writing is going to be passionate, and it's going to be interesting, and it's going to be dynamic. I just think it's a tricky thin line to tread to make sure that the journalism doesn't become, un-objective.”

Others didn’t think it was such an issue, so long as you can totally separate your activism life from your reporting one:

Yousef a local journalist working at a Western paper explains: “So long as your activism is not something that's forcibly seen or picked up on in your copy, as long as your piece does not read like something written by an activist, then fine, whatever you

want to do outside work. If you want to go to protests, if you want to put banners up on the streets go for it, but the copy needs to still assume a distance.”

For the purposes of this section, the discrepancies in whether journalists generally think a journalist can also be an activist in their day to day is the issue I am pointing to. Clearly the variety in belief here could greatly change how the objectivity standard is applied; some believe you could be objective in your reporting but an activist outside of work. Others, on the other hand, think that if you’ve committed to a life of journalism, you must do what you can to detach yourself from any biases possible; meaning a woman cannot openly support feminist causes, and an African American can’t be too out spoken about the BLM movement, lest they both are deemed too unreliable. Moral implications of this aside, it only serves to spin this standard further up into the air, and add even more conditions upon which it ends up being applied. Is it still objective when one starts off covering something because they believe something needs to change, or is it at that point deemed biased? And if it is deemed biased, how do any journalists get around to writing anything? Does mere human interest equate to activism?

The more I think about objectivity the more my brain feels like the wires of old earphones left to ceaselessly tangle in forgotten trouser pockets.

B. Widely Differing Definitions

In the earlier section, I demonstrated how the objectivity standard means different things to different journalists, which already imposes a varying factor when it comes to its application in the field itself. In this section, to complicate things further (as is the general mood of this research), I will be revealing how despite of the differing ideological understandings of the concept, there is additionally a large plethora of

obstructions that hinder one from applying the standard as one understands it (or corners the journalist into applying it in a contradicting or at the very least categorically different manner).

These factors range from epistemological ones, such as problems and logical fallacies that arise in the journalist's understandings of other concepts connected to the definition (Such as what a "fact" is, or what "biases" are acceptable), as well as tangible ones even more so out of the journalist's control. These include the personalities of the editors they work under, the politics of the news institution they're employed at, the deadlines and word counts the news cycle forces them to abide by and others. Let's look at these in further detail below.

1. The 'Fact' Problem

As shown above, the "fact" related route is a rather typical route to take when journalists are asked to define objectivity, although many will concede that it is not enough of a definition, as one can choose to include a fact and omit another one. This can also be said about numbers, which many reporters love to use as proof of their accuracy. They argue that it's difficult to deceive when you're using numbers, except for if you blatantly lie about them; but then again one can alter some percentages and their references to increase or decrease their numerical value, and therefore significance of a particular event. One can also, as mentioned earlier, simply decide to not mention some numerical values that don't quite fit the news piece.

This is arguably a rather necessary sacrifice, regardless of the inclusion of a malicious agenda, as one cannot possibly state all the facts regarding a news event, because doing so could perhaps result in entire books covering a single news conference

for example (which could involve all the details from how those who attended were dressed all the way up to what the temperature of the conference hall was, all of which are facts, albeit totally irrelevant). Yet again, the debatable relevancy of facts related to a certain event ultimately provides the space for abuse within the lines. Of course, I am not referring to whether a detail, such as one of the protestors being taller than average, is relevant to covering a mass protest against the lowering of minimum wages, or any other examples where one could logically decide that the fact's inclusion would add no merit. Rather, I am referring to instances where important bits of context are deleted, which editors or journalists will justify by pointing to their lack of relevance; this is an excuse that can be made in many small seemingly meaningless instances, that ultimately compound to form an altered impact in the overall news piece than was previously intended. This is often detected by Lebanese news reporters when writing for Western news organizations, the details of which will be discussed in later chapters.

I'll provide examples here, which one could extrapolate to imagine the massive number of potential situational combinations that could arise with similar discussions albeit within subtler (or in some cases even less subtle) details.

One could imagine a report narrating a "clash" between Palestinian and Jewish worshippers at Al-Aqsa mosque where violence broke out; perhaps it would be completely accurate to state that 37 people were injured. However, one could omit, that 35 of those people were Palestinian, and that the extent of their injuries was more serious, as the Israeli police played a part in protecting the Israeli settlers from the violence while simultaneously not doing much to hinder the damage inflicted on the Palestinians. This omission was exposed to have been repeatedly done in the recent

reporting on Palestine where “skewed headlines gave the impression of equal numbers of casualties and fatalities on both sides,” (Hamid & Morris, 2021 & pg. 14).

One can imagine even more specific subtler examples; while the above clearly exposes a censoring of figures that add plenty of important context, what of vaguer political interpretations? Say one was covering a protest against what protestors say is a widely corrupt regime that has been systemically violent with them, starving them and robbing them of their rights and freedoms. What if those protests had gotten “violent”, with participators burning tires and destroying government buildings; and say the journalist has the intellectual capacity to understand that these protestors are reacting “violently” due to years of oppression and failed ‘peaceful’ tactics that saw no real affective changes... Is omitting this behavioral analysis from your news piece considered contextually deficient? Or is arriving at this kind of behavioral analysis inherently biased, even if it’s based on scholarly works that describe revolutionary movements and the population’s psyche during them in an academic and logical manner? Are these not facts then, facts that are necessarily correlated to the story you are reporting, as they significantly affect the reader’s understanding

So, while most agree that it is not enough for objectivity to merely encompass the accurate representation of facts, the implication is rather that whatever facts you are going to use, they need to be accurate and exact.

I found it almost comical that some (four of them, all Arabs) felt the need to mention that objectivity in broad terms simply means not lying. Perhaps this is due to the fact that many of them had witnessed upfront examples of the complete forging of facts or spread of misinformation in their careers or lifetimes, having interacted with the local media environments of the Arab region. Here, there isn’t much to criticize of

course; one can hardly argue with “don’t lie” as a rule, but one can point to other methods of deception that are subtler, a theme we will see intertwined all over this research.

Interestingly, it should be noted that under the “fact-driven” genre there was a distinction made only by two journalists without being prompted, meaning that this was an analysis they had learned or arrived at on their own in the past. However, unfortunately, it still didn’t do much to correct or reform our “factual information” problem (i.e. that we can deceive with our mere choice of which facts to publish). These journalists argued that although they know that we don’t simply offer facts but rather are forced to offer an interpretation of them, at the very least one should interpret them towards the most truthful representation of the story.

This is stated quite clearly in Tiffany (Western journalist/Western paper)’s additional answer to the “Define the objectivity Standard” question:

“I’m trying to focus on the facts, as opposed to interpretations of the facts as far as possible...When you have conversations with editors about this stuff, they will always say, so what are we saying here? So even at that level of the conversation that a reporter and an editor has, there is an understanding that there is an interpretation being done by the reporter and by the paper, but that it should be towards the truth.”

The breakdown I offer below illustrates how this argument is fallacious, specifically with begging the question:

Premise 1: We need facts to be objective (or truthful).

Premise 2: We can’t help but interpret these facts due to being human.

Conclusion: We should just interpret them objectively (truthfully).

2. *The 'Bias' Problem*

Streckfuss (1990) explained that Lippmann's perception of objectivity was based in the broader cultural movement of scientific naturalism. This type of objectivity proved rigorous and difficult. By the time it became generally adopted by the press, the meaning had been diluted to the point of saying that reporters should keep their opinions out of stories" (Stoker, 1995, pg.8).

Even when many conceded earlier to the fact that it is rather difficult to omit one's biases from a piece and that they often end up revealing themselves despite their best efforts, the majority of them (except for a single journalist) did not seem to notice how this contradicts with their strong commitment to the "no opinion is ever allowed in news reports" directive. Although this wasn't specifically featured as a question in my interview, I calculated that 90% of the journalists I spoke to (26/29 of them) had mentioned that it would be impossible to fully remove their biases at one point or another during our conversation, whether it's due to their being human or the impossibility of escaping the subjective framing of the news (i.e. choosing which quotes/facts to ultimately include). Other statistics I gathered from speaking with the journalists that would be relevant here include their responses to a question I posed:

"What's the difference between a news report and an opinion piece?":

- **59%** (17/29) of journalists simply said a news report **omits any opinions** whereas a journalist is allowed to express their opinions in an opinion piece.
- **41%** (12/29) of journalists admit that there may be some opinion in a news report **but that it is expressed tacitly**, whereas one can openly admit its existence in an opinion piece.

Imad: “If I'm not saying in a news report that I think so, I am choosing which facts I lay down every time, I am choosing who I am going to interview, already kind of knowing what they're going to say. And I am choosing how to arrange things in a way where my editors will not challenge me. Our biases are really in all of our pieces, and this is the thing that we always have the room to do, the framing that journalists do all the time.”

Ben: “You can remove all the subjective language, but by choosing the information you've put on the page, you're already putting yourself into the story.”

Perhaps the idea here is that many make a distinction between subtle biases that conceal themselves in news selection and packaging, versus strong opinionated statements that directly assert a positionality on a subject, such as the widely detested first-person statements. For example, it is really difficult to find a statement similar to: “I think this law is wrong,” in any news piece, or any other proclamation that makes a clear assertive judgement on part of the writer. Consequently, for many, elusive biases present due to institutional imposing or complex subjective slips of judgement are impossible to avoid and therefore tolerated, whereas subjective first-person statements can be ruled out easily, and allowed only in their own (often deemed less credible) genre, i.e. under “opinion pieces.”

Dalia: “It should be a red line that within news you don't present opinion. News should be news. You have to tell the audience when you are giving opinion and when you are giving direct information. Mixing both would be misleading.”

The same journalist quoted above later said: “When I'm doing a story, on gender or politics, I choose the people I'm interviewing, I choose what words I'm keeping, to serve the story that I am presenting. I'm not lying about it though. Objectivity is really

flexible...The element of subjectivity is always there. I'm just trying to give the red lines that we should never cross. Subjectivity will have been and will always be there, at least let's agree on some key major factors.”

In fact, others seemed to beat around the bush even less in response to the difference between news reports and opinion pieces question, admitting that their opinions exist in the news report too but that they're more hidden and subtle.

Eric: “In an opinion piece, it's clear that this is my opinion, and I argue for it. In a news report, you state the facts, but you write the piece in such a way that in between the lines it's clear where I stand and what my opinion is, but I don't outright say so.”

Upon first glance this seems quite straight-forward; if there are notions that are deemed undesirable, we must do our best to get rid of them. During the birth of the objectivity standard at the rise of scientific reasoning (as mentioned earlier), it had been somewhat broadly agreed upon that the most honorable attempt at reporting included arriving at the closest version of the truth. This meant a reporter must try to entirely eradicate all his/her irrational humanly biases from what should be (even though the majority of reports involved subjective humans covering subjective human events) wholly impartial news events. This reasoning for the most part is still dominant today; if biases and opinions aren't welcome, we do what we can to eliminate them, which in the case of straightforward opinions is simple to do, while with subtle biases it is not. The harm that arises however, in my very well-researched first-person opinion, is as follows:

This idea of an impossible-to-achieve objectivity and semi-tolerated bias dependent on several factors is not an understanding the majority of news-consumers are aware of.

In fact, many well-respected newspapers and media institutions pride themselves on always committing and wholly applying ‘the objectivity standard’, but the fact that this is broadly acknowledged as impossible to achieve is only ever discussed in elite academic and journalistic circles, among those who have the luxury of debating such topics.

For example, the Guardian’s motto is “Conscience, Nurtured by Truth”, the New York Times motto is “All the News That’s Fit to Print” (a declaration of the newspaper’s intention to report the news impartially), and the Washington Post’s is “Democracy Dies in Darkness” (an implication that the newspaper aims to enlighten the world with accurate information). On the Reuters website, they state that they are bound by obligations to “The Trust Principles”, which were created in 1941 in agreement with the Newspaper Proprietors Association Limited and the Press Association Limited. These principles supposedly force Reuters employees to act at all times with “integrity and freedom from bias” (Reuters website).

The average consumer’s insight on these topics remains very rudimentary in his/her lifetime, especially in regions where public education and critical thought is already scarce, fragmented, and repressed (such as in the Arab region). This results in media consumers, at least those that don’t happen upon a media studies class in their lifetime (meaning: the majority), understanding “bias” in very basic terms. This can be evidently observed in Lebanon.

Young Lebanese citizens growing up in a politically divided society are made aware from a young age that news sources have very clear political agendas, given that most local media institutions do not hide the fact that they are owned by a specific political side. Therefore, bias is understood more in the context of clear-cut political

stances and blatant propaganda, which of course in itself is an incredibly harmful phenomenon. However, it is hardly rational to assume the average consumer can perform a critical analysis of subtle biases arising from premediated news selection, nor notice elusive decisions taken on part of institutions to omit certain information or highlight only particular actualities and gloss over others.

This, I believe, constitutes almost a more perilous harm than blatant propaganda does; it establishes a sly practice that manipulates a considerably larger range of media consumers to trust in what they think is ‘accurate reporting’, all while taking advantage of the public that is ill-informed on the complexities of objectivity and bias. I believe many major Western institutions to be functioning in this manner: they are capable of passing prejudiced ideologies, subtly alluding to dangerous stereotypes and surreptitiously leaning towards “one side” (the opposite of what they claim to do), in a manner that is difficult to detect. They do this all while holding on to their ‘reliable’ status due to, at the very least, being the more ‘objective’ counterpart when compared to the lazier and more palpable dishonesties disseminated from local news institutions (This will be discussed and confirmed in more detail in later chapters, where I found many journalists claim without question that Western institutions are undeniably more reliable news sources than local ones for many different reasons).

The bias problem goes hand in hand with our fact problem, where the loose understanding of both notions offers the potential for manipulation within their flexible definitional borders. Why is it considered innocent when one writes with an ultimately utilitarian goal, i.e. perhaps involuntarily alluding distaste to a corrupt government within their report, but then considered malicious when other involuntary subtle

implications appear in a different report, albeit this time alluding to racist prejudices or political beliefs?

a. The ‘Show Don’t Tell Rule’

Elie: “One trick that journalists do, because they have to be objective and neutral, is they channel their own opinions via their choice of sources. I go to a source I like, and I ask them a question and then the source would say what I would’ve liked to say.”

As I mentioned above, most reporters openly admit that even if they were attempting to the utmost degree to be objective, they will always have a reason for writing whatever piece they’re writing, and that voice comes out in their final copy. One of the ways many agree that this happens is through the infamous “show don’t tell” rule, a rule I was personally taught during my media undergraduate courses.

The rule, widely shared and adhered to in newsrooms, dictates that since you are not allowed to outright say what you truly believe and state the argument you want to make in your news piece, you gather up the facts and interview the people that will prove your point for you. This seemed like the most blatant and nonchalant confession of a bias insertion (or an opinion insertion truthfully) made among the journalists I interviewed.

Stephanie: “A news piece can still have some elements of opinion in it. But it shouldn't just go on to tell readers: ‘Oh, yes. I think this policy is the best’. It's not your place, you can interview someone who says yes, I think this policy is the best, but you can't attribute those to yourself. You're still making the decision to include that quote of agreement, but you're not voicing it yourself.”

When I would specifically ask some journalists (for I unfortunately don't seem to have asked all of them this, but rather only when the conversation naturally led there) about whether this show don't tell rule would have them choosing to interview people that they know would give them a quote that would be in agreement with their narrative, many agreed and said that they do.

Yousef: "Yeah, of course especially with experts and analysts, I mean, when you're writing a piece you always have an idea of how you want to structure your story or what kind of information you want to include, and you know the analysts and their takes, so those tend to be the people that you reach out to."

Melissa: "It's a strange thing to do or to admit, but yeah, sometimes you have an idea for what the article is going to be and you can't come out and say it. So, you have to use an analyst or an expert or whatever."

She continues: "I think that often happens, journalists, newsrooms have ideas of what they want to tell people and they may be selective in what they write, or what they choose, and they might deliberately try and find evidence to say what they want to say." When it comes to the moral implications of these concepts (which we'll get to), it seems most are more readily capable of accepting the "no harm" and "power to the people" biases, depending of course where they lie on the political spectrum. But whether a journalist's subtle biases are revealed deliberately or not, through which facts they keep and which ones they omit, or through abuse of the show don't tell rule, the idea here is to reveal that these human leanings cannot be helped, or controlled, or standardized, and that with no public media education on these topics they shouldn't remain issues we ignore. Perhaps we could live with these 'issues', but quit the pretense of an otherwise 'totally objective news report'.

3. Tangible Obstructions

a. Institutional Politics

“Publishers and broadcasters today are part of a large and growing and increasingly diversified industry. Not only are many newspapers owned by corporations that own a variety of non-media properties... But publishers and broadcasters contend that these connections have no bearing on how the day's news is reported – as though the ownership of a newspaper had no bearing on the newspaper's content; as though business decisions have no effect on editorial decisions” (Glasser, 1984, pg.16).

While perhaps journalists thought of objectivity a certain way, many agreed that they are generally bound by the biases, standards and ethics that their media institution abided by, and this was accompanied with contrasting acceptance of their situations. What I mean by this is: many, local and foreign journalists alike, are disheartened by the fact that they will never purely report based on what they feel is objective truth, but rather will always be obliged by whatever newspaper they're employed at or freelance for (with its specific editors), and what it expressly allows or restricts. This is interesting to note in itself, given that if all of these institutions abided by the objectivity standard, the guidelines or rules they adhere to shouldn't differ that much (other than stylistically).

Others however, although notably fewer, especially those who have been posted at a certain establishment for a longer time period, seemed satisfied and stated total agreement with the guidelines of their newspaper and editors. Other than those who feel ideologically in line with their institution, some perhaps may reach a point where they've built a strong enough reputation that allows them to exercise their own version of objectivity. But this takes an awfully long time, and if I'm being totally honest I don't think I've heard of many Arab journalists that reached that righteous untouchable status just yet.

This section of the criticism is critical, as it ultimately exposes the further multitudes of forms this objectivity standard can take, based on the alternative agendas and politics upheld by each institution. The danger here often lies, again, in the fact that these institutions will state that they generally adhere to “the objectivity standard”, giving readers a false sense of trust in the accuracy of their news, whereas the fine print should add that they do so as long as said reporting doesn’t clash with their political ideology.

This was a conundrum some of the journalists I spoke to were well aware of, as is clear from Shawn’s (Western Correspondent/Western Paper) as well as Melissa’s (Western Journalist/Local institution) response to my objectivity definition question:

Shawn: “This is with every media company, you as a journalist have to sort of obey your employer and through that you’re not independent anymore, and you can’t be the watchdog. You personally think you want to be but if you work for someone you’re just the watchdog for their interests, not the public’s.”

Melissa: “It’s very interesting because I think all journalists strive to be objective or most of them do, but it depends really on where you’re working, because every news outlet even if they’re objective, they have a goal or they have a certain angle in a way. Each newsroom has its own purpose and its own guidelines that drive it. So, I think objectivity is always going to be affected by that as well.”

This was also an answer reiterated by Bilal (Local Journalist/Independent Local Outlet), who expressed distaste with being employed full-time at a Western institutions due to having to be restricted by their ideologies:

Bilal: “That's why I don't want to have a full-time job at any of these Western media companies, because I know that they get sent memos about how they should cover things, what terms to use, what terms not to use.”

However interestingly, even though knowledge that personal politics and funding affect most media institutions is common, even amongst the ones claiming to be completely independent, it seems many journalists assumed this issue to only be prevalent in Arab local news institutions, not Western ones.

Dalia, (Local Journalist/Local Institution): “It's about Arab media outlets. Those young journalists are faced with mainstream media outlets that are corrupt, politically funded, and that affect those who work under this umbrella. The credibility has been compromised for a long time.”

This isn't to argue that institutions in Lebanon aren't famously sectarian and funded by political parties to push their own agendas, but as I'd mentioned earlier, it feels incredibly problematic that many simply assume this to be an issue only amongst those blatantly affiliated institutions rather than Western ones with perhaps more concealed racist ideologies.

Robert W. McChesney put it best in his book “The Problem of The Media, U.S. Communication Politics in the 21st Century”: “The problem of the media [i.e. biased media ownership] exists in all societies, regardless of their structure, but the range of available solutions for each society is influenced by its political and economic structures, cultural traditions and communication technologies among other things. In dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, those in power generate a media system that supports their domination and minimizes the possibility of effective opposition. In

democratic societies, the same tension exists between those who hold power and those who do not, only the battle assumes different forms,” (McChesney, 2003, pg. 17).

Indeed, many local journalists who end up working for Western media institutions answered in this manner, stating that they were lucky to not have to abide by the restrictions their counterparts in local institutions had to:

Nadine (Local Journalist/Western Institution): “Some colleagues in Newtv or LBC or MTV, local channels and institutions, yes, those people have to follow the politics of their institutions, since we don’t have professional standards in Lebanon. We have a really vague and wide law. So those, of course they’re not objective.”

One local journalist working for a regional Arab institution somehow admits that she is restricted in her work but then in the same breath says local journalists have it ‘worse’.

Dana: “My outlet will tell me not to cover something. It’s happened to me before. There’s other things, perhaps as an Arab reporter, which btw isn’t as bad as a local [Lebanese] one, they have it even worse, which stops us from being objective. I know it's wrong but this is my job because this is the media that I work for.”

Regardless of the political implications of this idea that Western media is always freer to be objective than local, many admit that wherever they work will ultimately affect their ability to be objective, and that they couldn’t afford to do much about that especially earlier in their career.

Bilal: “Journalists are selling their labors to these companies, and they need the job, they need to eat, they need work. Genuinely, if these people are working class, they are tied to their labor and being employed. They're going to have to make the sacrifices,

they're going to have to shut up when their managers or their CEOs or their editors tell them to shut up, or they get fired.”

Dalia: “You still have a chance to work. I mean, I worked with a politically funded media outlet. But I don't regret any work that I did. I worked because I have to work, because I need to work. I mean, this is where I get my income. It's true that sometimes I tried to push the lines, sometimes I failed, sometimes I succeeded. Sometimes I paid the price for having my stories not published.”

Imad: “I have been talking to friends who are working in Western media which have been taking extremely terrible stances on this [Israeli-Palestine] conflict recently, and they feel so ashamed, but there is nothing they can do. Not everyone has the privilege of just walking out of their job and remaining without a salary or an income, and they can't push against the power of the editors.”

Many admit that in order to be able to continue working and earning their salaries, they practice self-censorship before the institution even gets to reject their pitches, which can be argued is still the institution's weight on objectivity's implementation. The below quotes pertain to the self-censorship conundrum:

Bilal: “I'm not trying to be revolutionary from within, we can't do that. And generally, I don't try to push those boundaries too much. Because I am in a very precarious position when it comes down to it, I just freelance, and I have no faith in them to help us in this fight for liberation. And at the same time, I'm pretty sure I don't have enough leverage to push them to do something.”

Karen: “Nobody's completely objective. It depends on the outlet they are working for, in part. I would usually try to do stories for outlets that have political leanings that were not specifically political, because I just didn't want to. I mean, I didn't want to be

faced with this position where I'm having to do something that doesn't sit well with me, ethically, and I knew they'd reject any other angle anyway.”

Ghiwa: “Let’s say you’re writing for a Saudi outlet. Opinions have to follow the government lines. So, if you're talking about a specific subject, there are things that you can't necessarily tackle. You’re not going to write about Khashoggi for example. Wrong outlet. It's not like people imagine, there no intelligence person saying you can’t do this. In reality, there's a bit of self -censorship.”

Tara: “When I pitch a story, the same story, I need to find different angles for each outlet, or at least different ways of pitching it, because I know that each outlet has a view on things. And if I'm a freelancer, I need to work to get my stuff out there, I need to frame my angles to fall under their view. I need to adapt to a certain extent.”

The problem that arises is the same as the “bias problem” I mentioned earlier, where many local audiences wouldn’t be aware of the subtle biases these institutions have within the lines. Indeed, objectivity or this golden standard arrives at yet another obstruction that gets in the way of its application.

Here I thought I’d attach a back and forth I had with a local journalist who works for a large regional organization, where she insists that people already know that her institution is biased in certain ways so it’s not their problem nor job to point it out. In many ways, I felt like this back and forth represents a lot of the positions these institutions hold when they’re probed about the bias problem. My section of the dialogue is in italics:

Dana: “It’s not like we get instructions not to do something, maybe because we know the political standards of our institution. It's self-censorship.”

Don't you think that those political standards should be announced to the public?

“No, it’s clear. If you follow us, it’s clear. It’s not clear that it’s not a state-owned institution of course, it’s a private news institution. But its known where their leanings are.”

I mean it's not really known unless you understand media politics well enough.

“Of course, it is, you can tell from the news angles.”

If it's that obvious why shouldn't it just be announced then?

“Why they should announce it?”

Because it's a clear bias.

“No, it’s not like they’re hiding it. It’s just known.”

I mean you find out from a complex media understanding of the coverage.

“When I was a fresh graduate and [my station] had just opened, I just googled it. I saw who owned it so you just know.”

Again, not every media consumer has that kind of foresight.

[Another journalist had alluded to this, saying: “Things are really complicated when it comes to owners and the media, the first thing you learn at university is that you have to see the political standing of your media institution.” As if they’d totally forgotten that the majority of news consumers never got a media degree at university.]

Dialogue continued:

“I don’t understand why do they have to announce it? Just because its biased? If I came to sell you Pepsi or fresh juice I don’t have to tell you by the way the Pepsi might make you sick and the fresh juice doesn’t.”

I mean they warn you that cigarettes cause cancer on the packet for example...

“Well it's not a health issue...it's different! It's not their job to tell you who they are. Everyone knows that even CNN is biased even fox news is biased.”

Again-

“Look when objective outlets report on something it's not like it's a lie, it's showing their view of the story. We don't lie, we tell the truth all the time but it's the part that we see from the truth. For every station whatever benefits their cause, it will highlight it. Yes, maybe not everything they say I agree with 100%, but they're also similar to me in many ways. If that weren't the case I wouldn't have been able to work here for this long.”

She continues afterwards to shift the responsibility towards the audience when they're interacting with published news, which ends up serving as a great Segway to our next section:

b. In Relation to Different Audiences

Yet another interesting fluctuation, this time also based in both journalists' internal perceptions as well as what every news institution outlines as their targets: Varying types of audiences.

There are different schools of thought when it comes to how a journalist must approach their audience or readers, and it tends to seem as if those on either side believe their school of thought is the golden rule of thumb (even though they are totally opposing views). These are their responses mostly to a question phrased as such: “do you usually write assuming your audience doesn't know anything about the story, or knows a lot and is a critical thinker?”

Some believe that as a journalist you must always assume your reader knows nothing of what you're talking about, giving as much information and context to your news piece as you could possibly muster.

Ghiwa: "I try to think of someone who doesn't know anything about the story...It has to be nuanced, but also simplified a little, so that everyone can get it. I don't think that this solely means to dumb it down, but to explain a bit more background, not to immediately delve into details from the beginning. To set the big picture at least, and then maybe, if you have the space at the bottom you go a bit more in depth."

Dalia: "You have to stick to the general rule that when you talk about something, you don't assume that others know. You have to put it in full context and full information."

Rinal: "It's always safe to assume that you might have a new audience that's coming in every single day. Not dumbing down, but maybe people don't understand the entire context."

Toufik: "I stand with what benefits the most, and that's writing as if the audience knows nothing about the country, zero. It's just really important to assume that your story might be read by somebody who would only ever read that one article about your country."

Others however insist that we must go against this approach and that instead we must treat the audience with "a little more respect" (apparently here assuming the audience's lack of knowledge of the context is disrespectful), in informing them like they're critical thinkers who can take everything they read with a grain of salt. Here many who were opposed to this line of thinking immediately made the connection that a reader's lack of knowledge is inherently "stupid" or "idiotic".

Eric: "Always the golden rule is never assume your reader is stupid."

Elie: “Approaching journalism, from the stance that your audience is stupid, it's just going to make a really bad journalist. And very few audiences today, including myself, and I consume news all day long, and when we're reading we're criticizing at the same time, we're asking questions, no one just gobbles anything up. For real no one, even the people we like to imagine that they do, they have their own biases, and they're always reading critically.”

Nour: “I have a lot of respect for our readers and I think when you treat your readers with respect, they can sense it, they could feel it in how you're reporting. I don't think this idea that people are idiots and they don't know anything, and we have to either spoon feed things to them or speak to them like their five year olds is the right approach.”

The different approaches here could have widely varying effects on the final implementation of the objectivity standard: while some alluded earlier that objectivity always involves context for example, perhaps many would neglect to offer too much of it so as not to assume their reader was too uninformed. The degree to which a journalist sees their reader as being informed will correlate directly with how he/she will structure that information and present it, and here it seems we arrive at yet another juncture in schools of thought.

The more common answer I got to this question supports the argument I make in the section above, where I discuss how the institution's politics and aims tend to interfere with the journalists' implementation of the objectivity standard. Many claimed that how they envisioned their audience would depend on the outlet they were writing for, many making similar comments about what local outlets might want vs. Western ones.

Eric: “It also depends on which publication you work for. For an international publication, it can’t be too local, can’t be too detailed, can’t be too nitty gritty, the subject has to be big which appeals to people universally.”

Many others pointed out that usually they have to give a little more context when writing for an international publication, although some contended that when they attempt to properly do so their nut-graph is often later oversimplified and cut down by their editors.

Karen: “The local Lebanese outlets, they're going to be interested in things that are local, that don't necessarily have any impact on the world outside of Lebanon. Whereas if you're pitching to an international outlet, there has to be some reason that an international audience would care about this story... You do have to give more background to explain the context when you're writing for a non-Lebanese audience. You might have to also simplify a bit just because you don't get all the space in the world to explain the background and the nuances of the issue.”

Melissa: “I’m always trying to give as much context as possible, but it's always hard because you could give context and background explanations forever, you could go so deep. So how much am I going to explain and how much do I assume that they know? It depends on the outlet. So, if I'm writing for a local Lebanese one, as opposed to a regional one or an international one, they're obviously going to give a little bit less context. You don't have to explain as much who people are or what things are and events or whatever.”

Yousef: “The advice you always get from editors working in western press is when you write a copy, think if it's legible to a man in Dearborn drinking a pint, they should read your copy and understand it. The topic has to have some kind of interest for

Western or foreign readers, which means it can't be too micro politics, too local politics, it should speak to a bigger trend. The local press caters to a local audience. Which means it gives you more room to cover things and your pitch could be super micro. A difference in audience defines a lot of work.”

Only a few responses seemed to ethically question this elitism that comes with journalism, the kind that expects the reader to be educated and critically thinking or not, but we will get into these in the moral implications chapter. Here, it would suffice it to say that the way a journalist thinks about their audience, be it through their own ideological volition or by adhering to who their institution assumes to be their target readers, ends up reflecting on their writing, and therefore on the way the objectivity standard is implemented. One can argue that perhaps this perception doesn't involve such a detrimental effect, but it ultimately adds onto a pile of other varying conditions that topple the very foundation of this standard.

c. The Incredibly Fluctuating World of Editors

“Eric: “Well, the editor, like the journalist, is a subject who has his or her preferences It's normal. We're all human beings. We all have preferences, we all have our opinions. An editor is the same thing.”

So far, we've looked into how implementing objectivity could be affected by the agenda your institution sets for itself as well the journalists' perception of who their audience is (as well as who the institution outlines as their target reach). Logically, and famously, the next obstruction comes from the guardians of the news: the newspapers' editors, who play a critical role in news distribution.

“For reporters, “the editor’s constant eye” forms an inescapable center. Editors exercise control over their postings, their writings, public exposure, and career chances” (Pedelty, 1995, pg. 76).

Many agreed that ultimately what ends up being published is the editor’s choice, making them the final gatekeepers and decision makers in what makes it to said audience and the public. Below are four responses I assembled that alluded to this:

Bilal: “Editors are the people who control the narrative, the people who sign off on every article before it comes out.”

Reem: “Editors play a huge role. The editor chooses what pitch goes through and what doesn't. That's already gatekeeping. They get to decide what stories are being told, what stories aren't, what angles are exposed and what angles aren't. Once that final product is commissioned, they get to decide how the narrative is shaped. What information am I going to emit? What information am I going to keep? What sentences am I going to rework and for what reason? They have an overarching role over that writer and control that final barrier of what gets seen by the public.”

Ben: “Massive role! You can pitch 10 times, all these different stories, and they won't take it. And that will often mean that those stories never get written anywhere. But one story that fits what they're looking for, they will take it. You gradually get used to it and know what they want. And then you pitch what you think they want, rather than what you think is necessarily the most interesting story. You know that you're writing for what they want, because they're going to pay for it. Editors pretty much have all the power.”

Rinal: “It kind of reminds me of like, you know these shitty Christmas movies? They kind of portray the editor as working under the journalist and I was like where did they

get this from? Have they never entered a newsroom? You have no freedom! You can't do what you want without your editor's approval."

While the majority of journalists I spoke to admitted that they have run into issues or disagreements with the editors they've worked with, only three of them confessed that they hadn't had so many problems, although with their own reasons as to why not. One has been working in the same position at her paper for a very long time and has become in-line with the newspaper's editorial policies, while another just claims she was lucky.

Sally: "That doesn't happen very often. And one reason for that, it might sound big headed or something. But I'm very experienced, I know what my job is, I know what makes a good story."

Tara: "I've been lucky that most of the editors I've worked with, there's a lot of back and forth going on. I had a lot of say in the final output and the final outcome of it. And I think maybe that's just my experience, maybe I'm lucky."

Here many pointed out the differences between local news organizations and large western ones, mainly being that there are more fact checkers and editors in general in Western organizations, perhaps due to the low funds obtained by smaller local ones. While smaller local news institutions may have clear political biases existing in a highly polarized area, Western publications may appear to have none, but they do involve a massive number of layers that go on before a story is published. Some journalists who have worked in both situations outlined the differences to me below:

Dounia: "When you work in big organizations, the ratio of editors to writers is between probably around one to five. In a local organization, you can have 300

contributors and like three editors. The editor is not really editing here, the editor is barely able to notice big factual mistakes.”

Mark: “[In the Western newspaper I worked for], there would be the writer, who would file the piece to the editor. Then it would go to the copy editors who would do four reads, two copy editors doing two reads each. Then it would go to the fact checker, and then go back to the editor to resolve all the copy edits and the fact changes, then it would go from the editor, back to the fact checker who would sign off on it, back to the copy editors, to the associate editor in chief, to the editor in chief, back to the copy editors. There were so many layers of review, it probably went through more than 10 sets of eyes. Things would change a lot. Some pieces would be, between the first draft and the final draft, you couldn't even tell it was the same piece.”

The same journalist continues: “I mean, I don't know any local news outlets who have dedicated fact checkers. They'll be an associate editor or something like that.”

Another journalist working at a large western organization explains: “There's like an editor who sort of oversees what I'm doing, a regional editor. The copy editor is the one that you have to like, sit and argue about a word with. And the desk editor is the one that ultimately commissions the story. At the level of desk editor more filtration happens, because the desk editor has more time constraints, they are working on lots of countries and regions at once. They are not as in love with all your stories as you are.”

Toufik: “A lot of my experience with local media editors is that they just copy my work and post it. And these publishers, they don't ask a lot of questions to develop the story to be quite honest with you. Elsewhere, they ask to make things clear for context. This is an issue that has to do with the journalism education infrastructure in Lebanon

itself, and unfortunately, I get much more critical questions when I report for folks elsewhere than I do here, whereas here its mostly copy editing, which is a shame.”

Regardless of these differences though, we can still sort of arrive at the same point that editors add a new layer to the objectivity implementation process that makes it even more complex and inconceivable.

Rinal: “I think in the US, their need to insert their voice, was even larger than when I worked locally. There you had a couple of editors that would go through it. But regardless, you have to make sure your editors are happy, to change things according to what they want. And that hasn't really changed, Western or otherwise.”

Much like the self-censorship that comes with knowing your outlet, the same happens with knowing your editor. “You’re more inclined to write the story the way you think they are going to use it than trying to confront them maybe- you get along better with them if you do that. it is self-defeating to fight them” (Pedelty, 1995, pg. 72).

Others admit that while they play a big part in reshaping the narrative, it does not always have a negative on the outcome.

Tiffany: “I will have lots of conversations with the regional editor about various stories on a pretty regular basis, and he'll have ideas because he's got very long experience in the region. Sometimes, things will have already been covered or happen all the time, and I wouldn't necessarily know and he'd tell me. Sometimes, it's just my error, not their fault.”

Fares: “Sometimes it can be positive, just fixing some things, helping you focus on your point better. Sometimes it can be negative, really butchering the pretty parts. And

I've seen cases where the reporter would receive, a big amount of attacks, criticism and controversy for something that was actually written by their editor.”

What was remarkable about this subject was running into perhaps the most telling and stubborn show of necessary subjectivity that exists in the news publication process, which was discovering that it is not so much that editors' work in line with merely what the institution's editorial policy states, but that their work fluctuates widely as a matter of personal taste or character type of the editor in question.

The same journalist that confesses above that she doesn't have issues with her editor due to her massive experience later admits:

Sally: “But you can definitely run up against the taste of an editor. Sometimes I think of a story idea I just love, and my editor, he's just not interested.”

Others had similar clarifications about the variety of editors they've worked with.

Karen: “The editor always has the final say, but some editors take a much heavier hand than others. Some editors, as long as you didn't say anything that's glaringly wrong, or makes no sense, then they'll leave it to the reporter's judgement. Others might try to shape the story from before to push it in a certain direction. Every so often, one of the editors might even have their own personal beef with some specific person or their own preconception and that comes out in my work somehow.”

Melissa: “The editors that I've worked have different styles and ways of working. It depends on the kind of person. I have one editor who's more liberal and free with his writing, whereas I'm probably on the side of caution in terms of the language that I use in articles. And sometimes some of them are more conservative than me and in terms of how they use language.”

Mark: “Basically, with the no-no list, all editors in chiefs have their own preferences. Editors in chief will vary on subjects such as. how many reports do we need to be able to say this is a verifiable fact? At what point do you have to reach out to people for comment on incendiary things that you may be reporting? And then also things like quotes, some editors have disagreed on if you have a source who just says something that's just completely off the wall and a cool quote, some believe that you should be able to print it. And others believe that quotes need to be fact checked, basically.”

Yousef: “It depends on the editor. There are general guidelines, we have style guides, but it also changes from editor to editor. You have some editors that are very soft, they don't make much changes to the copy. There are others who completely overhaul the copy. Some editors don't mind if your stories are over the word count but others want to make your story the shortest version of itself as possible. Editing is such a precarious process. It's not defined by any rigid structure.”

i. Pack Mentality

“The event interested the reporters, although most doubted their editors would find similar news appeal in a story merely involving Salvadoran deaths. The doubters fell in line however, once a few colleagues decided to make the trip. They could not risk getting scooped. As a result, the story was covered by the whole committee, a common practice known as ‘pack journalism’,” (Pedelty, 1995, pg.31).

Johnathan Matusitz and Gerald-Mark Breen define “pack journalism” as “a practice whereby large groups of reporters cluster around a news site, engage in copycat reporting by using and sharing news information, and lazily refrain from confirming the data through independent sources,” (2012, pg. 896).

On the note about editors, I thought it would be rational to add this section on pack mentality here, as it is usually the editors of these institutions that hurry to include “scoop” stories to their paper, to the common displeasure of the journalists. Here yet again we see how editors play a specific role in hindering the objectivity process, this time by sending reporters out to cover things they perhaps wouldn’t have chosen to cover or have no information about, while at the same time making sure to cover that story simply for its appeal amongst other papers (or for business competition), rather than in a quest for objective and truthful reporting.

“Even though journalists sometimes think of themselves as non-conformists and independent thinkers, they are practically commanded by editorial and executive leaders in media outlets to ‘follow the pack’,” (Breen & Marusitz, 2008, pg. 2).

In this manner, the intention behind the reporting is tarnished and personal choice, one that might be motivated by pure intentions of truth-gathering, is snatched away from the journalist. As Breen and Marusitz explain, “numerous news organizations appoint a sizable number of reporters to the same events... leading to a genuine elimination of independent reporting, a disproportionate and mismanaged selection of news topics, and a loss in one’s wishes to dissent,” (2008, pg. 3).

This section was investigated through me first asking: “*Do you mostly pitch your stories or has an editor sent you out to cover some?*” to which those with full-time jobs in news institutions said both, whereas freelance journalists said that they mostly do the pitching. After that I would ask: “*Have you ever been affected by the so-called ‘pack mentality’ in the field of journalism?*” 66% (19/29) replied that yes, their news institutions are affected by pack mentality and that they had been sent to cover a story based on that in the past.

Imad: “Of course. That is mostly what motivates my editors, is that they saw a certain story on a different newspaper and they wanted get the same one without stopping for a second to worry that maybe that other newspaper was not being very accurate, nor did a very good job, or was being rather sensationalist in their reporting.”

Eric: “Yes, of course. What happens a lot as well is, imagine a newsroom in a Western newspaper. They will have two three TV news channels on at all times. There was a golden rule of thumb, whatever the main headlines were of that day, the three main stories on those channels, one or two should be on the front page of our paper. So very often, the editor would write me and say ‘I have a story idea’, and it would be one of those.”

Eric continues: “And the other way around would happen too, if I would propose something to my editors, they would be nervous. ‘But I haven't read this anywhere yet!’ they’d say. That's the fucking point of journalism, isn't it?”

On this issue academics Breen and Marusitz explain: “Although one might blame reporters, photographers, and sound recordists for the mob scenes that have cast disrepute on the news media... the blame should really fall on the city editors who send out these reporters and photographers,” (2008, pg. 3).

This was apparently a bigger issue amongst those who work at wire agencies, as was pointed out to me by one of the journalists:

Yousef: “The wires are always covering the same shit. And we would also have cases where we receive emails from our headquarters, where they alert us to a story that they saw in one of the big ones [Western organizations] and they ask us, can we match? We try to find a fresh way of telling the story or finding a different angle. Because the logic is that even though it's been out on these organizations, it's not on the wires yet.

So, millions of clients around the world won't have access to this content. If a scoop was reported somewhere else by another outlet, if it's not on the wires yet, then we have to make sure that happens.”

Often journalists expressed to me that they get sent out to cover stories they have no interest in or have very little information about.

Ben: “Like today, I’ve been sent out on a story, which I have very little knowledge and understanding of. There is so much information I don’t know about it. I wouldn't have pitched it in a million years.”

There was also a difference that was immediately made clear to me when I spoke to some of the correspondents for the giant Western organizations, who were quick to point out that the way they were affected by pack mentality was through other organizations copying their stories, and not the other way around.

Sally: “Well, I find that most of the time the [newspaper name] sets the news agenda, I mean read my coverage on [certain topic], and then read theirs and look at the dates. And you'll see that I kind of dictated the story to them.”

Lynn: “It’s even worse than that, sometimes I pitch a story, and it gets turned down. And then a few weeks later, one of our main rivals will publish that story. And then my editor will come back and say, well, actually, it sounds like an interesting story. Do you mind writing it? And then I have to find a new angle on it.”

Many expressed that this pack mentality issue was one that cannot be helped and was just part of the way the news cycle worked.

Dounia: “This is the news game. If the story is big enough then you’re going to want to chase it.”

Sally: “If somebody gets a really good story and an important story, another news organization is going to say, ‘we should be telling our readers this, too’. Then you might get assigned this after, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. And sometimes, the second one does it better.”

Mark: “Sometimes I understand. There's a feedback loop, because oftentimes when various outlets descend on something, it is because it's something that people care about, and it also is perpetuated by the pack mentality.”

Of course, this commentary is not to say that it is always a problematic thing, for at times stories are important enough that it seems valid to have multiple people and outlets covering them so that we could make sure to do the story justice. Rather this section is a look at what motivates the news publication cycle, and proving that many factors make it a far cry away from simply ‘objectivity’ goals and motivations. Kevin Stoker comments, “Newspaper editors may perceive objectivity as rational, open, and democratic, but the concept is more often governed by competition, control, and self-protection” (Stoker, 1995, pg. 8).

d. Within the Lines (Word Counts, Deadlines, Headline Choice)

“Tiffany: “It would be great if every news report was a documentary, nearly all of them deserve to be in some way, but that's just the medium. It can be really frustrating, I think that's one of the things that bugs me, is: ‘did I do justice to the story?’”

Another straightforward obstruction to the objectivity standard lies in another necessity to the news publication process, the sort of conditional properties attached to every news piece. Every journalist learns that their work will often be limited in both time and word count, which if one goes to journalism school beforehand, their professors will make it a point to practice cutting down your words and narrating news

as quickly as you possibly can. Depending on the size of the newspaper, its style guidelines, the space allocated to your story, your outlets' standards or as we saw above, your editor's preferences, once you set out to convey the objective truth behind a story to the public, you will necessarily be limited in the word count and time you have to do so, as dictated by the news cycle.

Again, one can imagine the benefits to this process; not every story can be portrayed in an entire book, and not every news item can be given documentary-level space. Regardless, it is merely a discussion on limitations to on the applications of the objectivity standard. When asked if word counts or deadlines have ever bothered them or gotten in the way of their pursuit of objectivity, the journalists I interviewed responded under these statistics:

- **79%** (23/29 journalists) said they do bother them one way or another (16 of them said they both bother them, while 4 specified that only word counts bother them, and 3 said only deadlines bother them).
- **21%** (6/29 journalists) said that they don't mind either.

The results of rigid deadlines and word counts are often described by journalists in terms of loss of important context or the slipping of factual errors due to time constraints. Some even mentioned examples of entire stories never being published because they were not able to get them out in time.

Karen: "You always wish that you had more time to get more context and talk to more people. We just have to deal with it."

Elie: "I always joke about the butchering review. There's the first review that's fair, the second review is fair, the third review I need to cut 100 words more and I feel like this is where all the nuance gets taken out."

Imad: “There are times when I felt that maybe they should have given me more time to cover this idea and more length, because I think this idea deserves more words and deserves delving deeper into.”

Wassim: “One time I broke this story about *, and we had the chance to advance the reporting out of Lebanon. But because we weren't able to secure interviews with very key contacts, we had a week of timeframe to get that interview and we didn't get it in time, so the story never came out. It would've made for an excellent page one story, but it just didn't happen in time.”

Dounia: “Limitations are always really frustrating, the strict word count. You'd be working the whole day and then they tell you to summarize everything, which is really annoying. I always felt we could do better. I always felt that even with the best of my intentions, something was wrong.”

Tiffany: “I've had people put factual errors in that I didn't see, in the editing process that I didn't spot, and that can happen because of time constraints and work constraints.”

Toufik: “Deadlines are very annoying, If the story can take 10 days, they only give you four. This is a competition of posts and populating your websites and stuff. It's a pain.”

One journalist explained to me that shorter word counts and deadlines often come alongside stories that editors have asked him to write, and that he'd get more time and space to work on a story he actually cared for and pitched himself, which was an interesting correlation.

Yousef: “Sometimes, the story is one I believe in, that I'm putting all my energy into doing. Usually I have the time to write these. Other times you have a deadline and it's the news cycle. There are events that are happening right now, and a story that comes

out in this time has much more utility than a story that's going to come out a week later, when the news cycle is already overtaken by something else. It's something you learn with the trade, you learn to distinguish between evergreen stories that you can take your time reporting on and the kinds of stories that you need to throw out to feed the monster. With time, you learn to be okay with that.”

The same journalist also alluded to how one could lean more heavily on the ‘show don’t tell rule’ (mentioned above) when a journalist is under pressure with a harsh deadline:

Yousef: “You learn to be fine with the fact that not every story you put out is going to be the best story. You have 24 hours to write an analysis piece on whatever, you reach out to the three analysts that you know are going to answer you in time. You call one person who you hope is going to give you the quote that you need and you throw it all together in a few hours and you're done.”

Another journalist explained that deadlines also end up affecting other aspects of her work, including her ability to physically travel to the destination from which she wants to do her reporting, limiting her to phone calls so she can send her report out in time.

Melissa: “In the past there has situations where I'm writing about an issue, and I want to be able to go and meet people, and see it with my own eyes, rather than just reading about it or someone telling me about it on the phone. But that's not always possible, and you feel like we're maybe missing something a little bit. The more time you have, the more people you can speak to, the more full, complete picture you can have on an issue.”

Of course, while there are many flaws to the news cycle’s restrictions, many journalists understand the importance of these factors, with some even swearing that

they are necessary and can improve their work. The same journalist that pointed out the issue with time limits explained that too much time can be incredibly problematic as well:

Melissa: “On the flip side, if you have weeks and weeks to do it, and you speak to so many people, you get totally overwhelmed, and you lose the story, you don't know what you're trying to say anymore. It can go both ways. With more time, you have so much information and so much source material, you lose sight of the point you're trying to make.”

Others, especially those with a deeper knowledge of an editor's job (perhaps having tried to be in that position themselves in the past) also vouched for the importance of these limitations:

Imad: “I understand there has to be a deadline. Editors are also thinking about things that we don't think about when it's a newspaper. They have to imagine the layout of tomorrow's paper and what they have reserved for this article.”

Nour: “I think having word counts and deadlines is very crucial, I come to appreciate them more day-by-day. I don't think it impedes the reporting, on the contrary the word count limitations allow you to be more concise and precise, and to tell the story.”

Mark: “From the editorial perspective, I believe in these things, because I do think that they help. They help writers in a lot of ways. When you're writing, concision is not at the forefront of your mind. I don't believe in removing huge chunks of your story because you have a page count, but I do think if you tell a writer it needs to be 1200 words, oftentimes, they can abide by it. But if something needs to be longer, and you're like, this actually needs to be 1200 words not 600, then I think it should be, but only

when there's information that needs to be conveyed, not because of rhetorical flourishes and things like that.”

Others explain that word counts are simply enforced these days because the institution wants to keep the attention of its audience, who have been proven to not want to read longer pieces.

Toufik: “I understand regarding the word count, because people don't read. I have a lot of friends who don't read my articles, because they're too long.”

Wassim: “I think these things have value. Honestly, if you're forced to explain something in 600 words, you should be on top of your game, and you should know exactly what you're talking about. It's just human psychology. As minds living in the 21st century, this is how long most of us are programmed to maintain attention.”

Others (mostly comments I received from more experienced journalists) simply lamented that this was how the news cycle has always functioned: i.e. “that's just the way it is.”

Dounia: “It bothers me every time. But this is the discipline.”

Sally: “And it would be lovely to spend days finessing that and make it really tragic. But you've got to get it out now, right? That's the cycle of the news.”

i. The Headline Choice 5

“Toufik: “People generally only read the headlines. The headlines unfortunately make the bulk of the story, so the headline needs to show what the most important element of the story is, and how its phrased usually makes a huge difference.”

Below are the statistics to the responses to the question “*Do you choose your own headlines?*”:

- **72%** (21/29 journalists) **said they don't choose** their own headlines.

- **28%** (8/29 journalists) **said they do** get their choice of headlines.

Out of the 21 who said they don't choose their own headlines, only 4 of them clarified that they actually didn't mind this. Also, of the 8 who said they do, 3 of them do because they are the editors in chief of their own company (Dounia and Dalia and Nour), and four others were foreigners working for Western papers (Ben, Mark, Sally, Tiffany), and then there's Nadine, who has been with her organization for 40 years so now she is trusted enough, and possibly in line with her outlet enough, to do so.

Finally, we arrive at our last tangible obstruction. After one is limited by a deadline, word count, audience type, outlet politics and editor personalities, journalists face another obstruction to their original work, and that is the choice of headline. Most journalists do not get to choose what headline goes onto their piece, and there is a myriad of reasons, some logical, some problematic, as to why.

Toufik: "Writers aren't generally in control of their headlines. For two reasons. One, cleanliness. The copy editor writes in a very clean and easy to understand way, and two, the word count. Headlines have to be particularly short to fit. But it's fine., editors are more experienced, and sometimes they phrase things much better than you will. I appreciate that as long as it doesn't distort the meaning of the story."

Of course, as with all factors plaguing this so-called news cycle, we arrive at a juncture where one could easily see how this could become problematic. In the same way, a news outlet may impose its politics on you, it could also twist the headline in numerous ways to make a different point than the one you'd originally wanted to make in order to fit its agenda, or simply to make the article more appealing to its audience (this is where sensationalism comes in). And since many of today's readers only read

the headline of a news piece instead of the piece itself, this can be detrimental to a journalist's work.

Imad: "At first, I was very happy to discover that those newspapers don't ask you to write a headline, I was glad that it's someone else's problem. But then it turned out to be a very problematic thing. I was very often unhappy with the headlines, and the most attacks I would get about articles are from people who only read the headline. I guess I could be like, Oh, well, they should have clicked on the article and read it, but also, they had a point in the headline being problematic. Sometimes it comes from not understanding the situation. Sometimes it comes from this framing that they choose, they pick an idea that is not necessarily the main point of the article."

Lynn: "Sometimes they'll publish a headline without telling us. They're a bit sensationalist, they're always trying to make it sexier. Lazy and sensationalist."

Others have complained that although it's not exactly sensationalist, they had been surprised by a headline because it didn't really have anything to do with their story.

Melissa: "Sometimes I wouldn't necessarily think that was the most well written headline, because I thought the emphasis of the story was different, or I find that they're missing something important in the headline."

Elie: "In Western outlets especially, I'm like, whoa alright, this is something completely different. I do feel like, they're focusing on another point. Like, that wasn't my point."

4. No One Believes in it

Finally, and perhaps most comically, we will conclude this chapter by illustrating that most journalists do not even believe that objectivity is ever truly attainable, but rather a goal they should strive towards.

When I asked the journalists whether they believed objectivity was even possible, 93% said no (27/29 journalists), 7% said yes (2/ 29 journalists). When I followed that question with “*Should you at least strive for it?*” 97%(28/29 journalists) said yes, only one journalist said no (3%).

Stoker explains: “Many journalists doubt that objectivity is attainable, but believe that individual subjectivism is the problem and not organizational or structural factors,” (1995, pg. 9).

1995, pg. 9)

I actually found this conviction is based on a myriad of reasons, including the journalist’s knowledge of some of the disparities and troubles in implementation I mentioned above, as well as a belief that it is truly impossible to rid oneself of their biases completely, for in selecting news and its packaging, one is already forced to commit to a subjective choice.

Ben: “Even by choosing the information and the facts that you put in there, you’ve already put yourself into the story.”

“The factors which influence objectivity include professional implementation... pressure groups, and ownership issues.” (Chala, 2018, pg. 15).

Many journalists themselves admitted to me that it is impossible to achieve objectivity truly, but (except for one of them) at least conceded that it was an ideal that

they must strive for regardless. These arguments are best summarized by how the journalist Yousef puts it below:

Yousef: “Objectivity doesn't exist in a pure form...All of these things I'm saying are ideals. At the same time, you can google search my byline, and you will probably get 100 articles that have violated almost everything that I've told you about what objectivity is supposed to be. But these are ideals we should strive for. Every time we sit down with a copy, these are the ideals that should be governing and defining our output. And sometimes these are the ideals that keep us in place.”

I suppose I can lay out my next arguments as such, split into two sections: firstly, I understand the concept of an unattainable ideal we must strive towards, but how far can it stray for this truly attainable form before we perhaps admit defeat and find something else to project our hopes onto? With all of the above, from differing definitions, differing perceptions, the fact problem, the bias problem, ownership politics, editors, audience types (to give a quick summary), it seems we are the furthest away from getting anywhere near this ideal. Secondly, let's take some of our understandings of this ideal (which again, not all journalists even agree on), are these ideal rules such as balance, no opinion and subjectivity even desirable ones morally in the first place? Perhaps we should reevaluate the ideal to something simpler, such as “don't lie when you're reporting”.

This section works to introduce the next chapter of criticism, that inspects whether objectivity, if it were to be implemented in whatever minimal limited way it can be, is even a desirable standard in the first place (spoiler alert: it's not).

CHAPTER IV

MORAL IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter I will be tracing the criticisms that have been put forth by many authors in the past about the objectivity standard, although these criticisms sort of vary and depend on whatever definition the author assumes for the standard. I will be lacing these with quotes from my interviews in an attempt to shed light on how these criticisms intersect with the context in the Arab region.

A. Detached and Amoral Journalists

“This doesn't mean that journalists are immoral. Rather, it means that journalists today are largely amoral. Objectivity in journalism effectively erodes the very foundation on which rests a responsible press.” (Glasser, 1984, pg. 14).

This criticism intersects in a lot of ways with the “activism question” I briefly discuss above, where journalists often draw a very thin, largely flexible, line between activism and journalism. The Glasser-esque criticism relies quite heavily on a definition of objectivity that necessarily includes neutrality, as well as a balancing of all sides without making value judgments towards anything. This conception of course necessarily assumes that if one were to take a completely neutral stance on things it is possible to report the truth, purely the facts of the matter. Robert A. Hackett puts it as such in his piece ‘Decline of a Paradigm? Bias and Objectivity in News Media Studies’: “the conception that journalistic objectivity results in an undistorted view of the facts... implies that the journalist and news media are detached observers, separable from the social reality on which they report, that truth depends upon the journalist’s neutrality in relation to the object of study,” (1984, pg. 234).

Theodore Glasser was the first to point this out: forcing journalists to remain neutral scrubs them of their ability to make moral conclusions about certain situations, deeming them amoral and incapable of acting in a manner in defense of the public's interest. Kevin Stoker reiterates this notion claiming, "Objectivity also relegates journalists to a subservient, spectator role in serving the public interest. They have lost some of their power to act on behalf of the public interest. As spectators, journalists surrender their independence as moral agents," (Stoker, 1995, pg. 11).

This notion sort of parallels my rant-intro in the beginning of this thesis, where I ask myself whether performing neutrality (as we sort of concluded that it is impossible to be 100% neutral) is the best possible way to achieve a utilitarian outcome with the situation I'm reporting on. Regardless though, in the journalism field at the moment, you are deemed more professional and successful in your craft if you were to completely detach yourself from the situation as a nonchalant observer, providing all sides of the story to readers as if the reality of the event you're narrating was also split into sides with an ultimately moral grey area.

This is indeed why Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro and de Vreese sought to prove that journalists that believe they have no responsibility to play in resolving the conflict they are reporting on (or the 'passive ones') tend to rely more on neutrality. The problem is, "the objectivity norm is undesirable when it leads to detached and disinterested journalists that take no moral stand to improve the society they're supposed to serve" (Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro and de Vreese, 2013, pg.25).

1. The Arab Context

Stephanie: “The way objectivity is translated on the ground is oftentimes, you need to send in someone who's not connected to what is going on to be objective, instead of someone who just doesn't bring in their opinions.”

This ‘detachment’ rule takes on a whole new, and often racist dimension, when it comes to reporting on the Middle East. As mentioned above, this kind of objectivity is arguably amoral and problematic in leading to a general sense detachment, but it’s also fairly logical to extrapolate and assume that foreigners find it easier to abide by them, for it is easier to detach when you are not from the place you are covering. What results from this sort of identity correlation however, is that it becomes easy to dismiss local journalists covering their own country as ‘too close to the story’ and not ‘detached enough’.

This isn’t to say that there aren’t Arab reporters that find themselves capable of adhering to the rules of objectivity towards their own countries, but rather that it is an easy scapegoat leaned on by Western correspondents and editors alike to dismiss local journalists. Indeed, one of the most prominent foreign correspondents in Lebanon immediately alluded to this when I asked them to describe their idea of an ideal journalist:

Sally: “Well, the ideal journalist first of all is completely unaffiliated with no stake in the outcome of what they're talking about. This is something that Western journalism very much cares about, which not all other countries do.”

The fact is, the likelihood of an Arab journalist having a stake in the outcome of what they’re talking about is very high, and almost impossible to rid oneself of. If a Lebanese female journalist reports the news about women’s rights in her own country, even if she were to exclude herself, she has a mother, aunts, friends, a whole web of

connections she's built that are necessarily connected to whatever the outcome of these events may be. Not only is she necessarily connected to that outcome, it is also more than likely that she would have active intentions towards eventually improving the state of affairs in her own country, unless we somehow come across a journalist that doesn't care what ends up happening to his/her homeland. Mark Pedelty talks about this phenomenon in "War Stories: The Culture of Foreign Correspondents", explaining: "A correspondent flies in and he's much more detached. The stringer [usually a local] sees all the abuse and so isn't detached. The stringer's sell is familiarity. Complete familiarity can lead to pretty strong emotions towards the story. The correspondent flits in and out," (Pedelty, 1995. Pg. 75).

I found that Rinal and Bilal, two local journalists, explained this notion perfectly: Rinal: "I think objectivity is a place of privilege. You get to be objective, because you don't have skin in the game. That is not the case for 90% of the population. I think people were raised on the standard of objectivity, as the ultimate form of journalism, as its purest form, because at the time that journalism came to be, it was white men who had all the privilege in the world. They could sit by and be like, women are not allowed to vote, women are getting killed, black people are getting killed, and they can come from an objective point of view, because they're not in it."

Bilal: "A lack of electricity, a lack of clean water... I don't think I can afford to just be neutral, because that comes with privilege. It's all in your conditions. If someone is very comfortable in the US, or in Europe, and wants to cover what's happening, unless they very deeply believe in what's happening, which many of them put an effort to separate themselves from, they're not going to feel it. They have a safe home to go back to. They can just leave and forget about everything that's happening and live their

entire lives without having to be part of this confrontation. Basically, they just want to tell stories that do not affect them. I can't do that."

So where does this line of thought lead us then, that only foreign journalists are allowed to report on the happenings of the Middle East, since they wouldn't be biased in covering them?

Imad: "You're hired, to do work on your country, but then they trap you in this position where they regard you as biased inherently towards it. So, you can't grow too much as a reporter of that place, you're always kind of providing help for someone else who is "not biased" because they're not from there."

There's of course an obvious problem that arises with this mentality, i.e. that it necessarily silences Arab voices, or at the very least forces them into positions where they must shed all connection they have to their own land (effectively being forced to mirror the Western journalist's own detachment lack of concern for the outcome of the country) in order to have any chance at furthering themselves in their careers (which, most of the time in the Arab world at least, would probably mean success at Western institutions that pay more and aren't laced with state propaganda). "Many journalists, if they tend to want to get ahead, basically will play along with the prejudices of their editors. Bit by bit they will learn to become like their editors. And, eventually, they will become their editors. The system rebuilds, re-cements, and re-propagates itself," (Pedelty, 1995, pg. 72).

Reem: "Western journalists don't know that experience. They're used to being the outsider. And as a result, their work is instantly considered objective. So our personal experiences we don't share, because we've been told by Western media that that

sidetracks from journalism, and that can impact our writing. At the end of the day, it's just gatekeeping.

In some cases, even the journalist tries to, it would be impossible for them to align themselves with these detached Western ideals, as they would be dismissed before they could even try.

Rinal: “How could a young African American journalist censor herself in terms of an activist movement like black lives matter? Then they’d probably say, well are you a journalist or an activist? Which I understand, but I also feel it’s really tone deaf, because the minute people see her profile picture on Twitter for example, they will know who she is. The minute a black journalist is covering police brutality concerning black citizens, they're going to say, it's not credible, because there's already a bias. By the color of their skin, there's already going to be a bias. How is that fair?”

How could an African American person detach themselves from a cause that literally states that they deserve equal rights? That their lives matter? This same line of reasoning can be extrapolated towards other locals reporting on causes relating to their race or nationality.

This isn't to say that it isn't more difficult not to get emotional reporting on a cause that is close to home, but rather to ask why that happens to be such an undesirable consequence. Surely, we must question the validity of a rule like this if it seems to only lead us to conclude that those with no stake in the issues (arguably because they had a hand in causing them in the first place) can talk about them. In fact, when I asked the local journalists about whether it was difficult to report on their country, many said that it was, mostly due to these rules of field:

Dana: “It's easier to separate yourself when it's not your country. But in Lebanon, you see a revolution like October 17, there is no way not to cover it with all your emotions. It was a dream for any Lebanese citizen. I have to remain objective but also, you just feel that of course they have the right to revolt, something is really wrong. If we are by the side of the people who were revolting...I was told I'm not objective. Even the Beirut explosion. I cried while reporting, I got emotional, I mean it's my city in the end. Especially when an event happens and it affects you and your family”.

Since we've arrived at the conclusion that only races other than white American, British or European are necessarily “too close to the story”, seeing as there is more than likely a discriminatory or highly tense issue necessarily associated with their identity, it leaves us to conclude that only Western whites somehow have the ability to report on their countries for them. This is certainly where this line of thinking leads us towards, and what Sally continued to allude to during the interview when she explained why foreign correspondents are so vital:

Sally: “And this is why I think foreign corresponding is very important for world coverage, because so many countries around the world don't have a free press, or they are so polarized that almost no journalist doesn't come from a specific perspective, or affiliation or something that they can easily shed, but journalists coming from outside really have no skin in the game. They have no stake in what happens.”

This however brings up another more blatant sign that this notion isn't exactly rooted in a logical well-intentioned practice to allow for the most accurate reporting: somehow the inverse is not true. I heard many local journalists complaining of this double standard:

Imad: “At the same time, they wouldn't allow you to go anywhere else to report. I suppose it would be absolutely funny and ridiculous for them if I were to be suggested as someone who could go to cover all those Western countries, because somehow, I'm Syrian and should only cover Syria, but also, I'm biased towards Syria, whereas when someone is English, or American or French, they could cover any country with no problem at all.”

Rinal: “If that was the case [that the issue is in Arabs being too biased], then we would be going to the US as Arabs and reporting on the US for them, we would be reporting on Europe for them. That is not objectivity here. It's about colonialism. They're looking at it from an oriental point of view, saying, we can do the job better than you, we understand the situation better than you.”

Stephanie: “But then we're just censoring the people from covering their own conflicts. Because we don't do this when you have the US elections, you don't send Europeans or Arabs to cover them instead of Americans because they have a stake in it and they're too close to the story. So why do it when we're covering the Middle East?”

Tara: “It should be okay for Lebanese people to cover Lebanon for international outlets, the same way it's okay for Americans to cover America. A lot of times I've wondered, am I too close to my subjects for international outlets? In the US as a student, a lot of professors even warned me that if I covered Arabic stories, I might be too close to them. And I'm like, okay, but if an American works for an American outlet, and they cover America are they too close to the story as well? No, absolutely not.”

Elie: “Honestly I hate to throw the word around but there is a little bit of a racist approach to that. You don't hear us criticizing the journalist of the New York Times, saying you can't cover Trump because you're American. No one ever came out and said

oh this guy isn't fit to cover this, we should fly in some journalists from Beirut to go cover Trump because the Americans aren't capable. But they feel comfortable saying this to us.”

Nour: “Do we ever hear somebody who's from Washington being told you can't cover Capitol Hill because you're from Washington? It's absolutely outrageous. This gets used against us because we have local knowledge, because we know the country, we know the history of the country, the culture, and we have nurtured contacts for a long time. We know the politics, we have intricate knowledge, and not to mention we also speak the language. So instead of that being an asset it's used against us to delegitimize us, and to say that we cannot report because we are not objective. I think there's always these double standards to say that we're not as competent or we're not capable and so on.”

A foreign journalist I spoke to who had worked at a news institution in the United States for a couple of years before coming to Lebanon echoes this double standard explaining:

Mark: “It's ridiculous. One of my good friends who worked with me at [Western organization], she's from the Midwest. She's one of the only people from the Midwest there. Any time they wanted to dispatch about politics and Middle America, they sent her, she wasn't too biased, because she's from the Midwest. I don't know if you're so pissed off about the biases, run a story from multiple people, I don't know, I think it's just a smokescreen for whatever you want to call it.”

2. The Activist Label

Imad: “I still, until today, want someone to convince me why all these years I was not able to come out against the Syrian regime, on my Twitter, or in

my personal life publicly. Even though clearly, none of us really thinks that the Syrian regime is a good regime. We don't have that much readership in Syria, or in pro-regimes circles. They didn't want you to do any protests, any marches, any membership of any activism group or political party or anything, all for the sake of objectivity.”

This all also intersects with our “activism question” from earlier. There has been a trend where editors and correspondents abuse the oftentimes porous definition of what an activist is, cornering local journalists with the justification that they’re again, ‘too close to the story’. Local journalists often claim that the worst possible label they could be stuck with is that of a journalist that is “too activisty”, not trusted or deemed professional enough to be employed at these esteemed Western institutions. This label is thrown around quite frivolously, not requiring the journalist to campaign or actively advocate for a certain cause. Instead, a simple opinionated tweet is enough to deem an Arab journalist “too subjective.” Of course, the double standard exists in this realm as well, as a couple of local journalists who expressed:

Imad: “No expressing of opinions online, you get immediately warned if you do express your opinions online. And some of those opinions would surprise people, would be very basic, even purely analytical, rather than actually opinionated. There were instances where I found it's absolutely crazy that someone is a reporter in my same company, but gets away with tweeting, with writing opinion pieces, and being kind of activist-y about the things that they're covering. This is because of the regional editor they work for- who could be the Europe editor as opposed to the Middle East and Africa editor who is checking what we're tweeting and writing, and keeping tabs on our opinions.”

Lynn: “I think it's kind of bullshit. Because when they say that they're usually talking about locals. Western correspondents and reporters can do the same thing that

would be deemed activisty if it's done by locals, but to them they're just speaking the truth. When they say they don't want someone 'activisty', more times than not, if it's a Western reporter, they'd just call them liberal. And if you're a local, they call you activisty. It stems originally from this sphere that locals are too close to the story. But with foreigners it's okay and it's not seen as activism. For example, the things that my colleagues tweet, I wouldn't tweet because I'm Arab.”

Some journalists even join protests or activist movements but make sure to not post anything about their involvement on social media, lest they'd be deemed too unreliable. Self-censorship is often frustratingly prevalent and goes hand-in-hand with locals working for Western institutions.

Roudaina: “I would participate in protests, but I might not share it on my social media accounts. Personally, on social media, I would say I'm a bit conservative. I don't really share much at all, I don't share much political opinion even though I write about politics because I want to be taken seriously.”

Many journalists have witnessed examples of counterparts getting backlash for sharing their opinions online, and it is more likely to happen with local journalists, or at the very least with foreign journalists sharing an opinion regarding a conflict in the Middle East. Of course, this would require the conflict to also be highly politicized in the Western world.

Nour: “Publications, especially big publications, don't really like it when their journalists share their opinion, but you usually see that happening when they're expressing an opinion in favor of those who are disenfranchised, those who are marginalized in our communities. It's rare for a journalist to be repudiated for siding with power; they're usually repudiated when they're siding with the marginalized. I

think it's delusional to expect journalists not to have opinions and not to share them. I think the question is, who are they siding with or siding against?"

Back in May of last year, around the time Israel's military demolished media offices in Gaza claiming Hamas intelligence operated there, the Associated Press fired their news associate Emily Wilder for opinionated pro-Palestinian tweets that surfaced from her college days (Singh, 2021). AP had justified this decision by claiming that Wilder had "violated AP's social media policy," (Singh, 2021). One of the journalists I interviewed who works at a wire explains:

Yousef: "Most news organizations have social media guidelines. And as a part of your contract, you're also de facto agreeing to social media rules and regulations. This means your company does have the right to ask you to remove posts, it does have the right to also tell you what kinds of posts you are and aren't allowed to post. And in extreme cases, your company is allowed to take action against you as an employee, if you violate social media rules, which are clearly laid out. There's PDF documents of those everywhere. It's updated routinely. Every time we have an incident with a staff member around the world an email reminder is sent. We're bound by it."

In the Wilder case, she claims her tweets were from her time in college way before she joined AP, and that she more than likely was just cancelled in the wake of the events in Palestine that summer. Regardless of whether this was true or not, it does beg the question, why do these organizations think they can enact such rules? Is it truly ultimately for the purpose of the purest form of objectivity or truth? A huge consequence of this kind of limitation is that even journalists not employed at wires end up censoring their opinions due to fear that a Western institution won't consider them for employment.

Ghiwa: “A lot of people feel like they need to censor themselves on social media, because they think it would limit their chance of employment, Western institutions don't really like it when journalists give their opinion online. I have an Arab friend who used to work for Reuters, and she always tells me be careful, you're an Arab, you have to be extra careful about what you tweet, or it'll be easy for them to dismiss you and say she's a local, she's too subjective.”

Stephanie: “I can't be honestly sharing my thoughts or on the sidelines working on some cause, if I'm expected to be taken seriously as a journalist. This has to do mostly with employer's perceptions of you and not necessarily your own opinions, because you have those opinions, whether you shared them or not. But it's just the way things are right now, I feel like journalists are not allowed to have opinions or take part in protests.”

But what is activism? Does a female believing in her own right to equality make her an activist? Is simply being born on the “wrong” side of the equator make you a de-facto activist? Is one supposed to detach from every conflict or complex political strife, in lands where that in essence is almost impossible to do, seeing as it has more than likely affected you personally already, in order for their reporting to be valid?

Stephanie: “I wouldn't call it activism when someone is defending their country or expressing some sentiments to do with a conflict taking place in their own country. I wouldn't call that activism to begin with.”

Another argument many foreigners working for Western outlets make revolves around the need for them to come in for their indispensable “fresh take” on events, in the middle of an incredibly biased world of local journalists that are incapable of telling their own stories in an unbiased manner. Indeed, this notion is so vehemently spread

amongst journalists that it seems it has even colonized the minds of the locals covering their own countries, for some even conceded that this ‘fresh take’ foreign correspondents bring in is more critical than local reporting:

Dana: “Sometimes we take things for granted, like the electricity situation, we take it for granted that the ministry of energy is probably responsible for this. But an American, he or she is fresh here. Their take is very important because sometimes we don’t see things properly.”

Dalia: “I know when international correspondents used to come to Lebanon, after the end of the war, I remember when I worked with them, they noticed things I didn’t. Because it’s somebody from outside, he or she see what your eyes are already accustomed to. Somebody with a fresh eye might see things differently.”

This is almost equivalent to the notion of the “colonized mind”, i.e. where dominant communities succeed in disseminating colonial narratives to the point where it begins to take root in the colonized’s mind as if they had been original thoughts. Still, how is it that their insistence that their perspective is naturally fresh and “stake-less” is yet to be contested? Is their view on the Arab world really completely unbiased? Do they come in having heard nothing about the Middle East, with no (racist or otherwise) preconceived notions about the countries they’re about to cover? Do they not learn about them beforehand-from a Western point of view (be it from the editors that send them or other Westerners that inform them)- one that is arguably more harmful, discriminatory and biased- than an Arab one?

Rinal: “A westerner coming in and saying they’re more objective, that’s not true, if anything they have more of a stake in it, making sure that they portray that one side, because there’s a narrative that they need to sell back home. They don’t cover

anything objectively, they come in with an agenda. Do you know how I know? Because they use the same damn clichés every time. The same heroes and the same villains, every single time.”

“Do we ever hear somebody who's from Washington being told you can't cover Capitol Hill because you're from Washington? It's absolutely outrageous. This gets used against us because we have local knowledge, because we know the country, we know the history of the country, the culture, and we have nurtured contacts for a long time. We know the politics, we have intricate knowledge, and not to mention we also speak the language. So instead of that being an asset it's used against us to delegitimize us, and to say that we cannot report because we are not objective. I think there's always these double standards to say that we're not as competent or we're not capable and so on.”

3. No Impact

“What objectivity has brought about, in short, is a disregard for the consequences of news-making. A few years ago, Walter Cronkite offered this interpretation of journalism: ‘I don't think it is any of our business what the moral, political, social or economic effect of our reporting is. I say let's go with the job of reporting - and let the chips fall where they may.’”
(Glasser, 1984, pg. 16).

An argument that's being made above, at least within the lines, is that the problem with this kind of neutral objectivity is that it not only that it molds journalists into a mode of detachment, but also that it tends to not really create any positive impact.

Imad: “If I want to write something and I want to make sure that it has a certain impact, or it makes a certain point clearly, I would not take it to international media. Because I know that that all these constraints that certain Western media pose on articles, they will take all the value out of the piece out. I don't think any piece I worked on had any impact for [examples of large Western publications] or any of those.”

This of course takes us back to questioning what a journalist's role is in the public sphere in the first place, are they meant to be simply disseminating information or are they supposed to be enacting change (at least indirectly) in the worlds they report on? As we discussed earlier, for many who are necessarily connected to the events they report on, they don't really have a choice. Some journalists, albeit not many of them, claim that journalism in itself is a form of activism, seeing as no one really joins the field without a passion for change.

Nour: "I think journalism is activism. I think by virtue of the kinds of topics that you decide to report on, if you have that luxury to make that decision by yourself, the types of people that you speak to, all of that influences the kind of reporting that you will be doing. For me journalism is a form of activism."

Others allude to an interesting argument, often made in critique of neutrality, which states that in being neutral when approaching a conflict of power dynamics, you aren't really neutral at all, but rather in support of the more powerful.

Fares: "I think a lot of journalists started out by being activists before joining. A lot of journalists join journalism out of very strong values, they share very big opinions and that should be used to fuel your journalism. I believe that journalism is inherently a position of activism. And if you don't take that position, if you believe in keeping the status quo or not involving yourself or your values, you are actually being an activist, an activist for the status quo."

When asked about impact, many journalists were quick to tell me that they were very aware about the fact that more than likely, their work will have no positive impact.

Nour: "A great journalist aspires for their work and their coverage to have that kind of impact where they should be able to resolve a conflict. But 90% of the time,

that's not the kind of impact that news stories or that kind of reporting have. I think at the most, what we can aspire for is to have some kind of influence on public discussion or on policy, or views on a certain issue or topic, but it really depends.”

This was confirmed to me further when an older journalist felt rather protective of me when I asked her about the impact of work, immediately explaining that I need not bother myself with questions about impact, because I would end up being disappointed in my career (my part of the dialogue is indicated in italics).

Hadeel: “You are at that age where you have higher aspirations, high expectations. You want to change the world, I understand, I was the same. But the more you know, the less expectations you have. I stopped thinking that I can make a bigger change.”

But shouldn't you try?

Hadeel: “Of course, you know, you should try to change, but I'm afraid you'll be very disappointed. And then you will stop writing. It's a business Ghalia. It's a business. You're not living in an ideal universe.”

Something else in a journalist's response however, made me sort of turn the concept of “impact” of our journalism on its head.

Toufik: “In my opinion, 90% of journalism has no impact whatsoever. Journalists aren't lawyers, you're not suing people, putting them in a court of law. What you're doing is you're maintaining memory, you're trying to impact narrative.”

Often when journalists are asked about the impact of their work, they're quick to explain that it suffices that they are documenting history and trying in their own little way to change things here and there, within the limited neutrality palette they're

working with, and seeing as they have to detach and stray as far from activism as possible.

Tiffany: “I spent a lot of time thinking alright, so I’ve been writing about this economic crisis in Syria now for how long and the UK just cut a third of its funding to them. That makes me feel like I've had absolutely zero impact, clearly nobody cared. But at least no one can say they didn't know. We were there. We watched it. We saw it. We told people about it. And there is some value to that I guess. But it's really hard to measure it.”

Documentation and the ability to hold leaders to account, although seemingly not any time soon, is considerably positive for small scale impact. Although one could argue that not much is being done lately to stop the injustices of the world, and not purely because the international community doesn’t know. They know. But how is it then that we never discuss the negative impact of this sort of reporting? Most reporters make the assumption that they are simply vessels of knowledge for the world as it is, truth tellers that reflect the reality of things, and who simply have to live with the fact that it is impossible to create any positive impact from their work. But what’s worse, at least in my opinion, is that not only does this sort of reporting not support any positive impact, it also has very harmful consequences and effects of global opinions on conflict zones. It’s almost as if the media is assumed to be outside the realm of responsibility by journalists, simply acting as a mode of information transport and nothing else.

Hackett expresses this notion perfectly: “the social and political world is not a pre-given “hard” reality for the media to reflect; it has to be socially constructed. Moreover, far from constituting a detached observer, the media help actively to construct that world” (Hackett, 1984 pg. 235). Ulf Hannerz also alludes to this

particularly when it comes to the importance of foreign correspondents, (the same ones who tend to be more detached than locals) in his 'Among Foreign Correspondents, Reflections on Anthropological Styles and Audiences', saying: "Foreign correspondents would seem to be key players in today's globalization of consciousness. Their reporting for newspapers, newsmagazines, news agencies, radio and television makes up a major part of that flow of information from and about other parts of their world which, for many of us, is a part of the daily rhythm of experience. But how does it affect our stances toward the world?" (Hannerz, 2002 pg. 65).

They affect outsider stances in many ways, in setting a news agenda for institutions to follow, which I will be discussing in the next section, but also in causing fatigue by portraying the narrative in that neutral 'all-sides' sort of manner. "By claiming and seeming to present facts impartially for the viewer (or reader) to judge, the news gives the viewer a "sense of being above and outside the actions displayed- and of having a god-like relation to them," (Hackett, 1984, pg. 252). This I believe to be another problematic issue when one relates the "detachment" problem to the Middle East. It's not simply that the neutral language causes detached observers and dry reflections of complex realities, but in its metaphorical distance juxtaposed with violence it reflects as "infotainment", it allows subtle racist discourse for those outside of it; arguable one of the largest problems with these imbalances in the world in the first place. Leaders will often be seen doing this, a form of "otherness", evoking nationalism and self-protection to keep those from outside of conflict zones with the power for change from doing anything. The news, in its foreign correspondent's language, does the same.

“As news of the world out there is so often bad news, of conflicts and catastrophes, that world may seem to be above all a place to be wary of. You would prefer to keep your distance, and if people from out there knock on your door, you will want to have nothing to do with them either. Isolationism and even xenophobia can thus be other reactions to bad news from abroad,” (Hannerz, 2002 pg. 65).

I believe this to not simply be the collection of bad news and catastrophes, although it may also seem so for the lack of space given to the Middle East in these foreign outlets (therefore only leaving room for the doom and gloom), but also in the language choices and the insistence on detachment, even from those who are necessarily attached.

B. Elitism and the Status Quo

“Indeed, objectivity in journalism is biased in favor of the status quo; it is inherently conservative to the extent that it encourages reporters to rely on ... the ‘managers of the status quo’ – the prominent and the elite.” (Glasser, 1984, pg. 13).

Another criticism of the objectivity standard lies in its rules that ultimately force journalists to rely on and legitimize those in power for their work, i.e. the prominent and the elite. In my view, it does this in a couple of different ways. The first way I will discuss has to do with the nature of the foreign correspondents and Western media in itself. As I mentioned above, the standard allows for Western counterparts to silence local voices, deemed ‘too close to the story’ to be objective; they also do through perpetuating elitism, both in continuing to appoint correspondents from the same elite class (and not allowing anyone outside of that circle in), through pushing the narrative that Western media is superior to local media, and finally through necessarily legitimizing those same elites through always quoting them as sources.

1. Legitimizing Elites

“The accuracy of the information was measured by the credibility or official status of the source and not on the individual investigation of the journalist. Journalists may enjoy unprecedented freedom from government interference, but they restrict their own freedom to report fact as they see it.” (Stoker, 1995, pg.6).

In almost every academic piece of writing that involved criticizing the objectivity standard, the writers expressed the problematic tendency for reporting to only be considered credible if it were backed by quotes from “elite” sources; be it politicians, large international institutions such as UN or World Bank representatives, or other bureaucratic sources. A report informing its readers of today’s news is not complete without a quote, usually one taken from a PR office’s statement or a robotic diplomatic response uttered by a politician to all the reporters that ask.

This could be problematic in a multitude of ways. Firstly, it encourages the reporters to shy away from truly criticizing those they quote, since a critical piece on these politicians could ultimately cause them to lose that source in their career (which would not be in the favor of the editors they work with who expect you to be able to reach these sources).

I found Mark Pedelty’s ‘War Stories’ to be incredibly enlightening and reminiscent of the foreign correspondent scene of Beirut, even though he was describing an anthropological study of the foreign correspondents stationed in El Salvador during the Salvadoran Civil War in the 1980s. He explains, “People didn't want to get screwed by The Embassy (close press scrutiny of Salvadoran military activities angered Embassy officials) ...the stakes of alienating The Embassy: ‘Being screwed by The Embassy there is a big deal, because then you don’t really get into the

press conferences; you don't get the access; you don't get the confirmations; you can't get "The Embassy spokesman said such and such." (Pedelty, 1995. pg. 44)

When I asked some of the journalists I interviewed about whether it's difficult to maintain relationships with these sources while still being capable of freely criticizing them, I got a mixed bag of responses. Some agreed and explained that you have to tread lightly as it's important to be able to keep them in your good graces so that you can get their statements in your copy.

Toufik: "As a journalist, you're trying to make sure you get as much information as possible and access the most officials as much as possible, right? If you want to do good investigations, you have to have a chance to speak with the officials and try and do interviews, try and get information and so on. If you are constantly antagonistic to these people, and you talk to them or approach them, in an activist-y kind of way, you're accusing them in your copy, you're talking down on them, you're talking smack about them on social media, you'll never have a complete story, it's going to be a detriment to your work."

His answer assumes of course that you had to have contact with these officials in order to have the critical information, which in itself is an elitist assumption. Unfortunately, his statement about your treading lightly as a journalist could ring true in the context of the Arab world. While in most places it is usually a rule of thumb that those who become public servants must be accepting of scrutiny and criticism from media persons, and usually have a duty to respond to their requests for comments no matter who they were or what they've said, in the Arab region many journalists admit that they had lost contacts due to their critical coverage in the region.

Hadeel: “The challenge for a journalist is to maintain a good relationship with all the parties. And this is the challenge I faced in the past. If they don't like the story, it depends on your personality as a person. You explain to them, I'm a journalist. It's not friendship, I'm a journalist, and this is how journalism works. If you don't have many friends in this domain, that means you're doing a good job. I lost many contacts.”

Another journalist explains the core of the criticism behind the need to maintain these relationships: that a journalist loses their ability to think critically and serve the public's interest, because if you were to lose that person as a source it would simply be an indication that you're doing your job right (especially if you assume your job to be a watchdog for the public).

Tiffany: “When you know something's true, what is the point of us if we are trading access for stories that are favorable to these people? Maybe you'll keep hold of a source, but what did you lose? Basically, all the point of journalism, which is to try and be objective and have integrity about how you're doing these things. If you burn them, then there was a good reason for it, because they did something wrong, and that's your job to expose that, so it's worth burning them.”

Not everyone sees it that way though, and this kind of idealism doesn't often make it to the field. All the reporters are bound, as we discussed earlier, by their institution's standards, and at this point in time the journalistic field has imposed quotes by “credible sources” as absolutely necessary for reporting to be taken seriously.

Pedely explains, “Most editors demand that news stories include the perspectives, or at least the quoted statements, of official U.S. government sources. As a result of these pressures, intimate access to The Embassy is crucial to most journalists. Those who are able to get exclusive quotable interviews with decision-making embassy staff have an

advantage over their colleagues who must rely on the oblique, though ubiquitous, press hand-outs,” (1995. pg. 70). Due to the nature of these relationships that have over time become an immovable standard, those in power and media professionals indeed function like symbiotic organisms. As one journalist puts it, they need them for the space you provide them to explain themselves, and the journalists need them for the quote to make their copy credible.

Wassim: “It's really about managing relationships. And a big part of it is understanding that you're not the only one getting something out of this. If I'm talking to you, I'm not the only one benefitting, there's a reason why you're talking to me. So often you just have to pull on these strings of why are you talking to me? Often enough it leads to better stories. You say someone is calling you corrupt, I'm giving you the space, I'm willing to sit with you for however long you want and you can tell me whatever you want, give me your side of the story, because at the end of the day it's my job to make you my friend and then fuck you honestly. We're not going to be naïve about this entire thing ... my source wants to be my friend so he can fuck me. So, we can both fuck each other and be happy about it.”

Other journalists (yet again showing a total divide in what it means to apply objectivity rules) completely disagree with this idea that in contacting elites you are providing them with the space for response, but rather maintain that it is critical to contact them to challenge them instead.

Nadine: “You need to challenge them, you don't give a platform for people to justify their actions. If I want to say that there is corruption in electricity for example, I have to challenge [the politician] with facts. I'm not going to talk to him to give him a chance to show his innocence, so that I can make a balance. This is not professional.

We are not a platform for people to make themselves innocent, but rather a platform for a better society.”

Regardless of these disparities however, whatever the ideological reasoning behind this is, the rules have sort of dictated that a lot of news reports will sound similar in that they will necessarily include quotes by these elites, be it for them to be challenged or simply to be provided with the space or the “right to respond”.

These sorts of relationships and interactions also end up bleeding into what some scholars have called the socially constructed reality of events, or “pseudo-events”, “preplanned or incited, and which have the primary purpose of being reported or reproduced. News conferences and most political speeches are examples of pseudo-events which are arranged for media propagation, and which would not occur in its absence.” (Hackett, 1984, pg. 235)

2. Construction of the News World

“Thus, to maintain an illusion of covering local news, chain papers (and independently owned newspapers) chum out stories from dependable sources, such as city council meetings, political rallies, speeches, press conferences, and so forth... national and local newspapers relied heavily on government sources and routine channels of information, such as press conferences and press releases” (Stoker, 1995, pg. 10).

Pseudo-events are just another branch of the ever-complicated microcosm that the objectivity standard has created, in which journalists end up constructing a reality that is made up of press conferences and elite quotations as if these were the happenings that were worthy of being informed about. In doing so becoming a journalist’s job merely turns into a routine of effectively gathering statements from official sources and press conference pamphlets; I myself have experienced many of these instances in the different newsrooms I had the opportunity to work in. I often found myself translating

official governmental statements, calling sources that will reiterate the same PR-constructed sentence to every reporter that calls, and listening to and transcribing recordings from long seemingly meaningless press conferences. “Most press stories are "routine events" which are promoted by political and bureaucratic power-holders; the "event needs" of the news promoters (political or bureaucratic sources) and the news assemblers (journalists) are complementary.” (Hackett, 1984, pg. 236)

Many of the journalists I interviewed even admitted that these events and statements they eventually procure from these sources are usually meaningless political constructions put together by trained PR professionals that often add nothing to the quality of the story being reported. They just do it because they have to, because their institutions insist that they do.

Melissa: “But if I think about the majority of the reporting I've done here, most of the time I at least try and reach out to a state official, or an MP who's involved. But certainly, since the revolution, the newsrooms I've worked in, and that my colleagues have worked in, have been less interested in doing it and very dismissive of it. It's Oh, we've got to call them because it's their right to reply or whatever. But you know eye-rolling like ‘right, we have to call them.’”

This notion is reflected at an even more distorted angle in the Arab region, as most countries operate under authoritarian contexts with corrupt leadership schemes, whose heads use every opportunity given to them by the media to spread misinformation and propaganda.

Melissa continues: “But you call up an MP or a Minister and they don't care, they probably get I don't know how many journalists calling them every day. They just love to talk and they talk to you forever. They often walk themselves into really ridiculous

comments, but they don't care. They see themselves as having a level of immunity. Obviously, the state is responsible for much of what's going wrong in Lebanon right now. So even if we don't necessarily believe what they say or agree with it, we have to get a response from them. But it is really tricky, because often we call up a minister, we call up an advisor or someone official, and they'll tell you something, you just never know if it's true.”

And with that we are faced with our second elitism problem, which is in the fact that providing space to these leaders ends up serving to legitimize them, which can be especially problematic within authoritarian systems and regimes. Some journalists deny this criticism, explaining that if a politician is part of a news event they are covering they must give him/her the right to respond, as they are simply an integral part of the story.

Toufik: “You know, I've been told, oh, you know, why are you speaking with this MP you're legitimizing him, no I'm not, that's just the story! What kind of a story would it be about corruption if you don't ask the people who are accused for a comment? You're not legitimizing, you're saying this is what they said. People think that if you quote somebody, you're legitimizing them. Think of a regular fairy tale, right? Goldilocks and the Three Bears. You don't talk about the bears on their own right. Well, that's not the story anymore. It's about relevance.”

However, Toufik's response doesn't really put an end to the legitimizing problem. The issue lies not so much in simply allowing them the right to respond, although I could argue that the politicians in question have many avenues and platforms they could use to respond to these allegations, and don't really need reporters to reiterate their mostly inauthentic rebuttals in every report. Rather, the news system in its reliance on

credible quotations from these kinds of officials presents reality as this status quo that just is, officials that do, and the public who are done to, “in generalizing it for the whole social formation, signifying it as natural, as taken-for-granted, beyond the power of history and time to modify or dismantle,” (Hackett, 1984, pg. 249).

Hackett goes on to make a similar point about Television news, although I believe it can be reiterated here for written news: “News broadcasting supports the political system as a whole... in its treatment of "current affairs," TV largely accepts and reinforces the definitions of issues which have prevailed in the political domain. The leading spokespersons of the established parties are accorded privileged access to the media, where they have the opportunity to amplify those definitions... The media both establish a "Parliamentary and Electoral frame- work of relevance" in their handling of political issues (at the expense of alternative issue agendas and political prescriptions), and legitimize Parliamentary government itself.” (Hackett, 1984, pg. 248)

What furthermore results from these legitimizing events and access to contacts are even more potential chances for higher ranking foreign correspondents to shut local voices out, as many of the smaller journalists (those who are deemed to activist-y) often find it difficult to gain access to these events or these contacts. “You get a certain access when you are a staff reporter for a major U.S. paper that you don’t get as a freelancer or someone who works for less prestigious papers... It’s very true. The Embassy will only invite certain people. The big boys will go to the little intimate briefings,” (Pedelty, 1995. pg. 71).

Melissa: “You have to rely on wasta [a Lebanese term to mean an inside connection] or contacts to get in contact with someone. There might be a media

spokesperson. But there's not official channels and official procedure for doing this stuff. Which makes it tricky. It's not reliable that you'll get an answer from people.”

Nour: “If you call any government representative, official spokesperson, and say you're working with a local publication, versus if you call and you tell them you're working with Al Jazeera, or the New York Times, and so on, you can possibly do a study on that and see who gets the response first. Probably the big guys.”

Indeed, this was an advantage one reporter who works at a Western paper was excited to boast about.

Wassim: “[Name of Politician] answers my calls all the time, even though we've criticized him. He knows [Western publication] is the biggest newspaper in the world, so of course he's going to talk to me, he hates my guts but he is going to talk to me. Because I'm but a platform. I'm but a platform for the facts and the reporting I've gathered and then your response to them.”

He continues: “Before I joined this outlet, I would look at the story and think this is impossible. It's impossible to meet this person. But working here, I now meet these people on a regular basis. That's not beyond the scope of imagination to eventually sit down and meet this person or report on this thing, or get this information. It's a good thing to learn, because you don't get that in local media, because you have to get the story out and the bar isn't that high.”

At a shallow glance this makes a lot of sense, especially given the lack of trust many have in local publications. The problem is dependency and the legitimizing of these sources and events was the doing of the large media institutions in the first place. The whole system likens itself to an exclusive clique with members whose survival are dependent on their interactions with one another, interactions local journalists are

pushed outside of for their threatening critical minds and then simultaneously shamed for their lack of access. “Apart from the deliberate production of pseudo-events, news media may influence the very social or political trends which their reports supposedly reflect,” (Hackett, 1984, pg. 235).

3. Who Are These Foreign Correspondents?

“According to the stringers, staff correspondents “feel like they are purely objective” sort of above it all.” They are “above it all” literally. Most of them live in the Escalon, a wealthy residential and shopping district... The place is closer to Miami than the slums of San Salvador. Their geographic isolation is matched by even greater social distance. The A Team members rarely mix with middle and lower-class Salvadorans” (Pedelty, 1995. pg. 74).

A further layer of elitism I alluded to earlier in terms of access the Western correspondents are given as compared to their local counterparts, lies in the nature of the genre of people that end up making up the layer of foreign journalists cover the region. I suppose I am treading on identity politics from a lens of privilege here, which are muddy waters, but I’d be dishonest if did not reveal a pattern I’d noticed in the kinds of people that get employed at these sorts of institutions. For one, heads of these papers often legitimize their choices of correspondents because they are all linked to the more elite journalism schools in the West, and often choose their graduates as employees. “Most staff journalists received their degrees from prestigious universities in the eastern United States or Britain, including Harvard, Cornell, Oxford, and Cambridge. Most of the A Teams [large Western paper teams] editors and sources were educated at similar institutions. Conversely most stringers earned their degrees at public universities,” (Pedelty, 1995. pg. 72). It should be reminded that Pedelty wrote about El Salvador, but I deem his commentary to apply quite accurately to the Middle East.

Indeed, one of the Arab journalists employed at a large Western institution I'd interviewed alluded to this being part of the reason that she had been hired, explaining: "I haven't had problems getting jobs when I wanted them. But the reason it's way less difficult for me, I'm fully aware is because I have an American passport and I graduated from the major Western journalism schools. So, I have several stamps of approval in their books."

Another Arab journalist employed at a Western institution gave me a similar response when explaining why we often don't hear of many Arab correspondents being hired to cover the Arab region: "Another reason is most of the main educational centers of journalism are in the West. When you're applying for the big Western publications, it catches their eye when you have a master's in journalism from Columbia, or from NYU. These centers and institutions are also the ones that create employment networks. When you're there, you're networking and you're meeting all of these people and these are the centers that local journalists are usually blocked out from. That's another reason a lot of correspondents are in the end the people who are getting these degrees. A lot of these agencies have internship schemes that are built and centered around these universities, and that's how a lot of these people become correspondents."

This phenomenon creates clear elitist restrictions on those who are incapable of attending these sorts of institutions, and also maintains a kind of homogenous grouping of people with similar ideologies that are then sent out into the world to cover it through a very similar uniform lens. Although some media offices have recently diversified their staff in one way or another, you'd still find that most of them are 'Westernized' Arab locals, which is not to decrease from their Arab identities, but rather to point to the fact

that they were not to be accepted until found to have been sufficiently embedded with the Western system doctrine.

Mark: “In terms of American media, it's notoriously a white institution. I think the people tend to come from the same sets of colleges and universities, which is not to say, you can't think differently, but it does mean people generally came from certain financial backgrounds. Geographic background, too, I was still a white man at the publication.”

Joseph: “The reason why is because it has to do with making sure that these journalists have climbed the ladder without skipping any needed guidance from the seniors, and their work has to be monitored for a while before they could be sent to reside in other bases around the world and get back information.”

So, they come from certain elite backgrounds only after getting a stamp of approval from the editors of professors at the universities that send them, and then once here they live a life sort of further removed from the community they're meant to be covering. Perhaps what I say here can be taken with a grain of salt, as I don't really have academic proof for these happenings, but in my time spent in Beirut working for different international outlets, I did find that they mostly grouped together, spending time in higher class restaurants and bars, only interacting with the locals through formal reporting mechanisms and even then, through the prism of a translator or fixer. Every social gathering I attended, involved a group of foreign correspondents, Western humanitarian organization heads and perhaps a selected few from the larger feminist organizations or the UN. Not entirely sure what to do with that information, but thought it would be important to mention it here, so that we gain an all-around understanding

of the many divisions of elitism the entire infrastructure of Western journalism branches out to.

Sally: “As Western journalists, we do bring certain values to our coverage, which are very much often identified as Western values, and I prefer to think of them as human values. But that often causes a lot of grief in the coverage of certain situations where people may have different values.”

And with that comment from a Western journalist, we arrive at my final point of contention with the elitism of the Western media infrastructure, from legitimizing problematic elites in the Arab world, to in itself being an elite club only little media persons have access to, and finally in this prevailing thought that Western media, along with its values, is superior to local media.

4. Western vs. Local

“Granted, international media does have political and corporate interests. But you can argue that they don't copy and paste press releases. They ask critical questions often, to their own officials sometimes. It's a very different thing. At the same time, for example, you do see that international media sort of dictates what's relevant in certain countries based on their local readership, which is a lot of bullshit. I'm not idealizing one or the other.”

Indeed, this is the issue I'm immediately faced with when I try to bring up the issues with Western media institutions, essentially it is (arguably) the lesser of two evils problem. Many journalists are sort of in awe of Western institutions and wish to end up working for one in the future, as it would widely count as an incredibly prestigious step forward in a journalist's career. This dream is even more pronounced in the Arab world, when local media is split into the two genres: independent alternative media, and local sectarian propaganda-pumping media.

Joseph: “We're talking about Lebanon? More or less, the majority of local outlets are extensions of the sectarian structures in Lebanon, they are the representative of sectarian elites, which means that they are representative of their interests.”

Obviously, the latter is ideologically problematic, if a journalist has no affiliations and would not want to follow the restrictive censorship any of those institutions would impose. The former, while a lot better ideologically at least, usually underpays staff and struggles as a media hub against the ones with larger followings. That is of course in the Arab countries that even allow for alternative independent media (countries like Syria and Egypt for example, would be impossible). Since these smaller independent media hubs struggle to get funding, they will often have less reach and less resources to match the golden objectivity pillars of their Western counterparts, with less capacity for editors, fact-checkers, and talented journalists (who may prefer a higher pay).

This results in a dangerous, at least in my opinion, tendency to trust in Western institutions and hail them as the ideal news sources in the region.

Roudaina: “If I saw it on local news outlets, but I then saw it on CNN, it makes a big difference for me. As a journalist, I go for the Guardian, BBC, Washington Post, New York Times, I do believe they're highly credible. For me, the margin of error is way less, that the one in local news outlets. Even interlocutors and the people here, officials and so on, they feel more comfortable sharing with Reuters than with locals. The Western media outlets won't choose just anyone, there's standards.”

This is especially true once you get employed at one of these institutions for a period of time, all of a sudden work opportunities come pouring in. You could be an intern doing nothing but translating and sometimes calling sources for a year at a Western institution and you'd still be considered more qualified for some positions than

someone who had been writing articles and going on the field for years for a local news outlet.

Reem: “You're more reputable once you've worked for international media organizations or published for them, and less so when you work regionally or locally.”

Rinal: “They wouldn't take me seriously but the minute I had [Western Institution Name] on my CV, they' were like, wow, Damn. But I'd interned there for a few months. It was during a pandemic. I tend to play it down, because I feel like I don't even know if I have the right to put it on my CV, but I get so many opportunities from it”.

Outside of the scope of this research, although I would be amiss not to mention this, is that even with the tendency for Western institutions to act all high and mighty in comparison to the local papers, they actually rely in a big way on local journalism to get their material.

Rinal: “In local journalism you don't need the fancy extra steps that big papers and big news agencies take, and once you publish, someone from a Western paper will see it and work on it more since they have the funding. That then becomes evidence for when a bigger paper wants to take it, unfortunately, that's what usually happens.

Of course, all of these arguments corner me into a difficult position, as there is no immediate solution for this tendency, since local institutions are not to be counted on at least in the structure they're present in today. Still, I suppose it should be pointed out and considered as an elitist power dynamic in and of itself.

Without going into very deep political theory, it isn't difficult to imagine that the reason these communities they deem too fragmented to speak for themselves are the way they are, can arguably be traced back to foreign political interferences in the first place. At times, it feels like the ultimate abusive relationship; these countries have

managed to gaslight an entire region into believing they are incapable of relying on themselves, only after years of pushing them to arrive at that state of vulnerability.

“Objectivity assists those in power to maintain social order and fix limits for behavior deemed deviant by the prevailing orthodoxy (Altschull,1987). Objectivity, according to Altschull, is anything but scientific-"it hallows bias, for it safeguards the system against the explosive pressures for change (Stoker, 1995, pg. 10).

5. Method of Self-Defense

“Newspaper editors may perceive objectivity as rational, open, and democratic, but the concept is more often governed by competition, control, and self-protection” (Stoker, 1995, pg. 8).

My closing statements on the elitism equation, will involve sort of glossing over this understanding of objectivity under the lens of self-protection (as it is not going to be within my capability to give this section any further attention). While many will deem it important to speak to these elites and provide them with the right to respond as a cornerstone of journalistic objectivity (i.e. a balance of all sides), the truth is this is often done for the institution to avoid major legal liabilities. “Balance or equality of coverage is the more usual standard adopted in bias studies, no doubt because appropriate benchmarks are not always available, and because it is legally enshrined,” (Hackett, 1984, pg. 231).

Tiffany: “That's why some reports or investigations often read really badly, and feel really boring. Sometimes it's because you really have to, for legal reasons, put in all of those denials because otherwise you can get sued. I think, being scared of lawyers and being scared of being sued is one of the biggest threats to objective journalism, because it makes you recoil from stuff that you think you're more likely to get sued for.

With relation to investigations, that's particularly important in terms of striving for objectivity is that if you're uncovering someone's corruption, of somebody extremely rich, there's always the chance that they will just spend the next five years suing you. And that I'm sure puts people off doing it.”

C. As Long as Its Economically Feasible

“The question whether people really take an interest in foreign news, and why, or how one can draw their attention to it, is important in the news business, not least in times when economic considerations play a very large part in management minds.” (Hannerz, 2002, pg.66).

“Fatigue with the Middle East” is a phrase I would hear often when I pitched stories to my editors, especially ones about refugees in whatever domain. I also heard this complaint from a lot of those I interviewed, explaining that foreign news just isn’t in high demand unless something that can be made sensational is going on.

Wassim: “That speaks to the problems newsrooms are facing in the States because at the end of the day, we're governed by the same cold hard facts as any other company, which is we need to make money. We need to grow our subscriber base. They closed down the Africa bureau, the Mexico Bureau, the South America Bureau, because they want to reorient themselves into the avenues that make the most amount of money.”

This results in a new dimension of problematic tendencies when it comes to news from the Arab region. Often because news from these areas is deemed unprofitable, minimal space is provided, mostly for the extreme doom and gloom stories, in the world news section of these papers. “The question may be raised whether the high cost of foreign news, especially in the form of a more extensive network of staff correspondents, is really balanced by more readers or advertisement revenue directly

brought in by such coverage. For some organizations, the answer may be simply, ‘No’, and thus they seek alternative ways of reporting on the world— or just do very little of it.” (Hannerz, 2002, pg.66)

This phenomenon explains why many of the reasons pitches for Western organizations were rejected for the journalists I interviewed due to their being “too local” of a story. The reason why I am rarely convinced by the ‘economic feasibility’ line of reasoning however, is because as we discussed above, these large news institutions are what set the agenda for what are events that are worthy of being covered. I believe that after constructing a narrative of fatigue with the Arabs, and sort of placing a distance (between ‘us’ and ‘them’), it was beneficial for them to deem news from these areas of the world financially unworthy.

Tiffany: “I cover a region where a lot of people die, and that's horrible. Each time lots of people die, that's real people. One of my big problems with HQ, or editors, let's say, is lots of people die, and I'll be like, I think we should do a story because lots of people died; Also, there's a political context, they didn't just die in a vacuum. One of the things I get a lot is, “oh, Iraq is always fucked up, you know, people always die, there.” Like, would you say this if they died in the UK? No, you would not. I think that's a really interesting example of a Western viewpoint of racism.”

This is especially when you could perhaps again, trace back the reasons the chaos is so widespread in these regions to exploitative foreign policies, which could completely be considered news worthy to a global audience if phrased in the right context. “Occurrences become events according to their usefulness to an individual (or organization) trying to order experience. Different people or institutions may have

different, even conflicting, "event needs," and hence will attempt to order or define reality in different ways," (Hackett, 1984, pg. 236).

Dismissing some local stories unless they provide an opportunity to further alienate this region of the world for not providing interest for a global audience is invalid, in my opinion, as that phenomenon is merely consequence of how the news media infrastructure organized itself in the first place. I believe this is what Glasser means when he explains that "What objectivity has brought about, in short, is a disregard for the consequences of news making," (Glasser, 1984, pg. 16). We've witnessed time and time again how these giant news organizations provide the standard for which reality should be interpreted for the rest of the media universe. Hackett explains, "In previous centuries, media reflected the form of the dominant institutions. But in the modern era, media themselves are the dominant force to which other institutions conform, including "the entire political process" which is now "inextricably tied to the logic of media work and has been transformed by it into an extension of media production," (Hackett, 1984, pg. 235).

1. Oversimplifying Political Contexts

My closing statements on the elitism equation, it doesn't seem too difficult too far from the imagination that the media world could slowly but surely flip the script, if the intentions behind these decisions was indeed pure, to offer a world view of the news that places importance on all the world views through a mere matter of reconstruction. As of now, what results in the distance taken from this region is not only that pitches from local Arab journalists being deemed too local and specific for a global audience, which ultimately means that those looking in on the region will never learn anything but

a generalized perspective, but also that the rules of objectivity force the writers to oversimplify and remove all the nuances from their stories (which editors will remove also by deeming them too local).

Imad: “They always use against us the thing that ‘oh, you know, people here in America or in the UK or in France wouldn't really care about this, we just take it out’. I understand that there is a certain level of simplification that has to be done for someone who's on the subway in Washington, reading about so many different countries, and doesn't really understand all of these things. Still, this could be weaponized in a certain way to render most of our articles somewhat superficial and lacking in depth and in added value. And this is happening with a lot of news reports, they all end up sounding the same, reading the same, their language is bland. And just the nature, the soul of the story ends up changing.”

Lynn: “Too much economy, too much nuance, things that are seen as a bit too local, is taken out. So sometimes a lot of details are taken out. Very important pieces of context on what's happening is all taken out, and I have to argue for it to be put back. A lot of color, I think is also taken out often. You hear a lot of like shit from colleagues that's frustrating, sometimes very simplistic, naive, or insulting things where they don't know that they're being insulting. Like the fact that that I'm seen as focused on too local stories when I completely disagree, I feel like the context is critical to the story. If we're going to tell it why not tell it right?”

This often happens, as many journalists have explained to me (and as I've admittedly experienced myself) with the nut graph in the beginning of a news report that sort of provides a little summary of context of the political situation of the certain country for readers before they read the more direct news update. Local journalists often

struggle with this, given that they find that there is a lot of important details that need to be included for those who want to learn to fully comprehend the news update and situation, but editors often change those to a nut graph that adds no complex or depth whatsoever, but rather repeats the sort of general shallow understanding most global audiences with little knowledge of this region have anyway.

Elie: “There have been times where, this boring paragraph you have to write every time, explaining the crisis in three lines at the beginning? One of the problems I always have with the Western media is that I always explained the crisis, the way I understand the crisis. I've written so much about it, I understand it by now. Most of the time, in Western media, it gets crossed out. And the editor rewrites two lines and they always explain it in like a really shallow way. And I'm like, Yeah, but you're ignoring a big part of it. You're ignoring how the politics interfere, you're ignoring the dynamic between state and banks and other things. And I'm saying it in three lines, like you're saying it in three lines. So why are you removing mine? Another example, if I'm writing for a German audience, I think they should understand how a judge works in Lebanon, because most Germans, they will read it and think, well, if the judge said so, then it must be correct, because there's a legal system. Things like that.”

Another issue that arises with applying the objectivity standard lies in the fact that it is quite difficult to find accurate and conclusive data in the Arab region (and other ‘third world regions’, even though I totally reject this phrasing). While this perhaps is due to other factors than a Western imperialistic view, it adds yet another layer to the generalizing and oversimplifying of the contexts of these areas, perpetuating the distance from us and readers. At least, reliance on this data for a credible report alongside the lack of their availability, turns reporting into a really dry process

producing detached narratives. This isn't to say a lack of data isn't problematic, but rather if we have certain knowledge that there are methods that are difficult to apply to these context, why not choose a different route to get 'closer to the truth' as these organizations claim to do? Unless of course, that was not really their true intention in the first place.

Tiffany: "Different contexts have different problems with facts. Here, there is a bit of a fact deficit a lot of the time, because data collection is poor. The local authorities don't always know, and they're not always to be trusted. It's difficult to know what sources to trust. A lot has been done wrong, it's really messy reporting in places where you have very limited access to information, but massive interest outside. That is a really toxic combination."

CHAPTER V

THE ARAB DILEMMA

There were several more interesting problems that came up during my conversations with my interviewees that I thought I would be amiss to not mention, so interesting that I decided to dedicate an entire chapter to them. I found these factors particularly critical, given that there are many justifications provided when the objectivity standard's application is questioned, even when one knows about the plethora of complications that arise with it. Many are quick to explain that regardless of these issues, it's an ideal that is mostly worthy of abiding by, as it is supposed to be a helpful aid in our search for "truth" when narrating these stories.

To the backdrop of this mindset, I would like to outline other common problematic phenomena common to the Western coverage of the Arab region, which, at least in my opinion, pose an even larger detriment to truthful reporting, and offer more obvious proof of the presence of a racist superiority underlining present within the infrastructure. These however are barely discussed, or even thought of as problematic in the first place.

A. The Arabic Language? Not Necessarily

"Reality is never experienced by social man in the raw. Whether the reality in question is the brute force of nature, or men's relations with other men, it is always experienced through the mediating structures of language. And this mediation is not a distortion or even a reflection of the real, it is rather the active social process through which the real is made" (Hackett, 1984, pg. 236).

None of the Western correspondents I interviewed spoke the Arabic language. A couple did explain that they know some Arabic, but definitely not enough to truly get them by. From a brief round of research, besides through the journalists I managed to interview, it was almost impossible to find a single Western correspondent (besides those ‘Westernized’ Arabs I’d mentioned earlier) that spoke Arabic. When I asked my interviewees whether they thought a correspondent should speak the language of the place they were covering, all the locals said yes, and 3 out of the 8 foreign journalists agreed as well, even though they themselves did not speak it.

Melissa: “I think it allows you to connect with people, the people that you're interviewing. And not only is it important when you're doing your reporting, but if you actually understand the language of a country you're reporting on, you can also understand their media from watching TV or listening to their music, you can just go around and understand the culture and the country a bit better. I think it's also easier to find unique stories or original stories.”

It does seem quite a straightforward condition one must have in order to understand and cover a news event in a way that’s closest to the truth in another country, but surprisingly overlooked as unimportant. In some places, it wouldn’t even be possible to find those that speak English to interview, and as Melissa explains, those who do often reflect this with a particular social standing (which sort of takes us back to the elitism argument).

Melissa: “That's not to say that people who don't speak the language can't report on it well, of course they can. But I think one, the sources that they can speak to are more limited because, people that speak English tend to be of a certain section of society generally.”

Hackett states that “apart from journalism’s mediation of the social world, language itself cannot function so as to transmit directly the supposedly inherent meaning or truth of events. In part, this is because labelling implies evaluation and context...Neutral value-free language is impossible, because "evaluations are already implicit in the concepts, the language in terms of which one observes and records," (Hackett, 1984, pg. 234). Later he goes on to add, “even within a single language, a signifier does not univocally point towards a single signified which in turn clearly delineates a single referent,” (Hackett, 1984, pg. 250).

We are to understand then, that there are critics that deny research of the effect of the media on its audience, due to the giant spectrum of ways that readers consume the content we’re analyzing, due to us not being able to definitively say that the language of the reporter was understood exactly the way it was intended (because of the multitudes of possible signified referents). What then can be said about those who cover an entire region without understanding the language of its people?

Fares: “A language is an essential part of the country's culture, whether you want to properly understand the country, and you want to be actually representing that country to the foreigners. And, not just relying on a native to do that part of the work for you.”

This is the way most Western correspondents find a way to circumvent the language problem, simply by hiring a translator or a fixer to speak to their sources for them. Of course, that raises its own problems, primarily that one will not only filter information through the original language barrier, but then also through the translator’s understanding of what the source is attempting to say. When I asked whether working with a translator helps solve the language issue, two of the foreign correspondents respond:

Ben: “It certainly helps deliver what you need to deliver. At the end of the day, if you need to write an article, you get what you need, you get a quote, you read all together, and you can deliver your story. But in terms of really understanding the issue and the event, and adding a little bit more color to your story and a bit more emotional stuff to it, yeah, obviously, I'm missing out on a whole bunch of that. Like when activists or people on the street are interrupting each other or something which they say and then they laugh and walk away. Could have been a really good scene painting these people's humanity. But they're speaking in Arabic. I can't write that one guy said something funny, and another guy laughed and walked away.”

Tiffany: “I worry about my own ability to speak the language. I wish it was much better. The fact that I can understand only most of what people are saying is not really good enough, because I can't ask the best questions in Arabic. I can't articulate an expression well enough compared to how I could do it in English. You also just hear stuff, in the streets or whatever. I can sort of understand people complaining about their lives, or I can hear people talking about the dollar or whatever. That doesn't go into the story, but it would have given me a better sense of where I am and a deeper understanding.”

The language barrier brings us to a new dimension related to the infrastructure of Western coverage of the Arab region, one I have been through myself alongside countless other local journalists: The News Assistant/Fixer Conundrum.

B. The News Assistant Conundrum

“Stringers harbor a great deal of animosity towards staff correspondents. Their complaints are as follows: 1) Staff correspondents are both physically and culturally removed from Salvadoran society. 2) Correspondents exploit stringers knowledge and labor without offering adequate compensation and

3) Correspondents rely much too heavily upon elite, propagandistic sources and are in turn treated preferentially by them” (Pedelty, 1995. pg. 69).

It became quite clear to me as I began my career in the journalism field that if I wanted a chance to land a position at a Western paper, it was most likely going to be a position as a News Assistant, not a reporter. The News Assistant position are offered to those who have knowledge of the field and a proper understanding of the language, usually young hopeful locals who would leap at the chance to be employed at one of these institutions. Being a news assistant however never actually offers a pathway towards eventually becoming a reporter, nor even- God forbid- a correspondent in the future, no matter how well you do in that position. “The stringers are, for the most part, young reporters who will either leave the profession, gain one of the relatively few, under- paid positions in the alternative press, or become staffers themselves. Unfortunately, it is very difficult for a stringer to become staff, “(Pedelty, 1995. pg. 76).

Most news assistants of course have little to no freedom in their positions within the institution. Their jobs are to translate whatever the correspondent asks them to, and to ask the questions the correspondents want them to ask to the sources who don't speak English. Then you're asked to translate and transcribe those interviews and send them in. News assistants barely if ever pitch their own stories.

Lynn: “When I was a fixer, the work came to me. The journalists would come to me with their stories, and they'd tell me we are trying to identify these characters, and these storylines, and we're thinking about doing this story. Sometimes, I would just find the character for the interview, sometimes I would more or less write it. But I've never pitched story ideas as an outsider.”

Because of our previously mentioned “activism” stigma, if those news assistants were to pitch them to local alternative media instead, they are again stigmatized in the Western media community.

Pedelty explains, “although the stringers’ personal politics tend to be more liberal, their news reports do not generally contain liberal biases, stringers must conform to the political and editorial wills of their clients...For this reason, they feel much more freedom when writing occasional pieces for alternative press organizations, whose editorial politics mesh much more closely with their own. Unfortunately, these institutions cannot afford to pay very well and constitute a very small part of the overall news market,” (Pedelty, 1995. pg. 76), and then later states that on top of that, “stringers who submit reports to alternative press are particularly stigmatized by corporate media, even though it comprises a small part of their overall news output,” (Pedelty, 1995. pg. 77).

In some cases, a news assistant is even sent to cover events and contribute in a large way to a copy, only to get a contributor’s line at the bottom of the report, but with the correspondent’s name at the top.

Nour: “Because oftentimes, of course, they’ll have to rely on fixers, who are the ones who have contacts, the ones who know the context, who have the background, who supply them with all of the information that they need, who take them to the relevant places, who conduct interviews on their behalf, who translate and they don’t even get a byline, they don’t even get an acknowledgement that they worked on a story even though oftentimes, they’re doing at least 50%, if not more of the work. And oftentimes foreign correspondents are white men, and occasionally white women, who do come in especially when to our region, with this orientalist gaze.”

To be fair, this tendency has begun to change a little in the last few years with many news assistants raising this issue to the correspondents they work for, and so now they get more bylines than they used to, depending on the amount of work they put in for a certain piece. Still however, they will always get paid astronomically less than a reporter would for doing the same if not more work, and generally given a freelance contract that has no added benefits. Pedelty explains, “despite their mutual antagonism, A and B Team journalists are heavily interdependent. A great deal of international news is produced via their collaborative efforts. Most staff journalists rely heavily upon stringers for knowledge of ongoing events and to make contacts. “I am a correspondent,” explained Michael, "but I rely on the stringer that lives here. He lives and breathes it...The stringers provide their labor and knowledge to staffers in exchange for money, institutional resources, and an opportunity to reach wider audiences. (Pedelty, 1995. pg. 80)

Mark: “This whole infrastructure that they have going, where you have fixers who are doing the actual work, yeah, I think it's absolutely ridiculous. I think they need to speak the language. And I don't really understand this current infrastructure where you have a reporter doing the writing using a local fixer who's not paid well, doesn't get health insurance, doesn't get any of the benefits of doing the work, I think it's ridiculous.”

Another local journalist I spoke to knew this very well and expressed that she leaned towards working in local media even with its pitfalls, because she’s seen how locals get stuck in entry-level positions simply bound to translation work for the longest periods without ever getting any further in their careers:

Roudaina: “I was interviewed by the New York Times and I didn't like the position because the hierarchy in the New York Times is just... we all know I'm going to stay for like 30 years until I get anywhere, if I even do. I was like, I'd rather be in a good position and doing the work I'd like to do in local media rather than be with a big name but doing way less.”

“Staffers reserve the title “correspondent” for themselves, while labeling B team [local] journalists “stringers” or “part-timers.” Through their appropriation of the generic term “correspondent,” staff journalists accord themselves a much greater sense of importance while denigrating the stringer “part-timers” as less serious professionals. “Within the journalist community there is a pecking order,” explained Janice. The A Team terminology reflects this sense of superiority,” (Pedelty, 1995. pg. 78).

This whole scheme makes it easier to lead towards, again, barely hiring locals to be correspondents for this organizations, even when they have both the language and the professional capacity to do so. A journalist I spoke to who had spent a lot of his time working as a news assistant with a giant Western corporation explains:

Wassim: “At the end of the day, my happiness is less important than the happiness of the correspondent. It's the job of the correspondent to come write about what's happening in the country, and it's my job to support the correspondent. All of that is of lesser consideration when it comes to the company's own risk: which is we can't create a mentorship scheme, and we then have to deal with all the news assistants around the world, you come to understand the brutal reality of it, which is the numbers. They don't have an obligation towards me to as far as healthcare, it calculates that we're not worthy of health insurance. If you're a guy sitting in New York or Washington, and looking at this, you'd be like why should I make these three four people correspondents and

multiply my expenses by nine, right? When I'm getting the same output of work, otherwise? Also, do I really care? Do I care if we have a very important facet of our Middle East coverage gone? Not really. Do we care about our Middle East coverage enough to justify multiplying our expenses there by eight or nine? Not really.”

There are many reasons given justifying why it's so 'difficult' to employ a correspondent who is local to the region, including some I mentioned above like the stigma that they're too subjective (which is considered inherently problematic), or too 'activist-y' and would cause too many problems for their employers, and the elitist infrastructure that often picks those who graduate from certain institutions to be hired.

Karen: “I can think of a few situations I've seen where an international publication was hiring for a position in Beirut, and I personally know, Lebanese journalists that are very qualified, that applied for it, and they ended up sending someone from New York that's never been here. I can't say if the reason for that is because of the perception that someone local would be less objective. Could just be internal politics, and this person from New York was the favorite of the editors. There are a lot of things that play into it.”

Melissa: “I think it's kind of just a custom of Western media. I've never worked in one, but my impression is that it just seems lazy. I would imagine they would say that it's easier to work with someone they know, but I mean, you can find someone amazing. And you can use your networks to find a local person who knows what they're talking about, and just get new people into journalism, I mean, why fly in someone who's going to maybe read a book about that country on an airplane, and then get there?”

Reem: “I think about how many Arab journalists and writers, how many of them have such eloquent thoughts and interesting angles and perspectives, but Rebecca from

Britain somehow ends up with the BBC in Beirut and gets the job. Time and time again, the work of Arab journalists gets overshadowed, because we're seen as less credible, less reputable. We don't work with international organizations because we're just not given those positions.”

Indeed, in speaking to a foreign journalist who's been here for a while now, he recalls his first few years of reporting out of Lebanon explaining:

Mark: “I'm not like an expert on Lebanon. I know a lot more about Lebanon now than I did at the time. And so maybe if I were to go back and have to look at those same pieces, and see some of the things that I edited and put up maybe now I'd be, much more reticent or ashamed of them. But at the time. I didn't I mean, it takes a long time to understand anyplace and it takes a really long time to understand Lebanon.”

I was genuinely in awe about another common justification given to the “why don't you just hire a local to be your correspondent?” question, especially because when the inverse is brought up it's not really considered an issue: that they don't speak the language well. Of course, in today's globalized world, it's not impossible to imagine finding a local who can both have a native tongue and a proficient knowledge of English, at least enough to write a news report in English (the writer's work you're reading right now is in fact an Arabic native speaker). Still somehow this was a justification that came up often. Below I attached a conversation I had with a Western correspondent that truly had me in awe at the time (the italic parts were my end of the dialogue).

The argument would be to just find someone from the Congo who could write a story about the Congo.

Eric: “Can he write in English?”

I mean if they're already taking the time to hire someone to translate the language for them, if they truly can't find anyone who speaks English why not have someone write a piece in their native tongue and then just translate it? Wouldn't that be closer to the story?

Eric: "You think it's that easy?"

No, I'm not saying it's really easy. But shouldn't it be more worthwhile to try?

Eric: "Let's talk about the Arab world. In Lebanon, a lot of people who read and write English and French well, right. But my experience is that as for example, try to find an Egyptian to write a story in English well. It's not easy."

Are you saying it would be impossible to find an Egyptian who can write a good story in English?

Eric: "I'm sure there are Egyptians who write a good story, of course, but there are not many, I mean, the level of education in Egypt very low there, it's not so easy."

I mean, to be completely candid I did not imagine that I would get this kind of blunt response out of a correspondent, but I do truly believe this is how most of them think, even if they wouldn't admit it to me. Of course, just like earlier if the intentions were truly to get the best stories out of a certain region, and it genuinely was that impossible to find someone that speaks the language well enough (which I find hard to believe), you could find a way to invest in training potential local journalists in the way you'd desire. But somehow even then, another journalist explains that when the reverse is applied, many Western editors have a "native English speaker bias".

Stephanie: "There's this bias towards people based on nationality. There's this native English speaker bias. It doesn't matter how well you can write or speak the language, they still would rather play it safe and hire someone who has just the passport, a piece

of paper that says ‘Okay, this person is a native English speaker,’ which I find ridiculous a lot of time. I say this because I was writing a story about Iraq, and then I suggested to my editor, there's someone who's actually from Iraq, and they can write a better story than I can. They're on the ground, and they're willing to freelance. And he said, okay, but only if they're a native English speaker. Which is obviously not the case in a lot of places.”

Then of course, like I'd mentioned above, one could imagine training locals to follow the basic tenants of objectivity in journalism and simply translate their work to get closer to the story. However, as we know by now, the best and most truthful intentions aren't exactly what guides this infrastructure. Another common justification, one I find the least convincing, as one local journalist explains, is that local journalists simply don't understand what it takes to cover the news for the audience of a Western paper.

Yousef: “There's this sense that you hire Western correspondents, because they know what the western audience wants. It's a flawed argument. It's not true. I'm not from the west, but I've worked at Western agencies long enough to know exactly what the western audience wants, and what kinds of stories they're looking for. This is something you learn, this is not something you'd only know just because you come from there.”

Finally, we arrive at the last reasoning, one that perhaps is the most logical explanation as to why we are need in foreign correspondents here. It's not the fresh eye argument, and it's not because locals are too subjective to be counted on. It is an unfortunate reality that often the local journalists working in their own countries are in more danger than the foreign correspondents, given that it usually involves work that

criticizes their own governments that generally lean towards the authoritarian side. One foreign journalist explains:

Tiffany: “What is my added value as a Western correspondent? Basically, that its harder to arrest me. To me that is genuinely the only thing that makes me useful. We do have problems with this. In places where we have correspondents who are from the place, we are shitting ourselves all the time about them getting arrested, like in sensitive countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia, for example. When we were in places where we had our correspondents who were from Saudi, and were from Iran, it's a nightmare, a very worrying thing. They're very vulnerable. So that's a toss-up, isn't it, to have someone like me, and it's not that I'm objective, necessarily. It's just that I'm less vulnerable.”

What Tiffany is describing rings true. Many journalists expressed fearing for their own safety and knowing that usually the danger comes from the government itself, as compared to the foreign journalists whose governments often interject to save them when their lives are in danger.

Tara: “Definitely the amount of protection they [foreign journalists] get both by their government because it's functioning but also by their outlets that send them. They get so much safety, they get lawyers in case something happens. If I get kidnapped in the desert covering Libya my government is a bunch of baboons, no one's going to come rescue me. And in my own country, I don't have the excuse of being like a foreigner. I can't even get protected by my own army, and who's going to protect me then? Whereas if I was a foreign journalist, yeah, there would have been intervention from my editors abroad or even from my embassy.”

The thing is though, since what I'm suggesting (or what I will be suggesting quite clearly in the coming chapter) is an entire overhaul of the system, all of these

justifications for the ousting of local journalists from these positions, even if logical within the political context like the last excuse, still seem to constitute an elitist structure that could be broken down and absolved if the intention was really there. Could we not find a way to prioritize Arab locals to tell their own stories, and find a way to protect them as foreign entities who have the interest of truthful journalism at heart?

C. The Arab Dilemma

It became quite clear to Every Arab, as well as some Western journalists I spoke to confessed that they have arrived at a standstill in their career, at least mentally, just like the one I'd personally arrived at then I embarked on this thesis writing journey. On the one hand, truly independent alternative media is scarce and not always available in certain countries, with a lower audience reach, credibility and pay for its employees; on the other, at the very least these institutions, when truly independent, will be the spaces in which we will be the most ideologically comfortable. With the Western media however, on the one hand, the pay is always better, it's an incredible boost to your CV and social status, but on the other, there are so many racist underlying tones you're going to inevitably experience once you're employed in one, let alone it being difficult to further yourself much in your career. After events in Palestine this year, many journalists found themselves even more so wrapped up in this dilemma, not sure where the future will take them. Here are a few key testimonies I've gathered:

Stephanie: "After seeing news coverage of international outlets lately, I'm not sure, I'm kind of torn on this issue. Because working for an international outlet, as a person coming from Syria right now, you will never be treated as an equal to other reporters.

It's not just on a local level where people are paid different by nationality. It's actually on an international level. So, where I end up will depend on what I'm willing to put up with at that point in my life. Right now, I don't have that good of a sense of direction as to where I'd like to end.”

Mark: “This is all to say having seen the cogs at work, I feel much less thrilled about the idea of continuing in the profession, and also just, Am I the right person? Am I the right person to be editing or writing stories on these topics? It's something I struggle with every day. Am I the right person to be editing or writing stories about the Middle East?”

Yousef: “I just can't see myself as going to major Western publications like the Washington Post, or The Wall Street Journal, or the New York Times. I have friends who work there, and I kind of see the misery of those jobs, because they don't really care about the region. They don't really care about the countries that we're reporting on. Nothing for them is really important. Also, their perspective is such a white man perspective.”

CHAPTER VI

SANDRA HARDING AND FEMENIST THEORY

“Many currents in feminism attempt to theorize grounds for trusting especially the vantage points of the subjugated; there is good reason to believe vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the power” (Haraway, 1988, pg.583).

So far, I’ve come a long way to outline all the problematic tendencies that arise from attempts to accept the objectivity standard, from its ever-changing definition, to the moral implications that arise with its implementation. I’ve also attempted to highlight the moral (specifically racist) underlying issues that are born out of the standard when it comes to the Arab context in particular. What is the point of all of this? I’ve revealed the problems, but what can be done about them?

According to Hackett, bias studies often accept the assumption that “the media can and ought accurately to reflect the real world, in a fair and balanced way. The concept of bias implies the possibility of a zero-degree unbiased or objective account of events,” (Hackett, 1984, pg. 232). Given that we’ve arrived at the conclusion, through several junctures in this thesis, that that is virtually impossible, why not consider overhauling our entire dependency on such an ideal?

One journalist summarized my criticisms as well as answered my ponderings about this issue in this manner:

Joseph: “There are lots of variables that ought to be brought to mind when assessing whether a piece is objective or not. Some of these variables have to do with individual choices, whereas others have to do with institutional arrangements, editorial policies. the whole legal and political settings due to drawing your own red lines, all these and others which might relate to one’s cultural background, one's inability to

diversify the language used. It's never the case, that each and every one of these values is completely balanced 100%. It's aiming for perfection, like anything in life. It's like thinking of, is there a perfect love? And then, if there's no such thing, then one can be like, why do we need to love in the first place?"

And to that I respond, I'm sure there are less racist underpinnings in seeking to find love in the world. The truth is, it seems to me that at this point there are too many problems underlying this ideal we are attempting to reach, one that in its very definition excludes those with any connections to their subjects. There comes a moment where we perhaps draw a line between some of the attributes commonly linked to objectivity that are more favorable, and then others that perhaps it is time to admit only yield the most harmful outcomes in knowledge production. As one local journalist puts it:

Nour: "There's a difference, when we talk about objectivity and saying that we're against objectivity, it doesn't mean that we're completely pushing aside or neglecting or ignoring the standards of our profession. It still has to abide by a certain set of standards, but objectivity is not one of them. And what are these standards? Accuracy, representation, all of the basic tenets of journalism."

Hackett had also made similar points about this understanding that not all of our work surrounding the creation of the objectivity standard is foolish and useless, because "where the partisan prejudices or self-interests of news producers do influence content, we would want to know about it," (Hackett, 1984, pg. 253). What I am proposing is a new beginning, not out of a vacuum but out what we have honed as of now of foundational understanding.

Towards the end of Hackett's article, which I've referred to quite religiously so far in this paper, he asks several questions which I think could relate to the core of what I've been hinting at all throughout this research:

"Is this possible [to rid of objectivity] without being seen to produce mere "propaganda?" How important are audience expectations of objectivity as a constraint on potential alternative media practice? What would be the political consequences if mainstream journalists themselves came to regard objectivity as ideological or illusory? Is it not sometimes politically useful to mobilize on the basis of demands for "balance" and "objectivity," just as the liberal rhetoric of human rights or equal opportunity may sometimes be turned in radical directions?" (Hackett, 1984, pg. 256).

I think future scholarly work on these topics should aim to ask and answer these questions, which he'd posed all the way back in 1984, but I will also attempt to offer a possible starting point of a framework. I believe that a great deal of wisdom can be found in feminist methodologies that have highlighted the value in 'situated knowledges', or at the very least sought to prove the validity of the viewpoints of the marginalized. Within the scope of this thesis I will only be thoroughly discussing Sandra Harding's *Standpoint Theory and Objectivity and Diversity: Another Logic of Scientific Research*, although many other feminist research methodologies have made similar points or sought to prove the work that Harding had done.

The feminist theorist Sandra Harding coined the term standpoint theory to categorize epistemologies that emphasize women's knowledge in particular. She argued that it is easy for those at the top of social hierarchies to lose sight of real human relations and the true nature of social realities, thus missing critical questions about the

social and natural world in their academic pursuits; otherwise, a very similar point to the elitism problem I have dived into in an earlier chapter (Harding, 2016, pg. 1803).

In contrast, she argues, people at the bottom of social hierarchies have a unique standpoint that should serve at the very least as a better starting point for scholarship. It seems quite simple when you first read the theory: why not let the subjects of the study, speak for themselves? In other words, go the opposite route from those who insist that you must not have a stake in what you're speaking of, to those who are entirely engulfed in the situation you are describing.

Nour: "I'd much rather work with someone from the south or the north or from anywhere in the country [of Lebanon] who has a stake in the reporting that they're doing. For them, it's not just a paycheck. They're connected, determined, passionate, and will go to the end, to get the truth. Those who are invested in their stories are more likely to produce exceptional work, as opposed to outsiders who don't care as much. Western journalists don't have a stake in the story, and they can present themselves as objective observers who are just merely reporting, but obviously, when you're working with the Washington Post, and the New York Times, or the BBC, and so on, you are abiding by their editorial guidelines and their policies, and their governments. They're biased too. Aren't we the bias closer the truth?"

Indeed, Western journalists often allude to this idea anyway, in citing that attempts to understand their subjects emotionally always leads to a better and more informed story.

Tiffany: "If you do allow yourself to try and understand that person, properly, that does mean an emotional engagement with their situation. You can often write much better, because you've actually tried to put yourself in that person's shoes, which is

obviously impossible to do. I mean, I'm so vastly privileged compared to most of the people that I would be writing about. I will never ever know the exact situation. All of my understanding is superficial. I'm a foreigner and I'm always going to be a foreigner. I'm always going to know like 10% of what someone here knows. But if you at least make the effort, then I think it gives the writing more power."

So why not simply give those who do know the exact situation, the right to speak about their exact situation? Harding expresses that their marginalized positions actually make it easier for them to define important research questions and explain social and natural problems, and that the argument that it can't come from the subjects themselves because they have a stake in it has no standing. "It is an epistemological mistake to conflate the motivation of research by social values or interests with an inevitable weakening of its validity, reliability and predictive powers. After all, corporate, imperial, and military interests and motives don't make weapons less reliable at killing; nor do environmental or health concerns in themselves damage the reliability of research they motivate," (Harding, 2016, pg. 1803).

Reem: "When I'm reading a Western journalist's writing, it feels as though it's completely detached from the facts on the ground. For instance, what's happening in India right now with the COVID-19 vaccine, I don't just want to hear the magnitude of devastation there, I want to read the day to day experience of somebody, I want to read somebody's previous few weeks versus now. I think someone being of that community, of that culture is a huge benefit to the content that they produce."

Reem: "Somehow it's 2021 [at the time of the interview] and we still don't let Arabs or marginalized communities speak up for themselves in the international media. There are organizations who will have a foreign writer, or foreign correspondent station

there, instead of employing someone on the ground. I don't know whether that's because they trust the objectivity of that foreign correspondent more or simply it's just the marginalization of Arab voices. It's definitely gatekeeping in international media at the end of the day.”

Of course, I do not wish to back myself into a corner in saying that only and purely Lebanese people should be able to tell Lebanon's stories, as even then I don't think I can make an argument for a pure Lebanese identity, it simply does not exist in today's world, nor do I contend that that is the most desirable outcome. What I am saying is, that there is something inherently problematic about the fact that the voices that are amplified in the Western media are primarily and the majority those of white men and women, combined with the fact that there is effective and active silencing of the voices of Arab men and women.

Stephanie: “I don't think it should only be locals, but I don't think foreign correspondents should constitute the majority either. There will be some scenarios where it's good to have an outsider that might grant them access somewhere locals won't have access to, because of local circumstances. But what is happening now, is that, 90% of people covering for international outlets are not from the place nor speak its language, and it should be the other way around. There should be like 10% of them.”

Lynn: “Yeah, the best journalists I know covering the Middle East are Arab. With some exceptions, but in my opinion, the people who know the most, and the people who have the capacity not necessarily do put out the best stories, but have the capacity to put out the best stories, and are usually stopped by their news organizations. I think those are Arabs and locals.”

It isn't all that illogical to understand the issues that arise if knowledge production about this region is in the hands of white men and women, especially given our political history and context. Harding explains, "Sciences and their societies co-produce and co-constitute each other. For example, a white-supremacist society will tend to produce sciences that in turn legitimate and enable white-supremacist economic, political and social projects," (Harding, 2016, pg.1803). I think that standpoint theory emerges as necessary when those who are marginalized become conscious of their social situation with respect to socio-political power and oppression, and begin to find a voice. "The need for standpoint arises when research communities lack diversity and are isolated from pro-democratic social tendencies. Research that starts off questioning nature and social relations from the daily lives of economically and politically vulnerable groups can increase the reliability and predictive power of its results," (Harding, 2016, pg.1803).

Even in scenarios where one could imagine that the world has made it so natives do not have the tools to speak for themselves, any outside effort should be intended to provide support to amplify those voices, not speak on their behalf. As one local journalist explains:

Wassim: "As a person coming from growing up in the east and working for an international media outlet, I have a better understanding of what's happening here, because I have an understanding of regional dynamics and the culture and stuff in a way that my colleague would never have. But equally my colleague brings tools that make the story so much richer. I think that the article is not really complete unless you add that international dimension that only your colleagues who grew up in London and went to these private schools would know. The end product is a very beautiful thing. All

hands-on deck, it's an enriching experience and it enriches the article. But this would only work as long as I have that space whereby I'm seen as an equal, not perpetually as the assistant. An equal. Why not?"

And if at the end of the day we understand that the ideals that one cannot really argue with are those of accuracy and lack of information manipulation, and that true objectivity is virtually impossible and not even an ideal that is desirable to aim for, why not flip the script? "There had to be more reporting which portrayed everyday life elsewhere, and which allowed journalists more personal angles and engagements," (Hannerz, 2002, pg.65). This would not so much require an entire overhaul the way I see it, but rather simply a lifting of the pretense that we were ever objective in the first place.

Tiffany: "Our names are on the top of stories, right? You know a human being wrote it and a human being is not infallible."

So why bother with the performance? I think a lot of the fears that come with this line of thinking can be summarized in a slippery slope kind of argument, whereby if we finally come to terms with the idea that we should just be subjective, all knowledge production will cease to be valid in a moment, and we will lose all the values that helped us discern truth from bias and fact from propaganda. But look around you... hasn't that already happened? Is it truly impossible to imagine that a subjective account that doesn't attempt to perform objectivity whilst providing you the news, is no different than a propaganda-filled news piece that twists every fact to push its dogma? The truth is, knowledge production is already a spectrum that could input those two extremes at varying degrees, the only difference, is our high-horse insistence on pretense of objective work.

“Its theoretical underpinnings seem to be trembling. No longer can we simply assume the possibility of unbiased communication, of objective and detached reporting on an allegedly external social and political world. No longer can objectivity be taken as the opposite of ideology in the media, if indeed the forms and rhetoric of objectivity help to reproduce dominant political frameworks, or position the media audience as passive observers and consumers,” (Hackett, 1984, pg. 253).

Donna Haraway expresses this quote in “Situated Knowledges”, that perhaps was the line that sort of set this entire thesis into motion: “A commitment to mobile positioning and to passionate detachment is dependent on the impossibility of entertaining innocent identity politics and epistemologies as strategies for seeing from the standpoints of the subjugated in order to see well. One cannot “be” either a cell or molecule- or a woman, colonized person, laborer, and so on- if one intends to see and see from these positions critically. Vision is always a question of the power to see- and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted?” (Haraway, 1988, pg. 585).

“In other words, one cannot separate truth from context and human subjectivity” (Stoker, 1995, pg.12).

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Within the scope of this research I attempt to discuss the problematic tendencies that arise with the objectivity standard, and offer an alternative starting point for future journalistic practices. Given that this is a student's thesis, of course there are limitations that I would like to discuss.

My study took into account the qualitative data I extracted from interviews with 29 journalists (they were 30 at the start but technical difficulties forced me to get rid of one interview). Obviously future studies and additions to the literature should attempt to take into account a larger database of journalists so as to come up with more definitive conclusions; I simply wanted to bring forth a discussion about racism and the silencing of marginalized voices, and possible entry points for future solutions.

There were many other factors that if I had more time on my hands I would have loved to include and discuss. Ownership politics, for example, play a large part in the final output that these institutions publish (i.e. what companies own what with the entire ownership hierarchical scheme). These kinds of studies make up a lot of the literature but I simply did not have the capacity to include these concepts within this study.

Finally, I know that it could get quite messy to discuss identity politics in the way I have outlined above, and it should be noted that I do not think identity could be discussed in pure black and white terms. Obviously, it's a spectrum that gets increasingly more diverse in today's world. I suppose I simply, even within these complications, point to the problematic tendency to depend on those who put in an effort to distance themselves from the contexts they are meant to cover, as well as the

systematic silencing of those that may have a stronger relationship with the lands they're meant to report from.

Today, there are so many conversations being held across the world about different new types of journalisms- obviously we no longer assume that traditional objective reporting is the only way to go about things. There's solution-driven journalism, impact-driven journalism, conversational journalism, and more, all born out of the same criticisms I attempt to highlight above. Regardless however, the reliance on the concept of objectivity remains strong in all of these attempts, while the academics who offered the subjective point of view are commonly shoved aside.

I think there needs to be reckoning, which is already in its nation phases, and it might be a long process, but it is to our benefit that we are already beginning to ask these questions: Who should be telling these stories? Who should be editing these stories? How do we end journalism as a colonial project and reckon with the fact that it has been that for a long time? Who should we be writing stories for? These are all questions that need to be reassessed and could serve as good starting points for future research.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

These interviews will remain anonymous and will be used for educational purposes only.

1. How old are you? (Age)
2. Where are you from? (Nationality)
3. What languages do you speak? Native language?
4. What language do you use in your work?
5. How long have you been a journalist? (Years of experience)
6. What countries have you covered in your work? For how long? (Location)
7. What is your current position? Freelancer/full-timer/correspondent/reporter?
(Career position)
8. Do you work for an international or local news media outlet?
9. What role do you think journalists play in society?
10. What are the values a journalist should hold in your opinion?
11. What are the values a journalist shouldn't have?
12. What kind of impact do you want your articles to have, if any?
13. How do you define objectivity in news reporting?
14. What's the difference between news reports and opinion pieces?
15. Is your opinion ever appropriate in reporting?
16. Have you ever pitched to a Western media outlet?
17. What are the things you keep in mind before pitching, or rather what kind of pieces do you think they're interested in?
18. Have you ever written an opinion piece for a Western media outlet?

19. Have you ever had a piece of yours published in a mainstream western media outlet?
20. Has your work ever been heavily edited by said media outlet?
21. What were the reasons if your work is edited?
22. Give examples of the recurrent themes surrounding why your work gets edited?
23. Can you give examples of pitches to Western media outlets?
24. What in your opinion are the characteristics that contrast in local media vs
25. Who in your opinion is a reliable source?
26. When is a source unreliable?
27. How often do you quote 'official' government sources in your work?
28. When is it appropriate to get both sides of the story?
29. Where do you lean on the audience philosophy? Do you give your audience all the context necessary?
30. Do you choose your own headlines? How do you feel about that?
31. Are you comfortable abiding by word counts and deadlines?
32. Can a journalist be an activist at the same time? Why or why not?

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