

# THE MYTH OF THE NEUTRAL PROFESSIONAL

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**ABSTRACT:** All systems of concentrated power, including modern liberal democracies, attempt to control the ideological field. In the contemporary United States, this project relies heavily on the imposition on journalists and academics of a demand for neutrality, which helps entrench the status quo and discourage critical, independent inquiry.

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## Introduction

I have spent my adult life employed as a journalist for newspapers or as a professor of journalism in universities, working in the trenches of two of the key institutions that select, create, shape, and transmit information. This is a report from the ideology assembly line.

In both those professions,<sup>1</sup> the assigned task, reduced to a simple formulation, is to learn how some specific part of the world works and convey that to others in writing and/or speaking. The institutions in which I have performed those tasks -- for-profit media corporations and non-profit universities -- have a stated commitment to non-intervention in the work of those professionals. But those institutions, and the people who run them, also have interests of their own (such as profit, power, and prestige). What happens when the commitment to free and open inquiry by professional intellectuals conflicts with the interests of the institutions and their owners and managers?<sup>2</sup>

In modern authoritarian and totalitarian states, the relationship between professional intellectuals and power is relatively clear and straightforward. The state -- which represents the interests of a particular set of elites -- governs through a combination of coercion and violence that is typically quite brutal and

propaganda that is typically heavy-handed. In that formula, intellectuals have a clear role: serve the state by articulating values and describing social, political, and economic forces in a manner that is consistent with state power and its ideology. To the degree one does that, one will be rewarded. The Soviet Union was perhaps the paradigmatic example of this kind of system.

In a contemporary liberal, pluralist, capitalist democracy such as the United States, things are more complex. The state -- which represents the interests of a particular group of elites -- still maintains a monopoly on violence and uses it when necessary to maintain control. But because of the nature of the system and the advances made by popular movements in the past century, the state cannot rule simply by force or crude propaganda. Those who rule have come to realize that one advantage of a relatively open society is that it fosters a dynamic, creative intellectual climate that fosters innovation. To elites, that innovation is desirable in certain realms (especially the sciences, both pure and applied) but potentially dangerous in other realms (especially the humanities and social sciences). The question remains: how to encourage innovation in one arena but discourage it in the other? This requires the state, and the elites it represents, to maximize social control through a more complex management of ideology and of the institutions that reproduce and transmit that ideology.

In short, the liberal, pluralist, and democratic features of the system are constantly in tension with capitalism and the state (which typically serves the interests of capital). As Alex Carey (1997) put it, "The twentieth century has been characterized by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy" (p. 18).

But propaganda in a liberal, pluralist, and democratic system is not achieved by direct state control of the institutions in which intellectual work is done and through which ideas are transmitted (such as a public university), nor do capitalist institutions (such as media corporations) always directly suppress the professional intellectuals they employ. Intellectuals in the contemporary United States do not face the crude choices (subordinate yourself to the state or risk serious punishment) that intellectuals in more authoritarian states face. While dissident intellectuals in the United States are not always treated well -- they may risk not being able to find permanent employment in an officially recognized institution, for example -- the vast majority of them are not at this point in history routinely subject to serious consequences such as imprisonment or death.

(That statement has to be qualified somewhat, because it applies most clearly to intellectuals from the more privileged sectors of society; for others, there are examples of harsh treatment. For example, Sami Al-Arian, a tenured Palestinian

computer science professor at the University of South Florida, was vilified in the mass media and fired in December 2001, and then subjected to federal persecution for his voiced political views.<sup>3)</sup>

In a liberal, pluralist, capitalist democracy, the elites in the state and the corporation must adopt a strategy different from authoritarian states to contain the potential threat from intellectuals. Elites need intellectuals in some arenas to innovate, while in other arenas they need intellectuals to articulate values and accounts of reality that will support the system that allows elite to rule. But given the substantial freedoms in place in the society, allowing intellectuals to have the time and resources to pursue the truly independent, critical inquiry needed for innovation poses a risk: what if some of those intellectuals engage in that work and come to a critique of the concentration of power that elites want to maintain? What if, instead of articulating values in support of that power, intellectuals articulate other values? Even worse, what if those intellectuals use their privilege not only to talk about such things but to engage in political activity to change the nature of the system and the distribution of power? What if intellectuals created a culture in which such activities were encouraged and those who engaged in them were supported?

In short, in a system in which intellectuals cannot easily be killed or shipped off to the gulag when they get feisty, how can they be kept in line?

### **The Neutral Professional**

Enter the myth of the neutral professional as a way to neutralize professionals.

In the political and philosophical sense in which I use the term here, neutrality is impossible. In any situation, there exists a distribution of power. To either overtly endorse or reject that distribution is, of course, a political choice; such positions are not neutral. To take no explicit position by claiming to be neutral is also a political choice, particularly when one is given the resources that make it easy to evaluate the consequences of that distribution of power and, at least potentially, affect its distribution. As South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu has put it, neutrality typically means choosing the side of the oppressor: "If you are in a situation where an elephant is sitting on the tail of a mouse and you say, 'Oh no, no, no, I am neutral,' the mouse is not going to appreciate your neutrality" (Reuters, 2004).

Myles Horton, the founder of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee and a legendary figure in progressive organizing and adult education, is one of many who have critiqued the act of claiming neutrality, which he described as "an immoral act." Neutrality, he said, is "a code word for the existing system. It has nothing to do with anything but agreeing to what is and will always be -- that's

what neutrality is. Neutrality is just following the crowd. Neutrality is just being what the system asks us to be" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 102).

This same insight lies behind the title of Howard Zinn's political/intellectual memoir, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train* (1994). If a train is moving down the track, one cannot plop down in a car that is part of that train and pretend to be sitting still; one is moving with the train. Likewise, a society is moving in a certain direction -- power is distributed in a certain manner, leading to certain kinds of institutions and relationships, which distribute the resources of the society in certain ways. We cannot pretend that by sitting still -- by claiming to be neutral -- we can avoid accountability for our roles (which will vary according to one's place in the system). A claim to neutrality means simply that one is not taking a position on that distribution of power and its consequences, which is a passive acceptance of the existing distribution. Even this is a political choice and thus inherently non-neutral.

In the contemporary United States, professionals who want to be taken seriously in the mainstream political/intellectual culture (and have a chance at the status that comes with that) are encouraged to accept and replicate the dominant ideology. Two key tenets of that ideology are the claims of (1) the benevolence of the United States in foreign policy (the notion that the United States, alone among nations in history, pursues a policy rooted in a desire to spread freedom and democracy) and (2) the naturalness of capitalism (the notion that capitalism is not only the most efficient system, but the only sane and moral economic system). At the same time, those same professionals are encouraged to be politically neutral, but within this narrow framework that takes the legitimacy of state power and corporate power as a given. In practice, this means that one is supposed to present material that takes no explicit position on which policies should be implemented in the existing system, but one is not supposed to step back and ask whether that existing system itself is coherent or moral.

I am not arguing that people who work within, and accept, the dominant ideology are by definition wrong or corrupt; reasonable people can disagree about how best to understand and analyze complex systems. My point is simply that it is not a position of neutrality. Those of us who routinely critique the dominant view are political; that is, the politics we have come to hold certainly has an effect on the conclusions we reach -- but no more and no less than people who do not critique. That is not to say that journalism or university teaching is nothing but the imposition of one's political predispositions on reporting/writing or research/teaching, but simply to observe that everyone has a politics that affects their intellectual work. The appropriate question is not "Are you political?" but instead should be "Can you defend the conclusions you reach?" It is interesting that the criticism I have received in my university career for "being biased" or "politicizing the classroom" almost never includes a substantive critique of my ideas or my teaching. Critics appear to think it sufficient to point out that because

I deviate from the conventional wisdom, it must be the case that I am unprofessional in the classroom.

To return to the train metaphor: When we ride on trains, we typically conform to the system. The trains run on a certain schedule to certain destinations. Once a person decides to take the train, it is understandable why we typically focus on working within that established framework. We do not tend to look at a schedule and then demand that the railway company route a train to a different location at a different time; in most cases it is easier to fit into the system than to buck it. But that keeps us from asking important questions: Should this train be on another schedule? Should these tracks be ripped up and laid elsewhere? Or, maybe, should we not be riding trains at all in favor of some other transportation system?

### **The Rules for Doing Your Job**

In journalism, the rules of “objectivity” keep reporters and editors hemmed in and discourage examination of those big-picture questions. Central to that is most journalists’ slavish reliance on “official sources” -- those people in positions of some authority within the mainstream institutions. These people from government and the corporate sector are presumed to be credible sources and, hence, have great power to determine what will be a legitimate story and how it will be defined; they are news framers and shapers (Herman, 1999; McChesney, 2004).

In university teaching, similar objectivity rules are in place, varying somewhat depending on the discipline. The primary vehicle for this has been importing the methodology from the physical sciences into the social sciences, in an attempt to give the study of humans and human institutions the imprimatur of “real” science. In such a system, political and moral choices often are obscured by methodology (Koch, 1971; Zinn, 1990).

The result is that both journalism and universities are, in general, overwhelmingly conservative spaces, in the sense that they function mostly to conserve the existing distribution of power. But because they also are liberal institutions (in the Enlightenment sense of adhering to broad values of free thought), they also allow critical inquiry that takes some people outside the consensus that favors the existing order. In my experience in both kinds of institutions, universities tend to be slightly more open to critique because there is more original work done there, which requires less stringent controls.

### **The Rules for Keeping Your Job**

Here’s how the system works: A few years ago the dean of my college informed us during a faculty meeting that from that point forward, a record of securing grant funding would be expected for tenure and promotion cases. The ability to

raise money, up to that point, had never been explicitly listed as a requirement, and many of us who had been tenured in past years had not been expected to raise money. But as public universities have been increasingly pushed to find more private funding, the pressure to raise money increasingly has filtered down to the faculty level. In some fields, especially the natural sciences, the expectation that faculty members would attract grant funding has long been in place, as have funding agencies for those disciplines, such as the National Science Foundation. And, although there are political forces that shape the funding in the sciences, there is money available for research that is not overtly tied to ideological positions.

In other fields, especially certain disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, funding is harder to come by and more overtly ideological in character. In my field, journalism, the major funders are connected to the industry, either in the form of the media corporations themselves or the non-profit foundations they sometimes establish. These entities have never funded critical research that might lead to conclusions in conflict with their interests. In short, in a field such as journalism, grant funding flows to those researchers who do not challenge the fundamental structure of the commercial media system.

When the dean announced this shift, it was put forth as a neutral rule: Everyone who goes up for tenure or promotion faces the same expectations. One might dispute whether or not the change in policy was wise, but on the surface it appeared to be applied fairly across the board. But such an analysis at the surface is predictably superficial. I raised my hand to offer a different perspective.

“Given that the sources of funding for scholars doing critical research are considerably fewer than for those doing research that accepts the existing system, isn’t this kind of demand on faculty, in fact, going to result in less critical research?” I asked. I pointed out that I had pursued such critical work during my own tenure period and had never even applied for a grant. Luckily for me, I had been granted tenure based on my scholarly work, not my contribution to the university balance sheet. Did this new rule mean, in essence, that if I were going up for tenure today I would be denied? If that is the case, it seems likely that faculty members with similar interests can either (1) pursue their critical research interests and take the risk of being denied permanent employment, or (2) abandon such work and take up topics that are safely within the parameters acceptable to the industry. No matter what an individual professor chooses, the result is that there will be fewer professors pursuing critical ideas and, therefore, far less critical research. So, in fact, this allegedly neutral rule could have a dramatic effect on the intellectual content of our program, given that curriculum is largely faculty driven. But such a change would not be based on any decision about the intellectual direction of the program that would be discussed and debated; it would be the decidedly non-neutral effect of an allegedly neutral rule.

At that point, the dean gave me a look that seemed to contain about equal amounts of amusement and exasperation and said, simply, "I'm just telling you about the policy from the Tower (central administration)." So, the lead administrator from the college, who is in charge of the academic programs of five departments, admitted she would not defend the principle of free and open inquiry and would do what she was told. Perhaps that is not surprising -- deans are not known these days for bucking the system; it tends to slow career advancement. What was more disturbing was the reaction of my faculty colleagues, which was no reaction. Not a single faculty member joined my critique, nor offered any comment. I can certainly understand why the junior faculty, those still not secure in their positions, might have chosen to remain quiet in front of the administrator who would have considerable power in their tenure case. But even senior faculty -- full professors, some with endowed chairs and professorships -- chose to remain silent.

That is a well-disciplined intellectual class. The members of it who have risen to administrative positions and are charged with formulating and executing policy know which master they serve. The more secure members keep quiet to make sure their privilege is not disturbed. The less secure members shut up in the hope that they will be allowed to move up a notch. In such a setting, elites cannot guarantee complete conformity from intellectuals, but the system works well enough to keep things running relatively smoothly these days.

### **Not Neutral, but Not Just Politics Either**

This critique of fake neutrality should not be taken as an endorsement of the total politicization of the newsroom or the classroom. Journalists and educators should not be mere propagandists for a party, a cause, or a political viewpoint. Multicultural education and diversity in higher education signifies a wide range of perspectives, communities, and meanings as it should in its emphasis on inclusiveness. In all of these situations, the question is not whether one is neutral, but whether one is truly independent from control and allowed to pursue free and open inquiry, which means engaging with all the relevant viewpoints. Of course, what viewpoints are deemed to be relevant may be a reflection, at least in part, of one's politics. In a healthy profession and institution, there would be space for debate about the influence of politics on viewpoints. The professionals should be willing to make clear the evidence and logic on which they base their decisions. In a healthy society, professionals would be given that independence - - not just in theory but in practice -- and out of the many different choices that varied professionals would make, we could expect a rich cultural conversation and an engaged political dialogue.

The ideology of political neutrality, unfortunately, keeps professionals such as journalists and teachers -- as well as citizens -- from understanding the relationship between power and the professions. Any claim to such neutrality is

illusory; there is no neutral ground on which to stand anywhere in the world. Rather than bemoan that fact, I believe we should embrace it and acknowledge that it is the source of intellectual, political, and moral struggle and progress. If we take seriously this claim, then all people, no matter what their position is, would have to articulate and defend the values and assumptions on which their claims are made. The other option is intellectual stagnation and political decline.

## Endnotes

1. Because journalists in the United States do not have to complete a specialized course of instruction or be licensed to practice, many would argue the term “professional” is inappropriate. I use it here in a more general sense. See Jensen (1996).
2. As is the case with many left/progressive intellectuals in the United States, my views on these issues have been shaped by the work of Noam Chomsky (2002), particularly the essays “Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship,” “Some Thought on Intellectuals and the Schools,” and “The Responsibility of Intellectuals.”
3. See <http://w3.usf.edu/~uff/AlArian/>. Al-Arian was indicted in 2003 by the U.S. government on charges that he used an academic think-tank at USF and an Islamic charity as fronts to raise money for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. A jury in December 2005 acquitted Al-Arian on eight counts but deadlocked on nine others. To avoid another trial, Al-Arian in April 2006 pleaded guilty to one count of providing services to the group’s members and was sentenced to four years and nine months, with credit for the three years and three months already served. See <http://www.sptimes.com/2005/webspecials05/al-arian/>

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