Modern journalism ethics was built upon the twin pillars of truth and objectivity. By the early 1900s, journalism textbooks, associations and codes of ethics cited truth and objectivity as fundamental principles of the emerging profession. Journalists were said to be responsible chroniclers if they reported in a truthful manner based on neutral reporting of objective facts. Journalists interpreted objectivity and truth according to their long-standing common sense realism – an epistemology that exuded confidence in the power of journalistic observation and other unexceptional methods. It also exuded confidence in psychological dualism – the capacity of journalists to separate observation and interpretation, and facts and opinion (and values), in their reports.

What the codes expressed was not the notion of truth and objectivity but one, historically situated, ideal. It was heavily indebted to the prevailing positivism of science and the idea of neutrality embraced by the emerging professions. It can be called the traditional (or original) idea of professional journalism objectivity.

Claims of truth-telling and the reporting of fact impartially go back to the 17th century origins of a periodic news press. Editors practiced an informal empiricism in chronicling the world. Their “newsbooks” mixed facts and opinions, and objectivity was yet to become a popular term. However, in the early 1900s, as the power of news media grew, the ethic of objective and truthful reporting became a strict methodology for constructing news stories. Guides to journalism stressed the need to separate, cleanly and absolutely, facts and opinion. The new mass commercial newspapers displayed a “veneration of the fact” (Stephens, 1997, p. 244).

Today, the traditional conception of journalism objectivity has a legion of sceptics due to at least three factors: First, a corrosive post-modern skepticism about objectivity and truth in general. Truth and objectivity are, for example, said to be Western notions used to impose a cultural imperialism on other cultures. Second, a cynicism about news organizations as more committed to profits and selling the news than honoring the ideals of objective reporting. Third, a belief that, not only is objectivity in journalism impossible or a “myth,” but non-objective, perspectival journalism is best for a global media world populated by citizen journalists and social media advocacy. Therefore, any discussion must begin with the problem of truth and objectivity in journalism.

This chapter would be short if the critics were right, that is, it could be shown that objectivity and truth are invalid concepts. Period. Such a demonstration would be convenient. We would not have to wade into the deep philosophical water that surrounds the “trinity” of epistemic concepts:
rationality, objectivity, and truth. But, as I will argue, these concepts are not invalid, and the debunking arguments are themselves dubious and self-contradictory. A commitment to truth and objectivity is necessary for any serious inquiry, within and without journalism. Why?

Positively, such notions are needed to make sense of what we do when we make judgments, then claim they are worthy of belief or approval. They are worthy to the extent that they are true or objective. Negatively, to reject such notions is to undercut any attempt to make a claim. A claim, by definition, implies that what one says is true, objective, or rationally acceptable. To deny truth and objectivity undercuts every attempt to assert a proposition, including the proposition that there is no truth or objectivity. To question truth and objectivity is to use rationality to undermine rationality. Global skepticism of truth and objectivity, therefore, is a self-refuting view. To abandon objectivity and truth is to abandon the hope that inquiry can improve belief, discern error, or bring us closer to the truth about some matter. Why inquire at all if objectivity and truth are grand illusions, reducible to cultural bias or geopolitics? All is appearance and subjective opinion. Perhaps one should remain silent.

To make matters worse, it is not just truth and objectivity that are undermined. Our key epistemic terms stand or fall together. They form a semantic circle where the meaning of one is explicated in terms of the others. To be rational is to believe what is true; what is true is what is rationally acceptable, given objective norms of evaluation. To say a claim is objective is to say it is rational or true. Also, to undercut objectivity and truth is to undermine the associated distinctions between bias and non-bias, accuracy and inaccuracy, careful and hasty generalization, the logical and the illogical. For example, one cannot even appeal to the idea of false cultural stereotypes, or to false propaganda, since “false” is one of the terms abandoned.

It is not just Western cultural imperialism that is refuted; so are its critics. To reject truth and objectivity undermines the authority of attempts to reform the world. Reformers, whether advocating for human rights or applying feminist ideas to teaching, claim that their reforms are based on a “better” view of things than the status quo. But how define “better” if not as more rational, more objectively just, more based on facts, or closer to reality? Finally, in an era of global misinformation, “fake news,” and social media extremism, this is exactly the wrong time to stop insisting that journalists (and others) support their claims by honoring rigorous methods and objective criteria.

The real issue, then, is not the validity of truth or objectivity as general notions. They are indispensable and valuable. The real issue is how to properly understand and improve our notions of truth and objectivity, and how to apply them in practices like journalism. We should neither abandon truth and objectivity carte blanche, nor fall back on an outdated traditional notion of objective journalism. The way forward is a reconstruction of the idea of journalism as objective and truth-seeking engagement for the public sphere.1

In this chapter, I outline how truth and objectivity came to be principles of journalism ethics, and how they came under attack. I discuss alternate journalism epistemologies that have arisen in the past several decades, and indicate the way forward.

EPISTEMOLOGIES OF KNOWLEDGE

Realism and Constructionism

Journalistic truth has two components: (a) the apprehension of truths, or true beliefs; and (b) truthfulness: the virtue of desiring truth. Truth and truthfulness travel together. For journalists to affirm truth but lack the desire to pursue it is an empty affirmation. To be competent in journalistic
method but to care little about truth is to undermine truth-seeking. Truthfulness is a mixture of passion, method, and evaluation. Ideally, journalists have a passion for truth that is shaped by objective methods of inquiry and tested for truth by evaluative criteria such as accuracy, completeness, and logical consistency. The journalistic search for truth faces many obstacles, such as the complexity of the world, the clash of rival perspectives, the biases of journalists and their sources, deadlines, and finite newsroom resources. Given these obstacles, journalists emphasize truth-seeking – the diligent application of fallible methods over time.

Talk of journalistic truth and objectivity is part of our culture’s theorizing about these notions over centuries. This rich history includes theories of truth, as well as skepticism and relativism about truth claims. Since antiquity, intellectuals have offered theories of truth (Kunne, 2005), such as correspondence with reality; truth as the coherence of ideas; truth as rationally acceptable belief; and truth as useful ideas. Questions about truth and objectivity are also part of the epistemology of journalism. Epistemology is the philosophy of human knowledge as a whole and in its many kinds – empirical, scientific, mathematical, ethical, religious, and humanistic. As a leading reference has stated, epistemology is “that branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope and general basis” (Honderich, 2005, p. 260).

Two theories have dominated the epistemology of Western thought and of journalism: realist and constructionist views of truth and objective knowledge. Each theory is a broad perspective on inquiry that admits of many varieties.

Realists tend to favor some form of the “correspondence theory” of truth. True beliefs “fit” with or correspond to the world as it really is. False beliefs do not. This realism is the default position of common sense, that is, people in everyday life, before they philosophize. Philosophers have developed sophisticated epistemologies based on this realist point of view. Realist epistemology runs from Plato, René Descartes and John Locke to Bertrand Russell and, more recently, William Alston (1996). For Plato, truth was not shifting belief about quasi-real objects of sense but certain knowledge of transcendent and truly “real” objects known by intellect (Cornford, 1968, pp. 217–218). Aristotle in his Metaphysics defined truth as “to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not” (2001, 1011b22-30, p. 749). Alston’s “minimalist” realism ignores complicated questions about how ideas correspond to objects. He defines truth, simply, as such: “A statement (proposition, belief) is true if and only if what the statement says to be the case actually is the case” (Alston, 1996, p. 5). It is true that grass is green if it is the case that grass is green.

Realist theories reject theories that reduce truth to coherence among our ideas or to what we can justify, using objective methods. Truth is not justification. There are many truths about the world that humans may never know. A justified belief, considered true at time t1 may be shown to be false at time t2 in the future. The role of justification, and objectivity, is to ensure that we form beliefs in a manner that makes it more likely that we will reach the truth. (Rescher, 1988; Horwich, 1990). The essence of realism is that my beliefs are made true by some reality external to my mind. External objects provide an objective check on my beliefs. Realism often becomes an epistemology that stresses facts. Facts are worldly states of affairs that exist apart from human interpretations. It is a fact that water is made of hydrogen and oxygen, and Mount Everest is so many meters high. Truth and knowledge amount to knowing these facts, knowing the way the world is apart from how humans think of it.

In contrast, constructivism is the view that truth and objective knowledge are constructed by humans as individuals or as groups. There may be an external world that awaits accurate description, but we never know that world apart from the tools we use to apprehend it. There is no way to say what truth is other than to state the findings of our best methods of inquiry. We only know the world via our conceptual schemes and standards of evidence. Justification and pragmatic methods of rationality are more primary than the metaphysical search for absolute truth about
reality. For some constructionists, truth is defined (or reduced) to rational justification. Putnam (1981) argued against “absolute” realists who think humans can know reality as it exists apart from human perspective. He defined truth as rationally acceptable belief. Also, constructivism tends to lean toward some type of relativism in knowledge, since it defines truth as relative to human perspective and conceptual methods.

Constructionism as a viewpoint began with the realization in ancient Greece of the variety of moral and social systems among humans. The Greeks distinguished between phusis, or nature; and nomos, or law, convention, custom (Aristotle, 2009, p. viii). Nature may be ruled by universal principles but society is organized by customs and human-made laws that vary across societies. Thus began the tradition of explaining society by explaining how humans came to live under a certain set of customs or “social contracts” (Darwall, 2003). Thus began the long debate between relativists and absolutists when discussing truth and knowledge. In the past century, constructionism has become prominent in the form of “social constructionism” which studies how people make claims to knowledge while pursuing various practices and goals. Social constructionists also critique dominant notions that are defined in ways that support inequality in society, for example, concepts of race and gender. The analysis shows that the concept is a “construction” and does not refer to something objective in nature (Hacking, 2000).

Common Sense Realism and Journalism

Historically, journalists have been realists of a certain kind: common sense realists employing a common sense empiricism of method. Journalists have believed, like most people, that there is a real, external world that journalists can report on truthfully. They describe the world as it is.

“Common sense” is a term that needs to be used with caution. It does not entail that common sense beliefs are true, even if widely accepted. Common sense is often false or lags behind the leading edges of science. Nor is common sense limited to ordinary experience. In any era, common sense includes religious, theoretical, and scientific beliefs that have made their way into popular culture. To say that journalists use common sense means they adopt beliefs generally held to be plausible and they express the ideas plainly, avoiding complexities. This is part of their role as cultural translators.

Empiricism was an attractive method for journalists since they chronicle the observable world about us. A journalist’s main path to truth is through the senses. If a journalist accurately reports on what was said or done, then the report is true. A news photograph is true if it captures an external event without distortion. If not, it is false. For many years, this simple realism and rough-and-ready empiricism appeared to be sufficient, as an epistemology of journalism.

In fact, many journalists in the past would have scoffed at the view that journalism needs an epistemology, of any kind. In their view, journalism is a craft learned by practice, not by doing philosophy. Journalism no more needs a formal epistemology than the craft of glass blowing needs a formal epistemology. Therefore, for centuries, journalism did not become entangled with philosophical disputes over what is known and what is knowable. Serious, theoretical study of journalism did not get much traction until the growth of schools of journalism and communication at universities in the previous century. It was not so much the journalists who described their work as guided by a naïve and robust empiricism, or a positivism of fact. That was the heady description that academics used when they theorized journalism.

Nonetheless, journalists in previous centuries could not entirely avoid philosophizing about their practice. In most cases, it was public criticism of journalism, and the threat of some denial of press freedom, that prompted editors to produce justifications of their craft. In the 18th and 19th centuries, editors used general philosophies of society and the press, for example, liberalism, to
defend press freedoms or explain practices. By the middle of the 20th century, journalists were confronted with the expansion of academic (and other) critiques of journalism, bristling with theoretical constructs. Some serious, theoretical work on a journalism epistemology, and a delving into the psychology, economics and sociology of news, was needed after all.

If we regard these normative press philosophies (Christians et al., 2009) as an epistemological exercise, or at least containing epistemological thinking, we can speak of five epistemological eras, which align with five eras in the history of journalism ethics.3

FIVE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ERAS

The five eras are:

Era 1: 17th Century: Epistemology of Partisan “Truth” and Matters of Fact
Era 2: 18th century: Epistemology for Public Enlightenment
Era 3: 19th Century: Libertarian epistemology and News as Fact
Era 5: 20th century (1960–present): Alternate Epistemologies

Era 1: Partisan “Truth” and Matters of Fact

The first era is the emergence of the modern news press in the 16th and 17th centuries. Publishers of “newsbooks” and “broadsheets” in Western Europe sought to interest readers with primitive compilations of news and political opinion. Working under censors, editors defended their reports and opinions by claiming impartial truth. But, in such partisan times, their editorials were partisan “truths” to support the king or his opponents. When the first newsbooks appeared on the streets of London between the 1620s and 1640s, they were called A True and Perfect Informer, or the Impartial Intelligencer or the Faithful Scout, Impartially Communicating. Daniel Border opened the Faithful Scout in 1651 with a flourish: “Having put on the Armour of Resolution, I intend … to encounter falsehood with the sword of truth.” In 1643, Henry Walley, editor of the True Informer, said: “Truth is the daughter of time … the truth doth not so conspicuously appeare till a second or third relation.” Compare Walley’s view with this passage from a popular book by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001, pp. 41–42) on today’s journalism: “The individual reporter may not be able to move much beyond a surface level of accuracy in a first story. But the first story builds to a second … and … to a third story.”

Editors adopted the emerging idea of a matter of fact. Every editor said their correspondents reported only matters of fact. As Shapiro (2000) showed, journalism was part of a growing “culture of fact” in Europe that began with the practices of law, and was stimulated by travel literature, the age of discovery, and experimental empirical science.

Era 2: Epistemology for Public Enlightenment

The norms of journalism evolved as newspapers grew in number and power during the 18th century Enlightenment (Briggs & Burke, 2002, pp. 74–105). Newspapers became the communication channels of the public sphere. Philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1983) argued that representative government depended on “publicity” from the press. The press espoused a “public ethics” (Ward, 2015a, pp. 153–196) that redefined the 17th-century norm of partisan truths in terms of truths for a public. The press was to inform and represent a public through informed opinion
based on scientific fact and public-based reasoning. In the 1720s, London editor Nathaniel Mist portrayed his Weekly Journal as a moral educator. It is a “History of the present Times” guided by “a love of truth.” By the end of the century, Edmund Burke called the press a Fourth Estate, one of the governing institutions of society (Ward, 2015a, p. 193).

Meanwhile, many newspapers made money by providing facts to a news-hungry public. England’s first daily paper, London’s Daily Courant promised “to give news, give it daily and impartially.” The Daily Courant said it would not comment on news “but will relate only Matter of Fact, supposing other people to have Sense enough to make reflections for themselves.” In 1785, John Walters I said the Times of London would be a “faithful recorder of every species of intelligence” (Ward, 2015a, p. 174).

Era 3: Market Place of Opinion and News as Fact

The third era, the 19th century, developed the public ethic into a libertarian theory of the press (Siebert, 1956, pp. 39–71) characterized by a love of politically partisan writing and an increasing interest in news reporting. In the first half of the century, journalism was led by an elite, liberal, opinion press such as the Times of London. The libertarian theory, expressed by John Stuart Mill and journalists such as Walter Bagehot and Thomas Paine, developed from the earlier writings of John Locke, David Hume, and others. Libertarianism meant society should allow a maximally free marketplace of ideas, similar to a free marketplace for goods. The marketplace metaphor presumed that public deliberation would consist mainly in a clash or competition of ideas. In the long run, true reports and correct views would win out (Ward, 2014).

The second half of the century saw the emergence of a liberal popular press or “news for all” – from the penny presses of America to the tabloids of London. By the late 1800s, the popular press was the first mass medium – an inexpensive commercial press based on circulation and advertisements and owned by press barons such as Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. Journalism was now the business of news. Reporters were sent out to gather news, to interview people, and to use new technology, such as the telegraph, to transmit news. Along with this news, journalism created a more factual form of writing which anticipated objectivity. In 1866, Lawrence Gobright of the Associated Press in Washington, DC, explained his factual style: “My business is merely to communicate facts. My instructions do not allow me to make any comments upon the facts which I communicate. … My dispatches are merely dry matters of fact and detail” (Mindich, 1998, p. 109). Meanwhile, editors claimed that the advent of news photography proved that reporting represented the world as it was. Charles Dana claimed that the New York Sun would offer a “daily photograph of the whole world’s doings.”

Era 4: Traditional News Objectivity

By the early 20th century, the epistemology of journalism came to be dominated by news objectivity. Journalists transformed their informal 19th-century empiricism into a strict methodological empiricism based on the dualisms of fact and value, and fact and interpretation. In newsrooms, news objectivity was an explicit, rule-bound, and firmly enforced method of story construction. It was developed by American print journalists (Ward, 2015a, pp. 236–241) followed by broadcast journalists. Associations, local and national, developed codes of ethics which stated that journalists serve the public by following the principles of truth-telling, objectivity, and editorial independence.

What type of objectivity did the journalists espouse? The ideal said that objective journalists published the truth about the world by neutrally recording the facts, and only the facts. From positivism and science, journalists took a veneration (and belief) in hard facts stripped of all
interpretation or bias. This was common sense realism *plus* a new methodological emphasis on reporting the “pure” fact. From the professions journalists emulated the ideal of being impartial and disengaged. Journalism objectivity was a sort of a passive stenography, or faithful recording, of events and public affairs.

News objectivity demanded much more from reporters than an informal empiricism. It was a disciplined empiricism, objectivity with a capital O, calling for the elimination of the reporter’s interpretation and perspective. Objective reporters were completely detached; eliminated all of their opinion; reported just the facts. Objectivity was a policing action against reformist values—the desire to interpret or campaign. Objectivity was operationalized in newsrooms through rules of story construction such as carefully attributing all opinion and giving equal weight or “balance” to rival views. Some news outlets would not use reporter bylines since a byline suggested the report came from a point of view.

**Why Traditional Journalism Objectivity?**

Why would journalists restrain their freedom to publish according to an elaborate system of rules? The historical reasons are many. Some major factors were: (1) the objective style fit the emphasis on news that was driving the development of a mass commercial press; (2) increased demand among the public for accurate, updated information, rather than partisan opinion; (3) the need to reduce sensational journalism, which raised public criticism; (4) the need to provide professional and ethical standards for a growing craft, and to protect journalists’ independence; and (5) increased independence of newspapers from political parties and a motivation to publish news “for everyone.”

From an ethical perspective, the most important factor was a growing public skepticism about the growing power of the press, and skepticism about the liberal theory of the press which advised society to just set the press free and it will be a responsible public informer. As the press came to enjoy a virtual monopoly on the provision of news, analysis, and advertising, the public became passive consumers of information dependent on data provided by a professional class of journalists employed by large news organizations. In the early 1900s, and beyond, this dependency raised public concern about the reliability of this mediating class of news workers. Did the press really serve the public or did it advance its own interests? Did it tell the truth or was it biased? Do not the press barons, press agents, and national advertisers determine what the press reports? In the fiercely competing papers of Hearst and Pulitzer, whose interests were really being served? Also, the public became increasingly vocal in criticism of the “yellow” popular press (Campbell, 2001). The rise of the press agent and the success of propaganda during the First World War called for a journalism that tested alleged facts (Schudson, 1978, p. 142). Amid this public concern, governments threatened draconian press laws. An impulse to chronicle the world was not enough for truthful, responsible journalism.

To assure the public, leading journalists and their societies sought “truth through ethics.” That is, journalists agreed to an explicit and restraining ethic to increase the reliability of the mass press. The answer, it seemed, lay in articulating, teaching, and acting according to explicit codes of journalism ethics. Ethics would make the free liberal press responsible. It was the missing ingredient. It was hoped that a professional attitude among journalists would run counter to the growing power of the press and the worrisome influence of press barons, newspaper syndicates, and business on reporting. Journalism ethics became the professionally mandated ethics of an important social practice, rather than the personal and idiosyncratic values of individual journalists or their news outlets. Times had changed. In a society dependent informationally on journalism, many journalists accepted a collective responsibility to be truthful and objective.
The belief that it was necessary to impose news objectivity on journalism testified to a growing feeling that the world was too complicated and too full of manipulators to approach truth in a straightforward manner. News objectivity signaled a step away from common sense realism and informal empiricism.

**Challenge and Decline**

Traditional news objectivity among mainstream media had its heyday from the 1920s to 1960s and then gradually lost influence, and fell out of favor with many journalists. News objectivity was criticized for being a myth, and for being philosophically naïve, out-of-date, and socially undesirable as a ruling ethic for journalism. Codes of ethics dropped the word “objectivity” and journalists retreated to the use of “safer,” less demanding, norms, such as being accurate.

Looking back, the ideal of news objectivity was never unanimously accepted by journalists. Journalism objectivity was most popular in mainstream newspapers and broadcasters in the United States and Canada. In Europe, the ideal was not robust, and many journalists preferred to report facts from within a political perspective, writing for newspapers and magazines known for their conservative, liberal, or other perspective. Hampton has argued that as American journalists were developing the ideal of objectivity in the news, British journalists were resisting the trend (Hampton, 2008).

Also, there were always rival frameworks, such as the interpretative journalism of *Time* magazine, or the guerrilla journalism of Hunter S. Thompson. Muckraker Lincoln Steffens complained about the objective reporting style of Godkin’s *New York Evening Post*: “Reporters were to report the news as it happened, like machines, without prejudice, color, and without style; all alike” (Ward, 2015a, p. 219). Henry Luce, who founded *Time* magazine in the 1920s, declared: “Show me a man who thinks he’s objective and I’ll show you a liar” (Baughman, 1987, p. 29). Both the magazine muckrakers of the early 1900s and the investigative journalists of the 1970s rejected neutrality in reporting, although they stressed the need for deep investigations into facts below the surface of things – facts not included in press releases or official statements. Other journalists, such as Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe, practiced a personal journalism that looked to literature for its inspiration. By the late 1960s, journalists were beginning to chafe at the restrictions of objective reporting. Many journalists adopted an advocacy stance to their work. In the United States, for example, the tensions created by the Vietnam War and the civil-rights movement questioned the notion of news neutrality. The times seemed to call for a press that advocated for peace and the rights of minorities. The emergence of television, radio, and then the internet created more personal forms of media where a strict objective style seemed unduly restrictive.

Traditional objectivity bequeathed to journalism epistemology the problem of how to develop an alternative model for objective and truthful reportage in a new global media world. The positivism that grounded news objectivity came and went (Putnam, 2002). Philosophers and others argued that our facts, values, and perspectives travel together, influencing the facts we choose and the frame we bring to events. The reporter as a passive stenographer of fact was false to a practice that was increasingly active and purposive. At the same time, post-modern constructivism questioned objectivity *tout court*. In practice, a more interpretive and avocational journalism emerged online. Traditional news objectivity had little to say about such journalism other than it was subjective, and advocacy was not the job of professional journalists. News objectivity was now outdated, philosophically discredited, and unhelpful as a guide for new journalism. The door was open to alternate approaches. The fifth era of journalism epistemology was underway.
Era 5: Alternate Epistemologies

In the middle of the 1900s, the expanding academic study of media produced trenchant critiques of journalism’s ethical principles and presumptions. Journalism was viewed, broadly speaking, through the lens of sociology. Journalism was a social phenomenon that could be studied and critiqued by the social sciences and other disciplines. Journalism could no longer avoid engagement with theorists that brought the perspectives of philosophy, political theory, economics, and social psychology to the practice.

Critiques Aplenty

Here is a summary of the main types of critique. In total, the critiques constituted a shift toward social constructionism. These critiques continue to be a part of current discussions about journalism in society.

**Philosophical Critique** Across the 20th century, postmodernism (Connor, 1989) and relativism questioned the idea of objective truth. Lyotard (2013) questioned the alleged universal standards of objectivity in Western culture and science. Historian of science Thomas Kuhn (1962) argued that scientific revolutions were non-rational “conversions” to new sets of belief. Philosopher Richard Rorty (1979) attacked a “Platonism” that believed objective knowledge was a “mirror” of nature. Social scientists talked about truth and knowledge as value-laden, situated, perspectival, and socially constructed. Rather than ask “what is truth?” they asked: What leads groups of inquirers in the laboratory, university department, or newsroom to make truth claims? What are the practices, routines, social values, political aims, and institutional structures that shape such claims? Questions about logic and evidence gave way to questions about who controls science and who defines truth. In philosophy, pragmatists, such as Putnam (2002), argued that dualisms of fact versus value, observing versus interpreting, neutrality versus agency – as found in news objectivity – incorrectly portrayed truth-seeking of any kind.

**Political Critique** Scholars in political science and political economy argued that journalistic “truth” reflects the interests of the powerful. Journalism is the manufacture of opinion not the neutral discovery of truth. This academic criticism was matched by complaints by citizens from the left and right of politics: that journalism is tainted by a liberal or a conservative bias. Noted linguist Noam Chomsky (1989) went so far as to claim that the mainstream press, such as *The New York Times*, produces propaganda, not truth, for political and business elites.

**Social Critique** Associated with this political analysis was the criticism that journalism perpetuated harmful social attitudes toward certain races, ethnicities, women, and minorities. Journalists published stereotypical views of groups; they adopted, often unconsciously, questionable perspectives that maintain social hierarchies and inequalities. Feminists, for instance, argued that the construct of objectivity led to treating women as objects, not as persons. They criticized male-defined concepts of gender and male–female hierarchies in society. In journalism, a feminist ethics of care (Koehn, 1998) was constructed.

**Conceptual Relativity Critique** A fourth critique argued that journalism’s common-sense realism was naïve, psychologically. It ignored how our views of the world are mediated by webs of belief and conceptual schemes. A reporter’s mind is not a passive blank slate upon which objects in the world imprint their image. Rather the mind is an active, organizing entity
that tries to fit what it experiences into a coherent grid of concepts (Pinker, 2003). Frame theory explored how journalists frame stories, where a frame is an organizing perspective on some topic. Journalists may frame drug addiction as a criminal story rather than a health issue, or frame a war as a noble fight for freedom rather than a war for economic supremacy in a region (Entman et al., 2009). Studies showed how the way that journalists define news – their news values – influences story selection (O’Neill & Harcup, 2009). Other studies delved into how ideology affects journalists’ approach to war and other stories, and how the phenomenon needs to be studied as “socially situated text or talk” (Van Dijk, 2009, p. 191). Also, how journalists build a news agenda was studied as another factor shaping reports (Coleman et al., 2009). The lesson was that journalists, in constructing stories, need to be aware of, and sensitive to, conceptual and interpretive factors. Such factors are operating even when journalists think they are sticking to “just the facts.”

**Lack-of-Knowledge Critique**  Another critique was that journalists lack knowledge when reporting on complex issues, making them ripe for manipulation. I call this area “knowledge infusion” since its promoters want to infuse knowledge and critical skills into the work of journalists. One promoter is Thomas Patterson whose *Informing the News* stressed the need for “knowledge-based journalism.” Journalists cannot properly seek the truth or serve democracy unless they become knowledge professionals (Patterson, 2013, p. xv). Journalism needs to develop a body of knowledge, or a knowledge base, from which it makes sense of a complex world. Knowledge, Patterson stated, is systematic. It is “established patterns and regularities organized around conceptual frameworks and theories” (Patterson, 2013, p. 65).

**Global Critique**  Media ethicists have critiqued journalism as parochial and overly nationalistic. Journalism ethics has failed to keep up with the development of global news media. In this view, journalism ethics needs to construct an ethic for global reporting, including new norms for reporting on global issues from immigration to climate change (Ward, 2013).

**Digital Challenges**

Traditional views of journalism objectivity and truth were weakened not only by theoretical critiques but also by a revolution in practice. The current digital revolution created a global public sphere where many people produce media content and journalism.

The impact, in terms of truth, is twofold. First, what is true and who is truthful becomes a large and worrisome social problem. Large-scale disinformation increases public mistrust of media, as journalists are tarred with the same brush. In response, governments, media centers, and philanthropic groups are spending millions of dollars on media literacy so citizens can distinguish truth from falsity in media. Second, the new digital journalism is more interpretive and opinionated, ignoring the traditional ethical principles of neutrality, objectivity, and editorial independence from political viewpoints. At the same time, journalists attempt to revise their norms of practice to maintain truth-telling in an era of instant communication and reaction. Journalism ethics today is fragmented, an archipelago of rival aims and practices.

**Reconstruction**

Yet, amid this disorientating media revolution, new standards and methods are beginning to develop, forming an interdisciplinary digital epistemology (Zion & Craig, 2015). Many news organizations, such as the BBC in Britain and the Society of Professional Journalists in the
United States, are revising their codes of ethics. The new standards guide journalists in the use of information from social media, in partnering with community groups, in opining on their social media accounts, and in verifying information – text or image – provided by citizens and alleged eye-witnesses to events.

Conceptual reform of journalistic objectivity and truth is also underway. For example, I have proposed a theory of objectivity that is called “pragmatic objectivity” which is designed especially for practices such as journalism (Ward, 2015a, pp. 280–337). Objectivity is not absolute knowledge, achievable by only a minority of people. It is not the reduction of statements to pure fact. Rather, we begin with all of journalism, and all of knowledge, as forms of interpretation and then we test the interpretations using the best available set of standards.

Journalists and ethicists are even making progress on what seemed to be an insoluble problem: how to maintain the central ideals of verification and accuracy (Hermida, 2015) in an age of instant updates, live blogging of events, and the swift moving conversation on social media.

The traditional notion of verification insisted on time-consuming checks prior to publication. New works in journalistic epistemology explain how to verify after posting by using the knowledge of the “crowd” on-line. Researchers (Silverman, 2014) have begun to develop methods of verification for online images and other materials. For instance, sophisticated software can discern if an image was altered and where the image was taken.

Work is being done to allow journalists to use powerful new research tools and story-telling technology, such as software that analyses “big data” – finding interesting stories in large data bases. Other work shows how to adapt virtual reality to truth-seeking journalism and how to employ drones for covering breaking news.

Meanwhile, scholars and journalists have begun to construct a global media ethics with implications for epistemology (Ward, 2013). Globalists typically take universal principles as their starting point, for example, human rights principles. They make a cosmopolitan commitment to a global humanity their moral priority and then seek to incorporate parochial values, such as patriotism, into their global system. Their theories have implications for how journalists should cover important areas of journalism. For example, Tumber (2013) has argued that the basic norm for war reporters today is not a neutral objectivity but a “responsible engagement” with events and issues. Dunwoody and Konieczna (2013) recommended that journalists covering climate change and other scientific issues should use the “weight of evidence” principle to decide how much emphasis sources should be given in stories. The news objectivity notion of an equal balancing of viewpoints is incorrect or of limited value. Also, Wahl-Jorgensen and Pantti (2013) have promoted a cosmopolitan approach to the coverage of natural disasters, which includes journalists showing empathy and compassion for victims. This epistemology dissents from news objectivity which insists that reporters should be detached observers.

A global approach has led scholars, especially from the Global South, to call for a “de-Westernization” of journalism studies and theories of journalism epistemology (and ethics). Wasserman and de Beer (2009), for example, call for the inclusion of non-Western values, into textbooks, teaching, and theory. One important question is the appropriateness of the Western model of an aggressive free press for struggling, transitional democracies such as South Africa.

The Way Forward

Recent years have not been kind to traditional journalism objectivity. This leaves the study and advancement of truth and objectivity in journalism in a difficult position. Should journalists go back to a 19th century libertarian view of truth and democracy as requiring only a free clash of
opinion? Should they revive news objectivity and “double down” on the norms of objectivity to restrain bias? Truth and objectivity in journalism seek a secure footing in a changing media ecology.

Given the deep changes in journalism, I favor a more radical response (Ward, 2015b) of reconstructing journalism ethics from the ground up, including more nuanced, believable, and useful conceptions of objectivity and truth-seeking. Reconstruction includes the ambitious goal of constructing a global journalism ethics, and developing norms that guide engaged and perspectival journalism. Moreover, the way forward includes journalists working with citizens to “detox” a public sphere redolent with unethical communication and extremism.

The lessons learned from the various critiques, above, need to be incorporated into journalism practice and teaching. The era when journalists could remain content with a practical view of journalism – a view that shuns theory and new learning about humans and society – is over. Also over is the era where journalists could hope to persuade citizens that what they practice is a neutral stenography of just the facts.

It is time for new, creative, and invigorated theorizing around the notions of truth and objectivity so that journalists have a clear view as to how they can help humanity challenge the ever-growing tyranny of extreme media in the service of hatred and tribalism around the world. 5

NOTES

1. I have discussed what this reconstruction should look like in a number of books, from Radical Media Ethics to Disrupting Journalism Ethics and Ethical Journalism in a Populist Age.
2. Also, common sense can conflict with scientific and others views, usually at a general level, for example scientific determinism questions belief in a free will; materialism or evolutionary theory may threaten certain religious beliefs.
3. For a detailed history of the development of these norms, see Ward (2015a). Quotations from journalists in the early era are cited in this work, chapters 4–6.
4. On the development of objective of fact from Francis Bacon in the 17th century to the scientific ideal of “pure facts,” see Chapters 2–3, Ward (2019c).
5. For more details on the shape of journalism ethics, see Chapter 6 of my Disrupting Journalism Ethics.

REFERENCES

8. TRUTH AND OBJECTIVITY


