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The View from Somewhere: A Review

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Abstract

Lewis Raven Wallace was fired from Marketplace for questioning the mainstream media's conception of journalistic neutrality. He developed his critique in his 2019 book, *The View From Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity*, a podcast of the same name, and in several ancillary products. Wallace concludes that "objectivity is a false ideal that upholds the status quo", and news judgement has less to do with objective criteria than with "who controls the narrative, whose narratives matter, and how the appearance of mattering is created in a society rife with entrenched inequality".

Keywords

Objectivity, Journalism, Neutrality, Movement Journalism, Radio, Lewis Raven Wallace, Activism, Marketplace, History

The View From Somewhere by Lewis Raven Wallace
Reviewed by Robert S. Boynton

Listen here: [The View from Somewhere \(lewispants.com\)](https://www.lewispants.com)

On 27 January 2017, a week after Donald Trump's inauguration, Lewis Raven Wallace posted an item on his blog titled *Objectivity is dead, and I'm okay with it*.¹

"Like a lot of people, I've been losing sleep over the news of the last week", he wrote. In his first press conference, White House spokesman Sean Spicer had described Trump's audience as "the largest ever to witness an inauguration, period"—an obvious lie. Soon after, White House counsellor Kellyanne Conway explained on *Talk of the Nation* that Spicer wasn't lying, but merely using 'alternative facts'. A politico-epistemological shift was under way and the media had no idea how to navigate the new terrain. While it was common knowledge that candidate Trump was an unrepentant liar, such defiantly false official statements were something else entirely. Reading Wallace's post today, his journalistic credo feels positively quaint: "We can (and should) still tell the truth and check our facts"; "To call a politician on a lie is our job". What a difference four years make...

At the time, Wallace worked for *Marketplace*, a daily American Public Radio show about finance and business, and was one of the mainstream media's few out transgender reporters ("The only out transgender person in every newsroom, every press conference, and nearly every interview"²). *Marketplace* asked him to remove the blog post, and when he refused, its vice president flew from Los Angeles to New York to meet in a midtown Manhattan bistro. She told Wallace he "didn't want to do the kind of journalism they do there. Impartial journalism," he writes. Wallace was surprised because nobody had questioned the neutrality of his on-air work, nor had *Marketplace* received any complaints about the blog post. "I didn't *really* expect to be fired over expressing what I thought was such a basic idea about privilege and objectivity."³ *Marketplace* offered him two weeks severance in exchange for signing an agreement not to discuss the incident. He refused and instead channeled the material into a book, *The View From Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), a podcast of the same name and several ancillary products.

Wallace's project is notable as much for the questions it raises about objectivity in journalism, as for the ecosystem through which he explores them. It is an example of how independent

¹ "Objectivity is dead, and I'm okay with it," [Medium](https://www.medium.com), January 27, 2017

² *The View From Somewhere*, p. 6

³ Episode #5

documentary journalists can expand and augment their work, and deserves to be studied. It started with a Kickstarter campaign, which raised \$16,000. The first episodes of the podcast appeared just before the pandemic hit, so Wallace responded to events in real time, adding special episodes, like “Wash Your Hands, Know Your History—Revisiting AIDS in the Time of Covid” (#12). In another episode, Wallace simply reads from the manuscript, audiobook style. Most episodes feature the public-radio blend of reporting, explanation and interviews, opening and closing with a theme song of snappy accordion riffs that would be at home on *This American Life*. The show’s website offers heavily annotated transcripts, with links to sources and resources. As episodes were released in late 2020, Wallace held live events, both in person and virtual, and developed an online curriculum to accompany the book.⁴

The View from Somewhere emerges at a time when the line between the written and spoken word has blurred⁵. Audiobook sales are growing at a faster rate than print books, with Audible and Spotify competing for the market.⁶ Editing software like [Descript](#)⁷ collapses the distinction between text and audio, allowing one to switch seamlessly between them; one can ‘cut tape’ using familiar copy-and-paste word-processing techniques, and swiftly transcribe audio files with artificial intelligence. The creative marketplace is in flux as well, upending the traditional scheme in which articles evolve into books, that then morph into movies or television shows. Today, podcasts are fodder for television⁸ or books⁹, documentaries are accompanied by podcasts¹⁰, production companies shuffle projects between audio, print and video, regardless of platform,¹¹ and books become podcasts.

The *View From Somewhere* podcast is in the last category, and the podcast tracks the book’s chapters fairly closely: both include sections about how the Black Lives Matter movement expanded the media’s definition of what counts as ‘news’ to include police shootings of African Americans; how ‘gay media’ altered the relationship between journalism and activism; how

⁴ “[Journalism Beyond Objectivity](#)”

⁵ Perhaps a technological parallel to the ideas about “writing” and speech” Derrida explored in *Of Grammatology*

⁶ “[Spotify Is Hiring A Head Of Audiobooks, Signaling Its Ambitions In The Space,](#)” [Tubefilter](#), August 14, 2020

⁷ “[Edit Audio and Video Like a Text Document With Descript,](#)” [Lifehacker](#), October 23, 2020

⁸ “[In the race to turn podcasts into TV shows, the podcasts are winning,](#)” [The Verge](#), January 8, 2019

⁹ *Bag Man: The Wild Crimes, Audacious Cover-Up, and Spectacular Downfall of a Brazen Crook in the White House*, by Rachel Maddow and Michael Yarvitz, Penguin Books, 2020.

¹⁰ “[An Opportunity to Look at How True-Crime Storytelling Can Affect Reality: Marc Smerling on Reinvestigating Errol Morris’s Reinvestigation in A Wilderness of Error,](#)” [Filmmaker Magazine](#), September 24, 2020

¹¹ “[Vespucci Group Taps Journalists to Find Projects for Film, TV, Podcasts,](#)” [Variety](#), December 18, 2020

conservatives learned to paint the mainstream media as ‘liberal’, and create doubt about subjects (such as illegal voting or election fraud) where none exists. The engine that powers both the book and podcast is the story of Wallace’s “subjective search for particular kinds of people: rabble-rousers who resist, challenged, or shook up standards for news production in the past”.¹²

As Wallace notes at the beginning of the book, most professional journalism organisations have dropped the word ‘objectivity’ from their ethical codes.¹³ Like the debate between objectivism and relativism in philosophy, no intelligent person, if pressed, actually believes wholly in either extreme. “Show me a man who thinks he’s objective”, said Time Inc. founder Henry Luce, “and I’ll show you a man who’s deceiving himself”. All journalism is subjective and what matters is how responsibly one deploys one’s subjectivity. Wallace argues that a crucial element of responsible journalism is letting the audience know who you are—the better to judge how to evaluate your claims. The book’s tone is more formal than the podcast’s, though it is far from the solemn monograph that one expects from a university press. Audio is the most personal medium, and lends itself to an extended tour through various modes of subjective expression. Episode #4, ‘Gay Reporter Wants to be an Activist’, opens with Wallace interviewing his mother; he identifies himself as “a 35-year-old who still calls their mom in a crisis”.

The podcast operates along two tracks. The first is the story of how the notion of ‘objective journalism’ arose in 19th-century America, and the ways that its philosophical ghost haunts us today. Conservatives are better at weaponising it than liberals. “Criticize other people for not being objective. Be as subjective as you want. It’s a great little racket”, says conservative journalist Matt Labash.¹⁴ “Objectivity is a false ideal that upholds the status quo”, Wallace writes,¹⁵ arguing that news judgement has less to do with objective criteria than with “who controls the narrative, whose narratives matter, and how the appearance of mattering is created in a society rife with entrenched inequality”.¹⁶ One critique that infuses the series is the way objectivity was equated with white-dominated media, implicitly ghettoising journalism produced by black and brown people as ‘activism’. Wallace flips the logic on its head, suggesting that objectivity doesn’t merely support the status quo, it may keep us from the truth. “What if objectivity isn’t just a wrong idea, but a harmful lie?”, he asks in episode #8 “What about the times when the opposite of detachment... *connection and intimacy* actually get journalists closer to the truth?”.

¹² *The View From Somewhere*, p. 9

¹³ *The View From Somewhere*, p. 7

¹⁴ *The View From Somewhere*, p. 149

¹⁵ *The View From Somewhere*, p. 24

¹⁶ *The View From Somewhere*, p. 34

The second track is a series of profiles of, and encounters with, Wallace's journalism heroes. The result is a kind of post-objective canon, a diverse community of journalists, with more POCs, women and genders than usual. Some are well known, like the crusading Ida B. Wells, who exposed the extent of lynching in America, and laid bare its roots in what would today be labelled 'white-supremacist thinking'. Others are less so, such as Marvel Cooke, an African American investigative reporter and editor who organised America's first Black newspaper guild, and stood up to Senator Joseph McCarthy. And we learn about Ruben Salazar, one of the first Latino journalists to have a byline in an anglo newspaper; he was killed during a protest, when a police officer shot a tear gas projectile at Salazar's head.

The podcast takes the form of a 'quest', with Wallace constructing a counter-narrative of what good journalism might look like once we dispense with the debilitating concept of 'objectivity'. He makes shrewd use of interviews with people like *Washington Post* reporter Wesley Lowrey, who explains how his experience as an African American allows him to see stories that his white colleagues do not. For instance, having been racially profiled, he knows how to interview people who have also experienced this form of injustice. "If you are someone who has never in your life has ever had to think about it before, what is your framing and your perspective for what questions you're even asking?", he explains in episode #2. Wallace also makes good use of his producer, Romona Martinez, deferring to her when Latinx issues emerge.

Wallace subjects himself to the same scrutiny as others. When reporting the 2014 shooting death of an African-American man shopping at a Walmart, he realised that he instinctively refers to him as a 'suspect', thereby uncritically parroting the official narrative. During a 2016 *Marketplace* story about predatory home sales in Detroit, Wallace interviews Eddie Cave, a disabled man living in an unheated house with no electricity. At one point, Eddie cries, and hugs Wallace. "I had what radio people called good tape. But there I was, a white person extracting a black person's painful story. Again. *For what?*", he asks in an episode titled, 'The End of Extractive Journalism'. Wallace vows to create *useful* journalism, rather than simply taking people's stories.

The series concludes with an episode on *movement journalism*,¹⁷ which Wallace associates less with activism than the kind of immersive work on immigrant communities done by Tina Vasquez, a reporter for *Prism*, a BIPOC-led non-profit news outlet. Wallace defines movement journalism as "an ethical approach to truth-telling", in which reporters "bring a power analysis

¹⁷Although episode #14 includes a sentence--"On the next episode...navigating as a movement journalist in the world of mainstream journalism" that indicates there may be more to come.

to our reporting, and focus on the *process* as much as the product”. That is, reporters don’t merely parachute into a community, get a quote and leave. It is the opposite of *extractive journalism*, which “treats facts like coal in a mine, using sources and places the way mining companies use land—as a resource to dig into, and then leave behind”.¹⁸ On the podcast, Vasquez describes her brand of journalism with the kind of earthy texture that can make audio so pleasurable: “I mean, as a kid, I felt like it was a way to talk shit to adults and the way to hold people accountable and make them uncomfortable. And I guess that’s still kind of what it is to me”.

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¹⁸ *The View From Somewhere*, p. 199