

Is media impartiality a democratic necessity? Lessons from the value free ideal in science.

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Abstract

The value free ideal states that in 'good' science, the conclusions scientists reach ought not to depend on their ethical or political values, or else research outcomes could be compromised. Biased science is problematic because science informs many public policies. A parallel can be drawn here between science and journalism. A value free ideal in journalism would state that 'good' news is free from any political, social and ethical values that could make a news report biased. The way the news is reported influences public opinion, and as a result, contributes to the construction of public policies. In this paper, I will argue that a working towards a value free ideal in science and in journalism is essential in a democratic society, and that this can be achieved by redefining the value free ideal to mean free from non-epistemic values. Impartiality increases public trust in scientific and media institutions, both of which are essential to a functioning democracy with fair and accurate policies.

1.0. Introduction

In the philosophy of science, the value-free ideal states that 'good' science does not bend its content to values scientists may hold. Social or implicit biases could compromise research outcomes if a scientist allows their research to be shaped by the personal values they hold. One of the implications of value-laden (and therefore biased) research is that it leads to inaccuracies. This is problematic because science informs many public policies, so if a piece of scientific research is biased, then it follows that the policy decisions being made on the basis of that research will be too, which is unjust. A clear parallel can be drawn here between science and journalism. A value-free ideal in journalism would state that 'good' news is free from the political, social and ethical values a journalist might hold that could make a news report biased. This is important because the way the news is reported and its content dramatically influences the shaping of public opinion, and as a result, contributes to the construction of public policies.

I will be arguing that the value-free ideal in science is necessary for a functioning democracy. My justification for this develops from Bright's (2017) discussion of Du Bois' defence of the democratic ideal, whereby the value-free ideal ensures that public trust in science is retained. My most significant take away from Bright and Du Bois' discussions is my sub-conclusion that we need to redefine the value-free ideal to mean free from non-epistemic values, so it is *non-epistemically value-free*. From here, I will argue that if the value-free ideal in science is important, then a value-free ideal in journalism is equally important. To justify this premise, I will apply Du Bois' democratic defence of the value-free ideal in science to the notion of impartiality in the news. I will then conclude from this discussion that impartiality is important in the news because it maintains public trust in the media, which is essential for a functioning democracy.

1.1.Scope and Purpose

One of the main aims of this paper is to prove the necessity to regulate more forms of news media to ensure they are not compromising democratic trust. In the UK, television and radio news is subject to the broadcasting code set out by media regulator, Ofcom, and incur (often financial) punishments if they disobey the code. In contrast, news published in newspapers, on digital platforms, and on social media platforms in the UK is not regulated in this way. In this paper, I will be referring only to UK television news organisations that claim to be impartial, and who are regulated by Ofcom. Perhaps one of the most democratically beneficial elements about Ofcom is that anyone can send in complaints when they feel a broadcaster has disobeyed some part of the code, which is then investigated.

News has a number of functions within society, including economic, entertainment and cultural functions. I will be focusing on the *political* function of news, that is, the process of how news provides an electorate with the information they need to deliberate decisions that will affect themselves and their country. Political news often demands stricter impartiality controls than non-political news because partisan views can contribute to a political agenda, which is undemocratic.

The broad range of different news outputs within individual news broadcasters can lead to complications in the discussion. A single broadcaster outputs a number of different types of news a day, from a presenter reading off an autocue in a studio, to a live news report interviewing members of the public. I will be focusing on pre-recorded television news reports (simply news reports from here) because I am comparing science to journalism in this paper, news reports share a number of similarities in terms of their process to that of scientific research. For example, in their methods; scientists tend to start with a hypothesis, which they then test, before coming to a conclusion and sharing that conclusion with relevant policymakers or whoever commissioned the research. Journalists start with an idea (essentially their hypothesis), which they then research (test), come to a conclusion about, and then broadcast in a news report from their platform to the public. Therefore, overall, I will be focusing on *television news reports* in the *UK* that discuss *political* matters.

2.0. What is the value-free ideal?

2.1. A brief overview of the value-free debate in science

The value-free ideal in science states that “the justification of scientific findings should not be based on non-epistemic (e.g. moral or political) values” (Betz 2013, p. 1). Douglas 2009 argues that it can be understood as the idea that “social, ethical, and political values should have no influence over the reasoning of scientists” (Douglas 2009, p. 1). In more general terms, it is the idea that a researcher’s personal beliefs and biases should not influence their assessment of data. Part of the problem of the value-free ideal debate is that defining the value-free ideal is laced with ambiguity. For example, I have just highlighted three definitions, and each one focuses on something slightly different. Whilst it is important to acknowledge that value freedom under these definitions is a normative ideal, it is also important to recognise that we expect scientists to (at the very least) strive for this ideal, even if it unobtainable. Furthermore, as Longino (2004) highlights, the ideal of value freedom is bound up with the ideal of universality; no matter the difference in cultural values, what counts as a scientific truth for one person or community should count as such for any other (Longino 2004, p. 128). Value freedom in science has been extensively critiqued, and there are many different kinds of objections available

for discussion, however, I will be focusing on what I will refer to as *methodological* objections.

2.2. Methodological Objections

Methodological objections are those which argue that values are unavoidable in the methods of scientific investigation; whilst undertaking scientific research, a scientist must make decisions about what hypotheses to test, accept and reject. Inevitably, these decisions involve value judgements. Richard Rudner's (1953) argument supports this view. He says, "...since no scientific hypothesis is ever completely verified, in accepting a hypothesis the scientist must make the decision that the evidence is *sufficiently* strong or that the probability is *sufficiently* high to warrant the acceptance of the hypothesis. Obviously, our decision regarding the evidence and respecting how strong is "strong enough", is going to be a function of the importance, in the typically ethical sense, of making a mistake in accepting or rejecting the hypothesis" (Rudner 1953, p2, original italics). Rudner is arguing that since the evidence will never fully confirm or disconfirm a hypothesis, there is no value-neutral way to decide when we should accept or reject claims when we are uncertain about them. As a result, the confidence we have in the acceptance or rejection of a theory depends on what the consequences of error are. Because scientists must decide whether to accept or reject a hypothesis based upon the strength of the evidence that supports it, Rudner maintains that the scientist qua scientist must make value judgements 'in the typically ethical sense' (1953, p2). Similar arguments to these have also been offered in Levi (1960) and Douglas (2009), all arguing that decision-making in scientific processes necessarily involves making value-laden judgements or predicting the consequences of error.

3.0. Why is the value-free ideal desirable in science?

3.1. Du Bois and the aims of science within a democratic society

Du Bois rejects the methodological objection, but to understand why, it is important to discuss how Du Bois views science within a democratic society. Bright's 2017 paper, *Du Bois' democratic defence of the value free ideal* provides an interpretation of Du Bois' views on the value-free ideal in the context of a democratic society. Bright highlights how Du Bois distinguishes between two goals for science. Firstly, Du Bois argues that the intermediate aim

of science is pure truth seeking, and this is the goal that should motivate scientists throughout their research. Secondly, he argues that the mediate aim of science is social reform; science should provide accurate policy information that can guide democratic decision making (Bright 2017, p. 2230-2232). For Du Bois, pure truth seeking plays the main role in democratic policy information because it is crucial for retaining public trust. The public does not trust science that has been carried out by scientists who were not motivated by a pure truth seeking because it means the science is skewed to a certain social agenda. Trust is a key element of a functioning democracy, and so it is crucial for the public to trust science if we desire scientifically informed policy information.

3.2. Du Bois' response to methodological objections

Du Bois responds to methodological objections by arguing that scientists should not take non-epistemic values into account when deciding how the conclusion of their research should be asserted, which Bright (2017) labels the '*justificatory value free ideal*' (p. 2230). Epistemic values are those indicating truth, empirical adequacy, or theoretical implicity, whereas non-epistemic values are social, political and pragmatic values¹. Du Bois argued that scientists should not let any non-epistemic goals affect which hypotheses they report because the public does not trust science carried out by scientists who make value judgements. Furthermore, he argued that it is inappropriate for scientists to have different evidential requirements that are determined by the consequences of sharing the piece of research. This view was born out of a concern that scientists could alter their theories to suit different audiences, which would undermine the mediate aim of science (social reform).

Further, he argued that the scientist is not equipped to make social decisions and so these kinds of decisions should be left to democratically elected officials who are 'experts' in what is good for their society. Du Bois argues that the public do not trust science that is carried out by non-truth seekers. For example, a piece of scientific research might advance some political programme or policy that some part of the community does not support. Consequently, science which does not operate with the immediate aim of pure truth seeking undermines democracy because the research is not carried out in a democratic way. This is

¹ I acknowledge that the distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic values itself is a controversial debate, but this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, so for the purposes of this paper I will grant this distinction.

not to say that Du Bois did not think social reform was an unimportant job for science, he just believed that social change would naturally follow from pure truth seeking.

3.3. The non-epistemic value-free ideal

As a result of the above discussion, I would like to further refine my definition of the value-free ideal. This is because 'value-freedom' can be quite misleading in terms of its language; even imagined perfect science and/or perfect journalism would require scientists and journalists to make value judgements at some point. In fact, even by employing the value-free ideal itself, we are employing a value somewhat similar to closeness to truth, or balanced argument which leads to approximate truth, so value judgements are inescapable in this way.

Therefore, we need to redefine the value-free ideal to mean free from non-epistemic values (i.e., social, political, ethical), rather than *all* values.

Immediately, this conception of research being non-epistemically value-free is pragmatically far more realistic than our original conception at the beginning of this paper. This does mean that research becomes epistemically value-laden, but this is not a bad thing since epistemic values in science and journalism are encouraged under this redefinition.

4.0. What would a value-free ideal in journalism look like?

A value-free ideal in journalism would state that 'good' news is free from the political, social and ethical values a journalist might hold that could make a news report biased. As in science, the value-free ideal in journalism is a normative ideal, but it can be practically implemented through processes of impartiality such as broadcasting codes of conduct. The fact that there are serious punishments if a news outlet is not impartial is an excellent incentive to ensure that media outlets produce 'good', quality, accurate news.

It is worth pausing here and discussing what the mediate and immediate aims of journalism would be in a democratic society. The immediate aim of news is to give an accurate description of what is happening in the world, whether at a local, national, or international level. In this way, journalists hold a similar immediate aim to scientists in that they are pure truth-seekers. The mediate aim of news then is to provide citizens with the information they need to make

the best decisions about their lives in terms of their democratic capacity, which can lead to social reform.

5.0 Is the value-free ideal the same thing as impartiality?

I will claim in my conclusion that impartiality is equivalent to the non-epistemic value-free ideal. I will now unpick exactly what I mean by this equivalence. In an everyday context, it is common to equate impartiality to some kind of 'fairness', whereby disputants in a given situation receive equal treatment. However, in the context of both science and journalism, this definition is too simplistic and does not capture what actually happens. While it is true that scientists and journalists treat their data fairly, the outcomes they produce are not technically fair according to the above definition. For example, a (good) scientist would not publish all the findings of their research for the purposes of fairness - they will present only the conclusion they think is true from the evidence. Similarly, a (good) journalist too will treat their original data (e.g. the stories and facts they know about a situation) with equal judgement, but they will not publish absolutely all findings.

Worsnip (2018) identifies two ways we can think of something being unbiased in the context of the media. On the one hand, to be unbiased is to be *neutral*; "an unbiased media source is one that (at least when it comes to disputed or controversial matters) reports what the different views on the controversy are, without seeking to arbitrate between them as to which is true" (p4). On the other hand, to be unbiased is to be *accurate*; "an unbiased media source is one that reports what is true (or what is probably true on the evidence), and, to the extent that it reports views to the contrary, represents those views as false" (p4). This is an important distinction to discuss in this paper. Television news generally follows the second conception of impartiality, where accuracy is the focus rather than neutrality. In fact, this is what Ofcom bases their definition of impartiality on in their broadcasting code. In section five, Ofcom states that broadcasters should "ensure that news, in whatever form, is reported with *due accuracy* and presented with *due impartiality*" (Ofcom 2019, my italics). They go on to define 'due' as meaning "adequate or appropriate to the subject and nature of the programme". Ofcom therefore defines impartiality as a relative notion that can vary according to a number of factors including the nature of the subject, the channel, the time of broadcast and the likely expectation of the

audience. I will discuss Ofcom's definition in greater detail shortly, as I would like to continue a more general discussion of impartiality first.

One way to think about impartiality is in the context of law. Lucy (2005) argues that impartiality is the stance adopted when a dispute between parties requires mediating, resolving or refereeing. Impartiality is a requirement of this third party's role, for example, we would not expect football referees to score goals for one team, or to allocate more penalties to one side over the other. This requirement for impartiality seems to only arise when there is a conflict or competition at play. This is similar to the way that political news is treated differently to other kinds of news; politics is ultimately a competition. When reporting during an election for example, a news broadcaster should act in the same way as the football referee does, refusing to favour one team for another (at least when on the pitch... or when the journalist is live on air). Can scientists and journalists be viewed in this way - as mediators of competing stories or data? I think that in fact this is the exact kind of role a scientist and a journalist should be taking towards their work; they should almost become their own individual third party. This allows them to approach their research using a non-epistemic value judgement, which, as I discussed earlier, is justifiable for the purposes of democracy.

It is important to think about whether we want process or outcome impartiality. While other contexts are different, in a political context, we are likely to be more interested in the construction and research of a news report being impartial since this will produce accurate and true results, even if these results are partial. This would guide the electorate to make better political decisions based on facts. Partial outcomes are acceptable so long as they have been arrived at impartially. We see examples of this in everyday life, for instance, we would expect doctors to allocate medicine and health resources to those who need it the most; distributing medical resources equally would be hugely illogical. An objection to this could be that it does not seem right that partial outcomes result from completely impartial processes, which suggests there are still some non-epistemic values subconsciously weaved into reasoning. However, Lucy (2005) also gives another example which helps to tackle this objection. Imagine a case where there are five kidney transplants available, and there are 100 people who all equally need an urgent kidney transplant. Consequently, the doctor decides to allocate the kidneys by lottery. This is an impartial process

which produces a partisan outcome, but the partisan outcome is justifiable because it has been carried out fairly. In this way, partial outcomes are not always bad. Ofcom seems to support this sentiment in their broadcasting code; "So "due impartiality" does not mean an equal division of time has to be given to every view, or that every argument and every facet of argument has to be represented" (Ofcom 2019).

The main thing that unites impartiality and value-freedom is their shared normative goal to be free from bias. They also both share similar expectations, i.e., that epistemic values such as social, political and ethical biases should not be allowed to be employed in the contexts of their use. 'Good' science and 'good' journalism will result from a community of scientists and journalists whose ultimate aim is pure truth-seeking via the use of epistemic value judgements (i.e., approximate truth, empirical adequacy, predictive adequacy). This is what we see happening in practice too; (good) journalists are extremely dedicated to producing accurate, true information - we should not burden them with having to do anything else beyond this requirement of their job, or else they start taking on roles beyond their responsibility.

6.0. Why is impartiality desirable?

In light of my discussion, I will be applying the same lines of argumentation that I discussed within the value-free ideal debate in science to the idea of a value-free ideal in journalism. The methodological objections I discussed argued that values are unavoidable in the methods of scientific investigation, and the same case can be made for the methods of journalistic investigation. For example, when creating a news report, a journalist must make decisions about which parts of a story to broadcast - a process that inevitably involves value judgements. Consequently, much like the scientist, the journalist is at risk of letting their values affect the outcome of the news report.

In regards to value freedom in science, Steele (2012) argues that "Scientists must make value judgements when presenting their opinions on factual matters" (p893). As a result, this changes how scientists are involved in policy decisions; the consequences of getting something wrong drives a scientist's assessment of research. Steele argues that this is worrying because scientists' specialist knowledge allows them to infringe on the role of those

democratically elected to decide what will benefit society the most. Steele concludes then that the scientist *qua* policy advisor inevitably makes value judgements in their research methods. Journalists also face the dilemma of journalist *qua* journalist versus journalist *qua* policy advisor; should a journalist publish a story even if the consequences of doing so have social, political or ethical implications? Robinson (2012) argues that journalists should report as much as possible. He gives the example of the reporting of the MP's expenses scandal in 2009, arguing that although the story damaged the reputation of government officials by giving people the impression that all elected officials were guilty, it would not have been right to suppress that information. He argues that the story highlighted a corrupt system that had to be exposed, and as a result, society is better off. If a journalist is asked to consider the consequences of publishing their story, this puts them in the impossible situation of predicting the future, which is not their job. Robinson further argues that the majority of journalists are "motivated by trying to get as close to the truth as we can that day, and that motivation is what guides our work each day". In this sense, the journalist *qua* journalist is a pure truth-seeker in the same kind of way the scientist is. This sentiment needs to be made more clear to an audience in that television news claims to be impartial, whereas newspaper and digital news makes no claim of this kind.

In the context of value-freedom in science, Du Bois worried that if scientists were allowed to change the standards for when a piece of research can be accepted, there is the potential that they would tailor their hypotheses to favour social reforms they support. This would lead to bad science, which would then lead to unfavourable social reforms; scientists are not necessarily the best judges of what is good or bad for a society. Journalists too are susceptible to this danger of becoming social reformers if they stray from pure truth-seeking; they would, for instance, be liable to tailoring their news reports to favour certain social or political outcomes. Again, journalists are not qualified to make decisions on social reforms. Even if scientists and journalists were capable of making these impactful decisions, doing so would undermine democracy; they were not elected to do so. This demonstrates that the same arguments and counter-arguments that philosophers of science have developed when talking

about the value-free ideal can be transferred with relative ease to the case of the ideal of impartiality in journalism.

7.0. Conclusion

To conclude, in this paper, I have used the structures in place in the literature of value-freedom in science to argue for value-freedom in journalism. The contents and methods of both science and journalism are affected by biases. The value-free ideal states that good science and good journalism should not distort its content to these values, since doing so would compromise research outcomes. In a democratic society, both science and journalism are instrumental in guiding societal attitudes. Trust in science and trust in the media are essential for a functioning democracy. Impartiality in both these sectors is essential in retaining public trust in scientific and media institutions. Reframing the value-free ideal to mean free only from non-epistemic values makes the ideal far more practically achievable. If science can work towards a non-epistemic value-free ideal, then so can journalism. In a democratic society, this will ensure both policymakers and the public are more accurately informed, which allows both to execute their democratic responsibilities effectively.

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