

Objectivity in Storytelling, Spatial Narratives, and Data Journalism

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A GROWING NUMBER OF GEOGRAPHERS, CARTOGRAPHERS, and mapmakers are embracing visual storytelling, and integrating maps with diverse elements including text, images, graphs, and anecdotes to create rich and engaging spatial narratives (Caquard 2013; Caquard and Cartwright 2014; Denil 2016; Song et al. 2022). Roth (2021) summarized this movement and outlined four tenets of ethical visual storytelling: “show your work,” “show yourself,” “speak to power,” and “speak to each other.” These principles emphasize the importance of transparency about methodology and personal biases, while encouraging cartographers to engage critically with power structures and foster dialogue within their community. Buckley et al. (2022) observed a decline in public trust in news and other information sources, and in response authored “The Mapmaker’s Mantra” to emphasize the importance of ethical practices in mapmaking, part of a long history of such considerations in the discipline (e.g., McHaffie et al. 1990; Harley 1991; Kent 2017). The Mantra addresses maps broadly, with its guiding principles—“be honest and accurate,” “be transparent and accountable,” “minimize harm and seek to provide value,” and “be humble and courageous”—speaking to overarching ethical concerns in mapmaking. While both frameworks emphasize transparency and honesty, they diverge in their orientations, reflecting the distinct ethical priorities of mapmaking and storytelling. I’d like to further examine the ethical implications of an orientation toward story and narrative in the presentation of information, asking what this orientation entails, what it leaves behind, and what ethical dangers might be attached to a commitment to storytelling. Given the strong association between visual storytelling, spatial narratives, and data journalism, I will to a large extent connect my arguments to similar threads within journalism, where debates about narrative, objectivity, and ethical responsibility are central to the field.

The new interest in storytelling comes concomitant with a withdrawal of a commitment to objectivity. Objectivity became a guiding principle in journalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as journalists reacted to the excesses of sensationalism and “yellow journalism” of that era (Jones 2009; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021; Lippman 1922). Scientific objectivity became an explicit model for journalistic objectivity; under this framework, a careful attention to an accurate reporting of the verifiable facts became a primary concern, while opinion and activism—never wholly abandoned—became the province of the explicitly labelled opinion or editorial sections (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021; Post 2014). Related concepts associated with this idea of objectivity include fairness, disinterestedness, neutrality, impartiality, and transparency (Curry and Stroud 2021; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021; Schudson 2001). Philosopher Thomas Nagel coined the term “The View from Nowhere” in his 1986 examination of objectivity in which he acknowledged the clear limits of objectivity, but argued that as an ideal, objectivity allows us to partially and imperfectly transcend our own limited experience to connect what we know with what is known by others. Nagel thought of objectivity as a kind of detached method of understanding and a corresponding set of attitudes and beliefs rather than a clear end-state of absolute or perfect truth that mirrors the world as it is.

The rise and spread of postmodernism and critical theory from the 1960s to the 1990s started to undermine faith in objectivity in mapping and elsewhere (Crampton 2001; Crampton and Krygier 2005; Harley 1989), and by the early 2000s, “the view from nowhere” was invoked by many as a self-evident farce, impossible to achieve and foolish to pursue. It is in this vein that situatedness and perspective, especially among under-represented groups was seen as a key counterpoint to the dominant paradigm of objectivity



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(Haraway 1988; Elwood and Leszczynski 2018), which was proffered as only a mask for a male, white, cis viewpoint. Proponents of subjectivity argue that objectivity, neutrality, and impartiality be replaced by ideals of transparency, accuracy, and honesty, and that stories become vehicles with which to effect change in the world. NYU Professor of Journalism Jay Rosen authored an influential early salvo within professional journalism against objectivity (2010) in which he argued that it is fundamentally in opposition to transparency in that the selection and editorial decisions that go into writing a piece must always and necessarily impart and often try to conceal a viewpoint. Better, from Rosen's standpoint, is to simply be honest and open about one's pre-existing beliefs, biases, perspectives, and assumptions that have fed into an analysis. The heavily partisan American political landscape brought new critics within professional journalism, including Lowery (2020), who voiced concerns that a commitment to objectivity is often reduced to an uncritical reporting of talking points or official government positions that hides behind neutrality to avoid a real engagement with the truth. Similarly, Sullivan (2023) argued that principles of neutrality and balance are at loggerheads with truth telling in that adherents uncourageously shrink from making a stand about what is and is not true. While the news media has as a whole moved toward perspective and activist journalism, there is a generational divide: older journalists are more likely to report values consistent with an attitude toward objectivity whereas younger journalists are more likely to report a friendliness toward biased viewpoint reporting (Bennet 2023; Forman-Katz and Jurkowitz 2022).

With these criticisms in hand, I would like to offer a defense in the service of the ideal of objectivity as an ethical principle, at least in part. First, let me say that the defense is a limited one: situated, non-objective stories absolutely have a place and I firmly resist the notion that a stance toward objectivity is an all-or-nothing, totalizing prospect. Not every story must be told in an objective way. What I argue is that the idea of "the view from nowhere" has utility, that whatever objectivity we imperfect humans can manage is worthwhile, and that the world is a better place if it is deployed in the service of analysis.

It may be that lazy objectivity does devolve into a form of milquetoast neutrality as in "he said / she said" or "horse race" style reporting, as Cunningham (2003), Rosen (2010) and Sullivan (2023) claim. But the principle of objectivity does not require "equal treatment" or "both-sidesism"

to work. On the contrary, objectivity implies an external truth and its roots in science tie us to a belief that some claims to truth can be tested and verified. It may be the case that neutrality and nonpartisanship have been often associated with objectivity, but they aren't inherent to the concept. Objectivity is intrinsically interested in separating fact from fiction.

Objectivity *requires* that we see the world from multiple perspectives and to try to integrate those perspectives into a cohesive whole. In contrast, the principle of *accuracy* concerns only the matter of the truth of what has been said, but it says nothing about other truths that may be relevant and add important context (Williams 2002). The Pew Research Center has documented a wide variety of influences on the decline of trust in news and information sources (2022). One key finding is that many people have come to believe that *most* news they hear is in some way biased, and they feel they are getting only half the story from any one news source (Entman 2007; Nelson and Lewis 2023). What the objectivity-minded storyteller commits to is to tell the whole story, to not shy away from complications and nuance that add texture and their own kind of authenticity to a story. Maps and visual stories meant to persuade invariably run into concerns of the greater good, but when the public becomes aware of contextually relevant omissions, they grow mistrustful. Nelson and Lewis interviewed 60 participants about trust in media and found that they consistently reported a skepticism that any single news source was reporting all relevant information, and that they needed to assemble the truth in stories on their own from multiple sources—to "do journalists' jobs for them" (2023, 1535).

The problem with stories is that they don't exhort you to tell the *whole* truth. In the service of trying to make maps that matter, maps that persuade, or maps that will go viral, authors may "deselect" elements that complicate the narrative, effectively telling lies of omission. This is the crux of the ethical danger that storytellers face: to tell a good story, an exciting story, a compelling story, sometimes we are tempted to leave things out that don't fit. The framework of perspective-based storytelling effectively gives us permission to this; after all, we can tell *our* story, and others can tell theirs. Yet this compartmentalization of truth does a disservice to both our audience and our craft. While inconvenient truths may indeed complicate matters and muddy the waters, maintaining a commitment to telling the whole truth is what ultimately builds and retains

trust. Complex and ambiguous stories with no clear right and wrong can be good stories, too. Sometimes the most honest summary of a situation is, “it’s complicated,” and *moral clarity* (Lowery 2020) is hard to come by.

I’ll close with several examples that I think center objectivity in visual storytelling and spatial narratives. First, objectivity (especially in journalism) is sometimes maligned as improperly *neutral*, and not able to take a stand against falsehoods. I find this criticism curious, as objectivity most certainly implies judgements about what is true and false. It is not objectivity that compels us to accept something as incredible as a contemporary theory of a flat earth, but rather the reverse! It is objectivity that asks us to transcend our own situated experiences and to conclude that the best explanation for what we *all* experience is that the Earth is round. The principle of objectivity exhorts us to view things from multiple perspectives and then synthesize them. Judges and juries are expected to be impartial and objective, but that doesn’t mean they are agnostic about truth claims—their very *raison d’être* is to sort truth from falsehood.

The idea of projection in cartography is a useful metaphor for understanding the value of objectivity. At a fundamental-level, one of the conceits of a map is that it is typically planimetric, effectively a simultaneous view from directly overhead at all points. This is a “view from nowhere” if ever there was one. And yet this view from nowhere, like objectivity, is a useful fiction that highlights other truths and lets us see outside our own experience in a common frame. By the same token, most map projections in common use warp space in ways that aren’t grounded in an embodied perspective. Their value is in showing us things we can’t ordinarily experience, thereby highlighting some things while distorting others. Projections are more *useful* in particular contexts than they are *true* or *false*. Objectivity can be seen in this way, as an attempt to see things from a point of view outside ourselves.

Some might argue that selection, simplification, displacement, smoothing, and enhancement—what Monmonier (1991) famously called the “little white lies” inherent in every map—mean that all maps inherently misrepresent reality (Harley 1991). This is true only in a trivial sense. In the short story *On Exactitude in Science*, Jorge Luis Borges (1999) relates an allegory of the Map of the Empire “whose size was that of the Empire,” which pokes fun at the uselessness of models that leave nothing out. If we commit to a kind of nihilistic relativism by sticking to the notion

that all storytelling is lying in degree, we lose our ability to arbitrate important truth claims at all. Telling the whole truth doesn’t imply telling *everything*, Borges-like; it implies telling all the truths that matter to the story.

There is a quote attributed (apocryphally) to Einstein that says that “everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler.” I charge that the call to storytelling often moves us to make things too simple, to leave out critical elements that complicate our stories. Accuracy, sincerity, verifiability, and transparency are excellent guideposts, but they only get us so far. What they leave behind is a commitment to the whole truth, the whole story. A commitment to telling the whole truth implies a commitment to the scholarship of the content of the stories you are telling. A mapmaker should not accept only the data, information, and analyses that are readily available, but should actively seek out relevant material that can round out or complete the tale. Just as mapmakers carefully consider the place and form of every map element, they need also commit to the scholarship of the content; they must be diligent and systematic in their investigation, evaluation, and synthesis of knowledge relevant to the subject matter being mapped. Epistemic responsibility (Code 2015; Corlett 2008) compels mapmakers to exercise due diligence in pursuing comprehensive, not merely accurate, knowledge of their subject matter. Any content-related item shouldn’t be left out by chance any more than a map element should be haphazardly placed, sized, or stylized. If the decision is made to simplify the story, this should be a conscious, deliberate, and justifiable decision, not one made out of ignorance or negligence.

Finally, there’s a more modern reason why single-viewpoint storytelling raises additional concerns. Telling single-perspective, situated stories in the service of advancing an argument or viewpoint involves the marshalling of evidence. But in an era of the Google Effect and Digital Amnesia in which people offload memory to the internet and a ready command of factual information is hard to come by, facts that might provide a constructive counterexample to a story don’t as readily spring to a reader’s mind (Robert et al. 2024; Sparrow et al. 2011). True, the critical reader can seek out alternative accounts from other sources, but we must also acknowledge that we are increasingly getting our stories from places that already fit what we think we know (Iyengar and Hahn 2009). In these cases, an edifice of internally consistent facts and points of view give the appearance of a complete picture, but the reality is that we tend to refuse to engage with alternative edifices

that don't align with our own *even when these are also largely built of truths* (Lord et al. 1979; Nguyen 2020). This phenomenon is closely tied to the idea of *framing*, where the presentation and emphasis of certain aspects within a narrative guide interpretation while sidelining other truths that might complicate or counter the preferred storyline (Entman 2007; Druckman 2001; Scheufele 1999). The telling of stories incentivizes us to create these internally consistent edifices that are yet riddled with of “spaces” of omission.

The causes for the erosion of trust in news and other information sources are manifold, but include a suspicion that our sources of information are too biased, not objective enough, and incomplete (Ksiazek et al. 2023). I argue that the principle of objectivity brings to the table the requirement to tell the truth, yes, but more importantly to tell the *whole* truth in a way that subjective, situated storytelling often does not. Yet objectivity and storytelling are not fundamentally opposed. For the better part of a hundred years, a bedrock principle of journalism has asked its practitioners to be objective in the way they create their stories. That this ideal is not perfectly attainable doesn't *prima facie* indicate we should abandon it. Nor does it require that all stories be objective. Stories absolutely can be told without objectivity and yet have truth value, utility, and epistemic

responsibility (Code 2015). Further, if this notion of objectivity-as-aggregator of viewpoints is correct, we fundamentally need subjective stories as material from which to generalize and synthesize.

Stories represent one of humanity's most powerful tools for conveying meaning and understanding our world, but their power demands careful ethical consideration. While recent movements away from objectivity have rightly highlighted the importance of situated knowledge and diverse perspectives, we shouldn't entirely abandon the ideal of objectivity in our pursuit of compelling narratives. Instead, we should recognize that the strongest storytelling often emerges from a synthesis that embraces both subjective perspectives and objective analysis. When mapmakers and journalists commit to telling not just accurate stories, but *complete* ones—ones that acknowledge complexity, context, and competing truths—they help rebuild the trust that has been eroded by oversimplified narratives. The challenge before us is not to choose between objectivity and subjectivity, but to thoughtfully integrate both approaches in service of deeper understanding. By doing so, we can create spatial narratives and visual stories that are both compelling and comprehensive, that acknowledge our individual perspectives while still reaching for broader truths.

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