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Objectivity in Newsmaking: an Argumentative Perspective

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Abstract: Objectivity is a pivotal – yet controversial – concept in journalism studies. Scholars disagree on what it precisely implies and on how strictly journalists should stick to it. Adopting an argumentative perspective enables reconstructing how journalists concretely deal with the objectivity requirement, which plays the role of endoxical premise in newsroom argumentative decision-making. The selected case studies shed light on what objectivity means and how journalists achieve it in two Swiss public service television newsrooms.

Keywords: objectivity, journalism, Switzerland, public service television, decision-making, Pragma-Dialectics, Argumentum Model of Topics, endoxa

1. Introduction¹

Objectivity is a key concept in journalism, but it is in itself not univocally defined. According to different traditions, being objective means either that facts should be separated from opinions (Schudson 1978, p. 140), that what is reported should be true (Gauthier 2004), or that one should try to present all positions in a balanced way and without a personal stance (Clayman & Heritage 2002a). Furthermore, how strictly journalists have to adhere to these standards also remains controversial. Most studies on objectivity focus on the news product, neglecting its production and thus how the objectivity requirement comes into play in the making of an item. This is especially the case if one looks at the few works in argumentation theory that approach this issue (Gauthier 2002; Herman & Jufer 2001).

The present paper fills this gap by adopting an argumentative and process-oriented perspective, which enables seeing how journalists deal with objectivity in everyday work. In fact, I claim that the objectivity requirement plays the role of endoxical premise in argumentative reasoning that takes place during newsroom decision-making. To this aim, I analyze various phases of newsmaking in two newsrooms of the same media organization, the Swiss public service broadcasting company (from now on, SRG SSR). The case studies shed light on what objectivity means for these two newsrooms, as well as on how the goal of being objective intermingles with that of telling a story.

Methodologically, argumentation is reconstructed employing Pragma-Dialectics (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004) while endoxical premises and inferential patterns supporting standpoints are traced out applying the Argumentum Model of Topics (Rigotti & Greco Morasso

¹ This paper partially draws on existing publications by the author. Paragraphs, formulations and parts of data analysis have been reproduced from the following works without explicit cross-references: Zampa, Marta. (2015a). *News Values as Endoxa of Newsmaking. An Investigation of Argumentative Practices in the Newsroom*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Lugano: Università della Svizzera italiana; Zampa, Marta. (2015b). Arguing with oneself in writing for the news. *Proceedings of the 8th Conference of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation*, University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands).

2009, 2010, in preparation). The examples are taken from a corpus collected during the Swiss National Science Foundation project “Idée suisse” (NFP 56, 2005-2008).

The paper is structured as follows. The concept of objectivity in journalism is introduced in Section 2, whereas Section 3 is devoted to the theoretical approach from argumentation theory applied to analyze the data. Section 4 describes the corpus and the context in which it was collected; Section 5 presents the analysis of three case studies. Lastly, some conclusions are drawn in Section 6.

2. The objectivity ideal in journalism

Objectivity is one of the most debated concepts in the sociology of newsmaking. Its precise connotation, what it concretely implies and how strictly it should (and could) be applied have been under discussion since the outset. Three main streams can be reconstructed in the literature on the topic.

The classical notion of objectivity (which I label *objectivity*₁), conceived of in American journalism research and rooted in the Anglo-Saxon culture, can be summed up as “the belief that one can and should separate facts from values” (Schudson 1978, p.5), and only facts should be included in the news. Within this framework, facts are “assertions about the world open to independent validation” that “stand beyond the distorting influences of any individual’s personal preferences”, and values are “an individual’s conscious or unconscious preferences for what the world should be” (Schudson 1978, p.5). Objectivity consists at the same time of “a moral ideal, a set of reporting and editing practices, and an observable pattern of news writing” (Schudson 2001, p.149) that can be observed in the newsmaking process, in the content of news items, and in journalists’ awareness. As such, it applies mostly to hard news, i.e., news that deals with topics in the public sphere that directly affect the audience (such as politics or international news). Besides being neutral towards the reported facts, news pieces must be written following the inverted pyramid structure. This implies that, instead of following the chronological order of an happening, an article starts with a summary, “the ‘most important information’ comes first and progressively ‘less important information’ follows after” (Thomson, White, & Kitley 2008, p.212). In linguistics, Appraisal Theory² (Martin & White 2005) labeled objectivity in journalistic discourse “reporter voice”, meaning “a regime of strategic impersonalisation by which the author’s subjective role is backgrounded”, that allows expressing “esteeming meanings” (Martin & White 2005, p.183) indirectly and “warrant[ing] the widespread impression that news reporting is objective” (Pounds 2010, p.109). This strategic impersonalisation helps guarding news organizations “from the accusation of gross partiality” (Pounds 2010, p.109).

Objectivity is also understood as the obligation for journalists to report true facts (*objectivity*₂). Gauthier (2004), following Searle’s realism (1995), maintains that journalism is committed to truth because it is in its nature to provide information via assertive speech acts: “informer, comme les autres actes assertifs, est une activité qui est concomitante à une valeur de vérité” [to inform, like the other assertive acts, is an activity which coexists with a truth value] (Gauthier 2004, p.170). These true statements regard a reality independent from its journalistic construction. Journalism is legitimated as a profession, and distinguishes itself from other professions dealing with public communication exactly thanks to this commitment to the truth

² A theory based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday 1985) that investigates the interpersonal dimension of language use, and devotes considerable attention to journalistic discourse.

and to reporting proven facts objectively.

Thirdly, scholars have singled out another, less idealistic concept of objectivity (*objectivity*₃): neutralism, i.e., being “more or less pointed, more or less fair, more or less balanced” (Clayman & Heritage 2002a, p.234-235) in approaching an issue. Neutralism has been explored in particular by Clayman and Heritage (2002a, 2002b) in their work on news interviews. They acknowledge the interviewer being subject to two requirements that are difficult to balance: remaining neutral towards the interviewee and his utterances (impartiality), while challenging him (adversarialness). Questions can be designed strategically to cope with these norms. For example, the journalist can voice the opinion of the interviewee’s opponents, or give some premises for granted by means of expressions like *as you all know*. This should lead the interlocutor to react without any stance taking on the journalist’s side. Therefore, in news interviews interviewers take “a ‘neutralistic’ stance towards the interviewee’s statements, positions, and opinions.” (Clayman & Heritage 2002a, p.120).³

Objectivity has not always been a trait of journalistic writing. At the beginning, reporters took side on events, commented and explained them, collaborated with political parties. Objectivity became a norm in American journalism only in the 1920’s, when it gained the position of “a fully formulated occupational ideal, part of a professional project or mission” (Schudson 2001, p.163). It was incorporated in the moral code and professional ideal of newsmakers, which set the basis for standardizing newswriting techniques (Lippmann 1995).

Nonetheless, as Schudson (1978) explains, the objectivity notion became object of harsh criticism in the very same moment it was established. This phenomenon could be explained in relation to historical and societal evolutions. In the first half of the 20th century, distrust in democracy spread throughout the globe, involving all means of expression of democratic institutions – freedom of press included. Later on, the progressive revolution of the 1960’s related objectivity to the conservative Establishment, and opposed to it the freedom to actively create the news by integrating personal views in it. Recently, objectivity has been described as a myth that no real journalist can fulfill. Hallin and Mancini, for example, criticize it by bringing it close to the ideal of political neutrality (2004; Harcup 2009; Harrison 2000):

No serious media analyst would argue that journalism anywhere in the world is literally neutral. A tremendous body of research has been devoted to debunking that notion, showing that even where journalists may be sincerely committed to a professional ideology of ‘objectivity,’ news incorporates political values, which arise from a range of influences, from routines of information gathering to recruitment patterns of journalists and shared ideological assumptions of wider society.

Gauthier (1993) defends objectivity against critiques by scholars who neither clearly define it, nor agree on what concretely should be objective in journalism. He argues that the criterion is valid if one narrows down what should be objective to the phase of information processing that is performed in news reporting (and not in other genres). Newsgathering and

³ Andone (2013), in her pragma-dialectical analysis of British political interviews, contrasts this position by stating that interviewers must be impartial when dealing with questions and answers, i.e., “allowing for a variety of views to be made known without giving more prominence to one view over another” (Andone 2013, p.43).

medium-related constraints on production should not be expected to fulfill the requirement. Moreover, some scholars have noticed a connection between the professionalization of journalistic work, political neutrality and objectivity. If journalism is understood as an independent institution, devoted to public service and faithful to its own standards, then journalists can be “neutral information providers” (Hallin & Mancini 2004, p.38).

3. Tools for the argumentative analysis

The present investigation is embedded in the above-mentioned (Section 1) frameworks of Pragma-Dialectics and of the AMT.

Pragma-Dialectics considers argumentation the process of defending or refuting a standpoint by putting forward arguments for or against it, with the aim of resolving a difference of opinion on the merits. This process is staged in a critical discussion that has a protagonist, who puts forward a standpoint and defends it, and an antagonist, who casts doubt on it or argues against it. A model of an ideal critical discussion (i.e. of how an argumentative discussion would ideally develop if all standards of reasonableness were met) is proposed as a normative and descriptive tool (see van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004 for an exhaustive account of the model and of the theory).

The AMT allows moving from the pragma-dialectical overview of how argumentation is articulated to its deep inferential structure. According to this approach, in order to understand why a given argument supports a standpoint it is not enough to rely on its logical soundness. A connection to the actual context of the discussion must be established for argumentation to be effective. This aim can be achieved by reconstructing the endoxical⁴ premises that root reasoning in the common ground of the participants to a discussion. In the newsmaking context, such endoxical premises are often news values,⁵ i.e. criteria for news selection that are shared in a community of newsmakers and among its audience, and guide the choice of events as potential news items (cf. Zampa 2015a). Being part of the community’s common ground, these criteria are mostly implicit and are verbalized only when disagreement occurs.

4. The corpus and the context of the case studies

In this section I introduce the corpus analyzed in this publication, the collection method as well as the television programs where it was gathered.

4.1. Data collection with Progression Analysis

The examples considered here are taken from a television news corpus constructed within the framework of Progression Analysis. Progression Analysis is a computerized multi-method approach that “combines ethnographic observation, interviews, computer logging, and cue-based retrospective verbalizations to gather linguistic and contextual data” (Perrin 2013, p. 63) on three

⁴ With Aristotle (Tredennick & Fowler 1960, Topics I, 100b), I understand endoxa as “[those opinions] which commend themselves to all, or to the majority, or to the wise – that is or to all of the wise or to the majority or to the most famous and distinguished of them”.

⁵ Despite the wide debate on the topic, only the adopted definition of news values is featured here, due to space limitations.

levels: the situation in which writing is produced (macro level); the material activity of writing (meso level); the reflection on the writing process (micro level). In the newsmaking context, the macro level is defined thanks to interviews with journalists and editors and field observation, with a focus on interpersonal, professional, institutional and technological conditions and constraints in the newsroom. Particularly relevant components at this level are editorial conferences, the actual setting of decision-making about what journalists will write about. The meso level focuses on the writing activity. Each keystroke and writing movement is recorded by means of key logging and screenshot recording programs (Zampa & Perrin 2016). The recording does not influence the writers' performance since it operates automatically in the background, without changing the user interfaces of the writing or editing software used. Finally, the micro level consists in the Retrospective Verbal Protocol (from now on, RVP), during which the journalist watches on the screen how his text came into being and comments on each writing step, explaining what happened and giving reasons for it. It aims at opening "a window onto the mind of the writer" that reveals "the decisions that an author could have made in principle" (Perrin 2013, pp. 63-64), i.e. the writing strategies and practices he is aware of.

An important remark shall be made with respect to this data type. The RVP is produced together with a researcher, whose role is to make sure that the journalist keeps on commenting by posing standard questions. The researcher is not engaging in a discussion with the journalist nor expressing opinions, she only triggers the writer's reconstruction of his own thoughts, strategies and decisions. Despite these precautions, it cannot be avoided that the journalist (who is not aware of the research goals) views the researcher as a real interlocutor. This can of course influence the way past actions and decisions are accounted for, and eventually lead to rendering them differently from how they were made inside his mind. Therefore this soliloquy is an approximate reconstruction a posteriori, but still, a more useful tool as compared to talk-aloud protocols, which interfere with the habitual writing process of the journalist by compelling him to verbalize each action while performing it (Ehrensberger-Dow & Perrin 2013).

4.2. The context where data were collected

In order to understand how Swiss newsrooms conceive of objectivity and how their members work according to this conception, it is necessary to briefly sketch the context of the media organization and of each program in which the investigated discussions are set.

The data have been collected during the above-mentioned "Idée Suisse" project at the media organization SRG SSR. This non-profit national holding has the duty to offer Switzerland a homogeneous and equal broadcasting service, respecting the linguistic and cultural differences that characterize the country. SRG SSR is regulated by corporate principles that constitute an unavoidable starting point for understanding how decisions are made within the organization. The principles that assess the quality of the service offered ("credibility", "independence", "diversity", "creativity", "fairness") are listed together with the mission and vision of the program on the corporate website:⁶

Mission

We inform, entertain and contribute to education and cultural development. We promote democratic opinion forming, public information and preserve cultural

⁶ <http://www.srgssr.ch/en/about-srg-ssr/corporate-principles/>

identity. We broadcast programmes of comparable quality on the same terms within the four language regions. By taking into account the demands of majorities and minorities, we promote mutual understanding and solidarity.

Vision

Our audiovisual public service offering reflects and is part of reality in Switzerland. Our programmes are distinctive and are competitive on an international level. We are quick to identify changes in user behaviour and are open to technical innovation. Our services set quality standards and make an essential contribution to Switzerland's social cohesion.

Tagesschau is the news bulletin of SRF1, the first channel of the German-language branch of SRG SSR. From the study of this editorial office conducted in the "Idée Suisse" project, it emerged that *Tagesschau* journalists believe that the program should report recent and important events in a clear, objective way, without providing background information or commenting (Gnach 2013, pp. 103-104). This concept is described in the mission featured on *Tagesschau*'s website:⁷

To see and understand what makes the world move: "Tagesschau" reports on topics from politics, economy, culture, sport, society and science. It gives an overview of important events of the day. The criteria for the topical choice are relevance, recency and interest for the audience. In case of controversial topics, "Tagesschau" gives the floor to the different points of view. The audience should build its opinion itself, based on the facts reported. Credibility, adherence to the facts and understandability are the most important goals of news reporting.

Interestingly, news values are listed in this short manifesto (*relevance, recency, interest for the audience, credibility, adherence to facts and understandability*), which also mentions the intent not to influence the audience's opinion, but to simply help the viewers to build one of their own (cf. Gans 1979).

The other television program considered is *Téléjournal*, the news bulletin of the French-language branch of SRG SSR. *Téléjournal* does not publish a mandate on its website. Therefore, besides presupposing that it complies with SRG SSR's values, the account of the regulations it abides by has to be extracted from discussions within its newsroom. There, a fundamental trait emerges, which distinguishes *Téléjournal* from *Tagesschau*: whereas the latter includes *objectivity*₁ in its mandate, the former requires an interpretation of the happenings it reports. This is due to the conviction that taking a stance is a necessary step in newsmaking, for only *objectivity*₃ is really feasible (Gnach 2013). In addition, compared to their German-speaking colleagues, the French-speaking reporters often feel entitled to speak from their personal viewpoint, as well as to "spice[s] up its hard news program with some soft news and dramaturgically elaborated stories" (Perrin 2013, p. 10). These differences in the understanding of objectivity emerge clearly in the examples analyzed in Section 5. In editorial conferences, it can be observed that the journalists are aware of the expectations and duties derived from being part of the public service television, as well as of the importance of providing information that is relevant for the whole French-speaking area of Switzerland. Discussions often revolve around

⁷ <http://www.srf.ch/sendungen/tagesschau/sendungsportraet>

reporting events from all areas in a balanced way. Finally, it is worth mentioning that *Téléjournal*'s journalists have a clear picture in mind of how their bulletin differs from *Tagesschau*.⁸ They attribute to the latter a series of characteristics they should avoid (such as being not well refined, didactic, coarse) and others that are instead praiseworthy and should be imitated (such as being clear and balanced content-wise).

5. Data analysis

In this section, I analyze three case studies: the first two (5.1 and 5.2) are taken from *Téléjournal*, the latter from *Tagesschau* (5.3). The cases have been selected from different phases of newsmaking (an editorial conference, an item-construction meeting between a journalist and a cutter, a journalist's reflections on his own writing), which feature different types of discussion (deliberation, problem-solving, justification of own behavior). The case studies are paradigmatic because they display how objectivity stands out as a key criterion in everyday journalistic practice and throughout the newsmaking process.

5.1. "there is no *angle* for this topic/ and there has to be an *angle*"⁹

The first example is taken from an editorial conference at *Téléjournal* on March 1st, 2007. One of the journalists (X12) suggests making an item on agriculture in the Geneva canton, a mostly unknown topic for the general public. Geneva is indeed famous for producing luxury objects, such as jewels and watches, but it also has a rich agricultural production. What makes this issue topical is a press conference taking place that same morning. A colleague, who is not present at the meeting, intends to write about it, so that the non-Genevan audience of the news bulletin can increase its knowledge about that part of the country.

The editor in chief (R) objects that the story, as it is, cannot be used for *Téléjournal*. The reason: "there is no angle on this topic".

1187 R: now **there is no angle on this topic**
 1188 **there is no angle**
 1189 X12: yes
 1190 R: **there is no title**
 1191 X12: ah well that was for eleven thirty
 1192 R: genevan agriculture she [the journalist who proposed the story]
 starts
 1193 she wants to make french-speaking switzerland
 1194 discover genevan agriculture
 1195 that's that's interesting
 1196 but there we are-
 1197 it's that
 1198 **there is no angle for this topic**
 1199 **and there has to be an angle**
 1200 X12: well then
 1201 R: **the intention is interesting**
 1202 **but there has to be an angle**
 1203 **otherwise I would say it's the it's the bla bla**
 1204 **because journalists are required to have an angle**

⁸ tsr_tj_070214_0930_redaktionskonferenz_discourse.txt.

⁹ tsr_tj_070301_0930_editorial_discourse.txt

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1205 no but it's serious- I don't want to say
1206 **genevan agriculture is interesting**
1207 there are fifty thousand farmers
1208 we have to talk about it
1209 it's yes we have to
1210 **but what is the- what is the title**
1211 what is the(xxx)
1212 X12: good it brings a lot of money
1213 it produces still more surprisingly
1214 because there are the proportions of agricultural areas
1215 that apparently decrease in geneva
1216 that has been increasing for five years
1217 R: **but she has to be pushed a little bit**
1218 **so that she determines an angle**

The use of the word *angle* strikes the attention of the analyst, for it behaves like a cultural keyword. Cultural keywords are “words that function as pointers to culturally shared beliefs and values [...] or to culturally shared patterns of inference” (Rigotti & Rocci 2005, p. 128). As such, they are strongly context-dependent and rich in connotations that may change over time. *Angle* stands for the specific viewpoint of *Téléjournal* (different from local news bulletins and from *Tagesschau*) and of the journalist himself: a subjective evaluative perspective on an issue, which takes into consideration the interest of the editorial office and of the audience. The frequent occurrence of *angle* in the corpus collected at *Téléjournal*,¹⁰ its repeated use to address a well-known behavioral pattern in this particular discussion, as well as the awareness of journalists on what it points at guarantee for its keyword status.¹¹ Within argumentation theory, Greco Morasso and Bigi (2012, p. 1142) identify keywords in argumentative texts as “those words that activate cognitive frames from which endoxa are then drawn to be used in the argumentation”. Furthermore, argumentative analysis can help verifying if a word is a keyword. Rocci and Monteiro (2009, p. 95), following Rigotti and Rocci (2005), argue that keywords function as “termini medi in enthymematic arguments pointing to implicit premises that are *endoxa* in the cultural common ground” of a culture. In the present case, the AMT can be applied to test such endoxical value. R’s argumentation is articulated as follows (Figure 1):

¹⁰ e.g., thus my preoccupation is to ask myself/ ok well how will you what approach to your topic/ what *angle* (tsr_tj_070219_1045_KH_frame.doc, 0197-0199); the exchange with the colleagues is very important too/ for imitation at the level yes of an exchange of thoughts/ on how we’ll put our topic in perspective [*angler*]/ to go further than the level of purely news/ therefore it’s a bit a jargon used here/ we try sometimes to put a topic in perspective [*angler*] (0039-0044).

¹¹ The concept of *angle* is used in studies on translation in the newsroom, which shed light on the importance of domesticating stories, i.e., editing information with the aim of making an event understandable for the target audience even if it is culturally far from it, without altering the content. When translating sources, journalists do not worry about literally adhering to the original, but – if necessary – “change the prevalent news angle or point of view from which events are narrated in order to produce a new text which can function more effectively as news for a different public.” (Bielsa & Bassnett 2009, p. 93).

(1 the story about agriculture in Geneva cannot be a piece of *Téléjournal's* news)
(1192-1196; 1206-1211)

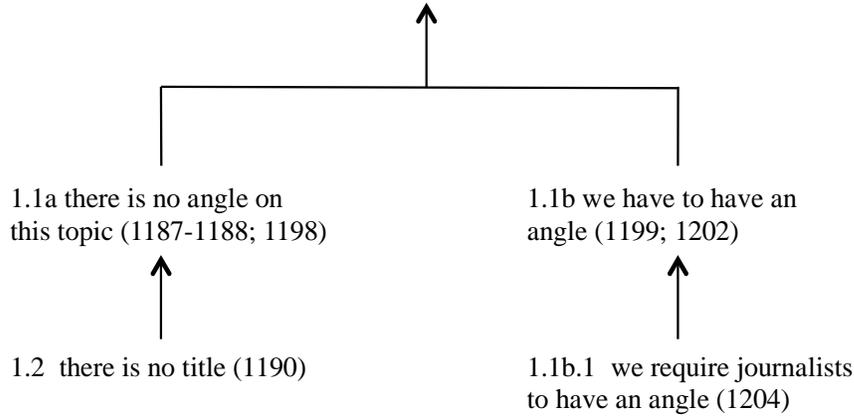


Figure 1

The inference leading from the coordinative argumentation structure to the implicit standpoint “the story about agriculture in Geneva cannot be a piece of *Téléjournal's* news” is based on the locus from the final cause, as enlightened in the Y-structure in Figure 2.

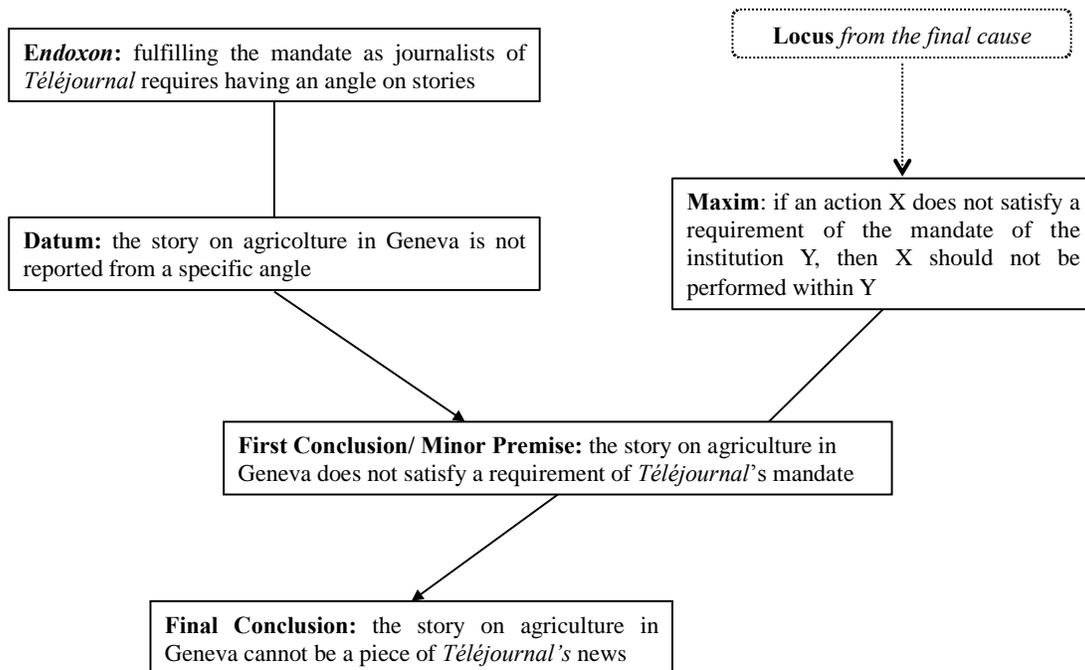


Figure 2

If fulfilling the mandate as journalists of *Téléjournal* requires having an *angle* on stories (endoxon), and the story on agriculture in Geneva is not reported from a specific *angle*, then the story on agriculture in Geneva does not satisfy a requirement of *Téléjournal's* mandate (first conclusion). This becomes the minor premise of a topical syllogism, whose major premise is the maxim from the locus from the final cause “if an action X does not satisfy a requirement of the

mandate of an institution Y, then X should not be performed within Y". From all this, it follows that the story on agriculture in Geneva cannot be a piece of *Téléjournal*'s news. This reconstruction proves that *angle* functions as a terminus medius, which confirms its role of cultural keyword in *Téléjournal*'s newsroom. Nonetheless, the importance granted to the Swiss-French perspective on topics should not collide with accuracy in reporting, nor lead to manipulating events, as the following example illustrates.

5.2. "we should not exaggerate"¹²

The next case is taken from a problem-solving discussion between a cutter and a journalist again at *Téléjournal* (March 7, 2007),¹³ where the clash between two different understandings of reporting (and of the standards related to it) becomes topical.

The journalist (CA) and the cutter (C) are preparing the opening item of the 12:45 news bulletin issue on a plane crash in Yogyakarta (Indonesia), which caused surprisingly few casualties. CA, with a background in education and at newspapers, is very concerned with adherence to facts and truthfulness. The cutter he is working with has long been employed in movie editing. From his behavior in the interaction, it is visible that he aims at entertaining the audience and enjoys working on spectacular events. Indeed, he is more focused on what pictures convey and on how they can be exploited for telling an exciting story, than on what they literally depict.

The dialogue between the two contains many argumentative exchanges. I here consider a matter of linguistic formulation: whether "at risk of his life he switched on the camera" is a journalistically adequate line to comment a scene (1) or not (2). The discussion starts when the journalist reads the sentence from his draft. He is quite convinced of this wording, but the cutter disagrees:

0432 CA: **"at risk of his life he switched on the camera"**
 0433 no
 0434 C: oh
 0435 **we should not exaggerate**
 0436 when he turned it on
 0437 he was out of life danger
 0438 CA: no but there are still- the plane can still explode
 0439 C: it's that he sold his pictures for three thousand dollars
 0440 to indonesian television
 0441 that's all eh
 0442 CA: **he still isn't under shelter**
 0443 C: ah I make fun of war movies ah
 [...]

By saying "we should not exaggerate", the cutter appeals to a news value he knows the journalist is particularly committed to, as mentioned above: *Téléjournal* reports events in a

¹² tsr_tj_070307_1245_CA_yogyakarta_discourse.doc. This case has been investigated from different perspectives by Burger (2011) and Perrin (2013).

¹³ "Problem-solving discussions, obviously, have as their over-all goal finding a good solution to a problem. But in order to do so, participants must do something else, as well: they have to resolve in a rational fashion the differences of opinion that rise in the different stages of the problem-solving process. These differences arise because the problems that are at issue are too complex to enable the mere application of a simple recipe." (van Rees 2003, p. 466).

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trustworthy way, without altering reality. The cutter maintains that – from what the video shows – the passenger believed to be out of danger. This is symbolized by the frame where the passenger hides under a bush:

0481 C: **I believe he's basically sheltered eh**
0482 **because he takes refuge under a bush there quite simply**
0483 CA: but we hear him breathing eh
0484 C: yeah but-
[...]
0510 yeah **for me it's just that symbolically the shot**
0511 he's taking refuge
0512 you see
0513 even if it's nothing
0514 it's just that
0515 it's silly eh
0516 he's shocked
0517 but he goes under a bush
0518 CA: yeah
0519 C: because he believes that
0520 you see that

The journalist partially accepts the antagonist's standpoint:

0485 CA: yeah but wait
0486 **he's under shelter**
0487 you see
0488 **but a machine a boing which blows up**
0489 **the debris splash far eh**
[...]
0497 but we see him running there
0498 C: yeah yeah
0499 CA: **he would not have run if he had been under shelter**

CA agrees that the passenger appears to be under shelter, but such shelter constitutes no effective protection in that situation. Moreover, he is still running, therefore one could infer that he feels in danger. Figure 3 shows the structure of the argumentation by both sides.

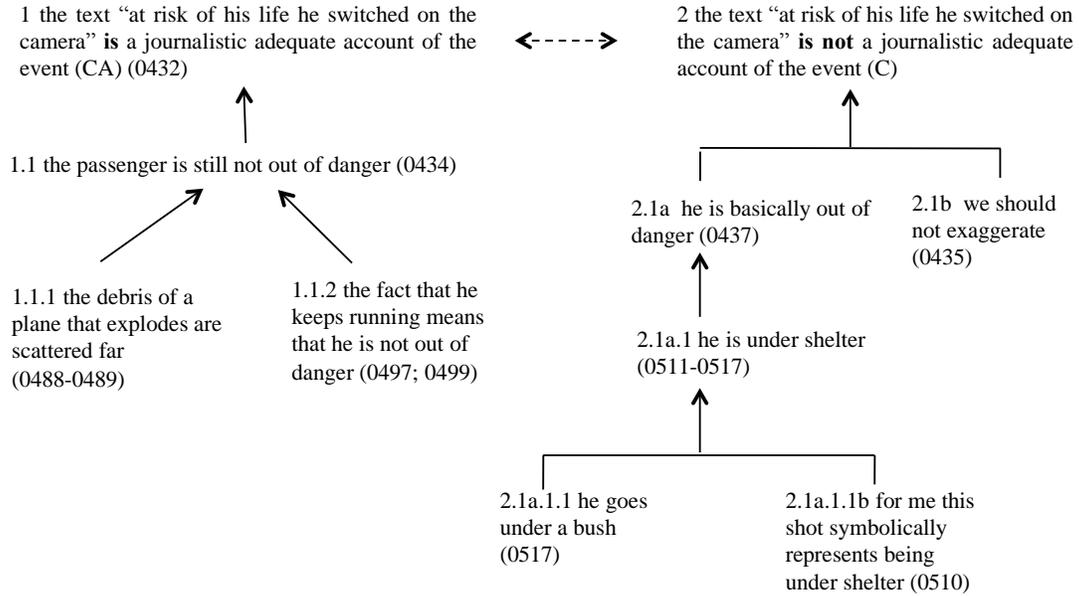


Figure 3.

Let us now focus on the almost paradoxical move by which the cutter claims the passenger to be safe from a plane's explosion because he hides under a bush. C seems unreasonable, given the circumstances in which the pictures were shot. In order to make sense of his interpretation of reality, one has to presuppose that he reasons from categories belonging to a different framework than that of news reporting. One could, for instance, presuppose that the cutter displaces the action in the world of filming-making, with which he is more familiar than with newsmaking. Indeed, if this were an action movie, being hidden under a bush would be enough for the hero to be safe from the explosion. With this premise in mind, his reasoning would function as reconstructed in Figure 4.

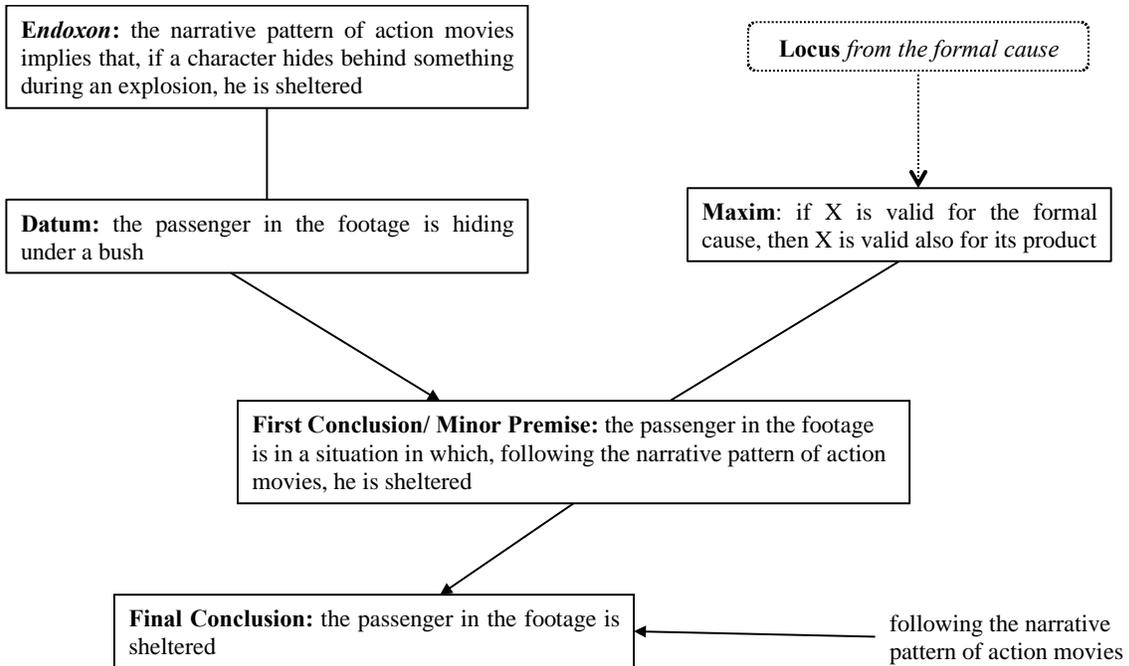


Figure 4.

If the narrative pattern of action movies implies that, when a character is hiding behind something during an explosion, he is sheltered (endoxon), and if the passenger in the footage is hiding under a bush (datum), then the passenger in the footage is sheltered, following the above-mentioned pattern. This minor premise combines with a maxim from the locus from the formal cause, which poses that what is valid for the formal cause is valid also for its product. Therefore, within the pattern of action movies, the passenger in the footage is sheltered (final conclusion).

After this exchange, the cutter reluctantly accepts the journalist’s interpretation and consequent formulation. There is thus an explicit – although not ideal – concluding stage, where the antagonist surrenders to the protagonist instead of being fully convinced by his arguments.

This case shows how, within the same newsroom of the AGRI case, the subjective perspective finds its boundaries. In fact, speaking from *Téléjournal*’s viewpoint cannot be pushed beyond the limit of truthful and accurate reporting, lest one violates the requirements of the genre and the mandate of the media organization.

5.3. “well this should not be taken one to one”¹⁴

The last case study is taken from the RVP of a journalist (HS) of *Tagesschau*, recorded on November 08, 2006. He is an expert on political issues, and believes in the social commitment of the journalistic profession. At the beginning of his career, he was based in Latin America and involved with local political movements.

The item about which the RVP is made regards the sudden resignation from duty by Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. secretary of defense under George W. Bush. The resignation took place right after the Republicans lost the mid-term elections, and despite Bush’s declaration that he intended to keep Rumsfeld in duty during his whole mandate. Actually it is Bush who fires Rumsfeld and, by doing so, he implicitly communicates that he is aware of the mistakes made in

¹⁴ sf_ts_061108_HS_rumsfeld_verbal_1.doc.

the Iraq war.¹⁵ The item features part of Rumsfeld's farewell speech and of Bush's comments on it. Both politicians act pretty emotional. Nevertheless, as HS repeatedly notices, the whole situation is odd: Rumsfeld resigns because the disastrous Iraq war (in particular the violence he allowed in interrogating prisoners) negatively affected the Republican administration. This real motivation is well hidden behind the story of the good leader and his successful general. In fact, as explained in HS' report, Bush compliments Rumsfeld for his contribution to the war,¹⁶ and Rumsfeld describes himself as a humble servant and admirer of the army.¹⁷ The journalist wants to make such an incongruity evident to the audience, and decides to do so in the closing of the item, where Bush pats on his commander's back at the end of the press conference.

1285 **now the question was**
 1286 **how do I comment on this**
 1287 do I simply leave it very dry
 1288 do I say just something
 1289 or do I go into it
 1290 and comment it just as it is
 1291 or do I comment it slightly ironically
 1292 and I have for this-
 1293 it is also ehm-
 1294 one can talk it over slowly
 1295 but I simply think
 1296 as a journalist now it is something very important for me
 1297 one must always keep at the back of one's mind in this kind of
 public appearance
 1298 that this now was again pure showbusiness
 [...]
 1302 **of course he doesn't say that**
 1303 he is the greatest commander ever
 1304 therefore I have to-
 1305 **nonetheless as a journalist I have the duty**
 1306 **to make the spectator somehow perceive**
 1307 **that I know it**
 1308 **that they are doing showbusiness there**
 1309 **but I don't make any comments**
 1310 of course as a journalist I can't say
 1311 this was the showbusiness for today
 1312 **thus I try to include a bit of irony in it**
 1313 that signals the spectator
 1314 well that should not be taken one to one

¹⁵ sf_ts_061108_2400_HS_rumsfeld_review.doc: 0110-0117 and I wanted that the spectator gets something-/ catches something of the- of the historical moment/ that's an historical moment now yes/ ehm three four five six it was more than three years of war in iraq/ and ehm now all of a sudden one realizes ehm-/ it is for the first time overtly admitted/ we have made a mistake there/ the man has to go.

¹⁶ sf_ts_061108_2400_HS_rumsfeld_item.doc: 0026-0033 he disempowered saddam hussein/ and helped the iraqi people/ establish a constitutional democracy/ it will go down in history/ that under donald rumsfeld's leadership/ our troops/ overthrew two terrorist regimes/ and freed about 50 million people.

¹⁷ sf_ts_061108_2400_HS_rumsfeld_item.doc: 0037-0041 I must say/ that it was the highest honor/ that I have experienced in my life/ to have been able to serve with the amazing young men and women/ in uniform.

HS wants to make it clear that this emotional behavior is part of a show business strategy to protect the image of Bush's war policy, because he feels it is his journalistic duty to tell the truth. He cannot say it overtly though, because there is no statement by Bush or Rumsfeld on the topic and he is preparing a report, not a commentary piece.

This struggle for the right formulation brings HS to face the incompatibility of two understandings of objectivity, namely the separation of facts and opinions (*objectivity*₁) – which is clearly requested by *Tagesschau*'s mandate – and the duty to tell the truth (*objectivity*₂) – in which HS believes. HS is very aware of *Tagesschau*'s policy, as he himself explains during an interview with the researchers.¹⁸ Furthermore he received specific indications not to provide any background information when writing this item, but to focus only on the press conference announcing the resignation.¹⁹ To fulfill all requirements, HS decides to end the item with an ironical hint,²⁰ in a way that makes an acute spectator grasp what is happening behind the show business. He knows that this choice is risky for him as a reporter, for it makes him speak in a commentator voice (cf. Martin & White 2005).²¹

In argumentative terms, what HS does is to ponder on three alternatives and on the arguments supporting each of them, eventually picking the one that better satisfies his and the program's values and expectations. The alternatives are: making the audience understand something which is not explicit and for which he has no evidence, but that he considers worth communicating (alternative A); not making the audience understand something which is not explicit and for which he has no evidence (alternative B), and making the audience understand that something important, but not explicit and for which he has no evidence is going on by means of irony (alternative C). Why the third alternative is selected can be explained by the following reconstruction (Figure 6).

¹⁸ sf_ts_061106_1315_HS_frame_1.doc: 0676-0686 the aim of tagesschau is to show pictures of events/ that have happened/ [...] the aim cannot be that of analyzing/ the tagesschau doesn't have the task to analyze/ [...] the task of analyzing/ and conveying the background/ and to exhaustively represent the connections/ that is the newspapers' task.

¹⁹ sf_ts_061108_2400_HS_rumsfeld_review_1.doc: 0135-0143 I was requested/ not to make it longer than one minute twenty/ and not to make any background material on rumsfeld/ thus no life of rumsfeld/ quick retrospection that was it then/ the so-called background/ but that I should only show the press conference/ it went like this/ and they said this.

²⁰ sf_ts_061108_0000_HS_rumsfeld_verbal_1.doc: 1327-1329 "Rumsfeld was visibly moved/ and also president Bush somewhat touched/ patted on his commander's back".

²¹ sf_ts_061108_0000_HS_rumsfeld_verbal_1.doc: 1335-1342 it would be interesting/ to discuss again about this concluding sentence from a journalistic viewpoint/ to say is it allowed/ is it not allowed/ is it even necessary/ that the journalist shows the spectator/ whoops I know more/ than I can say now.

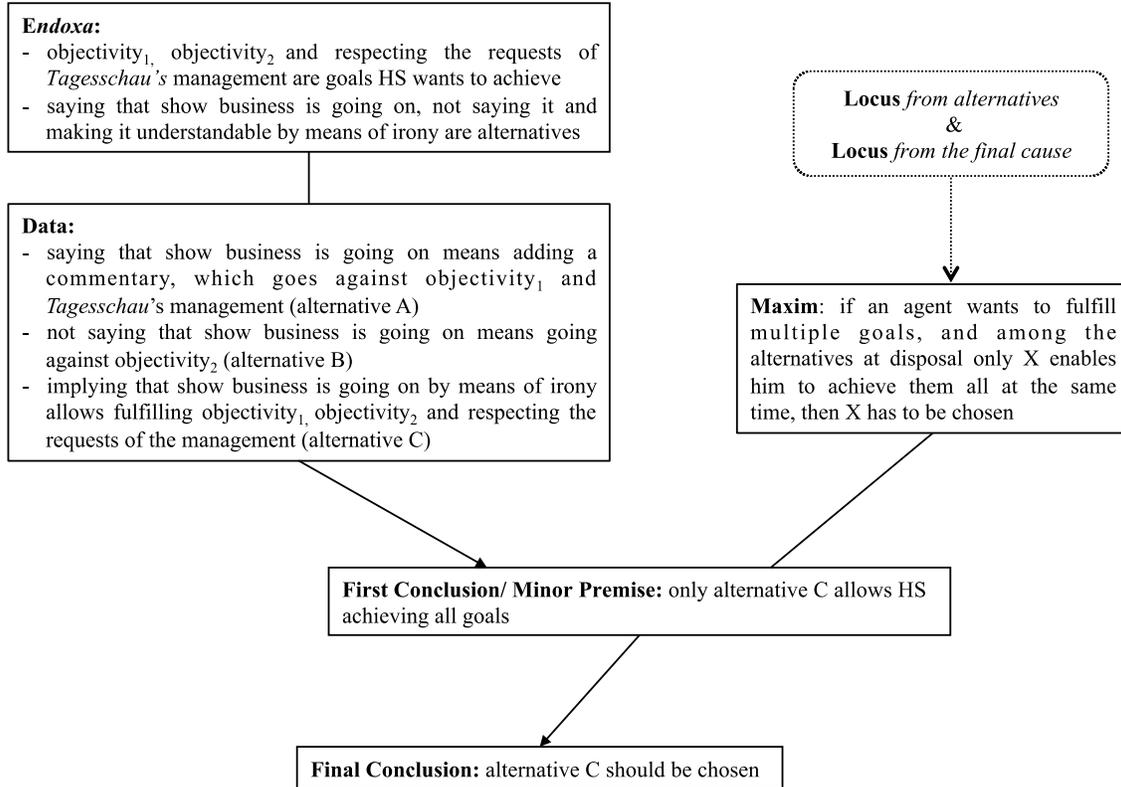


Figure 5.

The endoxa at the roots of this reasoning are the requirements concerning how to make the item, i.e., two concepts of objectivity and the requests of *Tagesschau's* management. Furthermore, they entail the fact that the three possibilities considered by HS (A, B, C) are alternatives. These alternatives involve fulfilling the requirements in a different way (datum): saying that show business is going on means adding a commentary, which goes against *objectivity₁* and the requests of *Tagesschau's* management (A); not saying that show business is going on means going against *objectivity₂* (B); implying that show business is going on by means of irony allows fulfilling the goals of *objectivity₁*, *objectivity₂* and the requests of *Tagesschau's* mandate (C). Therefore only alternative C allows HS achieving all goals (first conclusion). This first conclusion is the minor premise of a topical syllogism, whose major premise is the maxim “if an agent wants to fulfill multiple goals, and among the alternatives at disposal only X enables him to achieve them all at the same time, then X has to be chosen”, derived from the combined loci from alternatives and from the final cause. It follows that alternative C should be chosen (final conclusion).

Even though the struggle emerging in this RVP is tightly related to the character and personal beliefs of HS, the situation in which he finds himself is not uncommon. Indeed, the journalists' knowledge often exceeds what they are entitled to say. This is all the more the case for press conferences, i.e., staged events where the sender's perspective on a happening is made public, while other viewpoints and details – possibly known to the reporter – are left unspoken.

6. Conclusion

The case studies presented in this paper have shown how objectivity is conceived of in two Swiss newsrooms, and how journalists argue for newsmaking decisions by drawing on objectivity endoxa. In the AGRI case, the focus lies on the need for *Téléjournal*'s journalists to take up a specific perspective on a happening, to make it more appealing and relevant for their public in all the French-speaking part of Switzerland. The term *angle* has been identified as a cultural keyword of *Téléjournal*, which points exactly at this subjective evaluative attitude towards events. The YOGI case features a contraposition between the entertainment-oriented viewpoint of the cutter and the more reporter stance of the journalist. While the former interprets the event within a narrative framework, attributing symbolic meaning to images, the latter wishes to adhere to facts. This case exemplifies the limits of the subjective perspective otherwise fostered in this newsroom. Eventually, the RUMS case shows how a journalist tries to reconcile the requirements by the management of *Tagesschau* and by the program's mandate, which impose avoiding commentaries, with his personal drive towards reporting the whole truth, even without evidence. He ends up picking a middle way, i.e., letting the audience guess the truth via an ironical comment in the closing of the item.

Despite the fact that *Téléjournal* and *Tagesschau* belong to the same media organization, their newsrooms abide by different objectivity standards for what could and should be included in news reports. The concepts of objectivity emerging from this investigation often coincide with those envisaged by the literature, but they tend to mingle. Furthermore, exceptions are possible (e.g., the need to find an *angle*). The personality and the background of each journalist involved shall not be neglected either. Objectivity plays a central role in translating an event into a story, for the two goals of being objective and of writing an appealing piece can conflict. This can be due to contrasting narrative patterns followed by co-authors (the YOGI case), as well as to an event lacking fit with respect to the narrative strategy of the news organization (the ANGL case), or being already wrapped into fiction in a way that does not suit the ethos of the reporter (the RUMS case). Analyzing case studies from an argumentative perspective shows that objectivity is at play in practical reasoning at all levels of the newsmaking process, being thus neither a utopian ideal void of connection with the real world, nor something taken for granted and undisputed. Moreover, it helps unraveling all nuances of this concept. Therefore, an argumentative analysis significantly contributes to understanding what objectivity really means to practitioners who struggle with it on a daily basis, and to reconstructing how they manage the outlined conflicts when making decisions.

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