

# THE INSTITUTIONAL SUBJECTIVITY OF THE WHITE AFFLUENT US NATION

In a really worthy read, Bill Keller and Glenn Greenwald debate the future of journalism.

Sadly, however, in his first response to Keller's self-delusion of belonging to the journalistic tradition of "newspapers that put a premium on aggressive but impartial reporting[] that expect reporters and editors to keep their opinions to themselves," Greenwald seemed to cede that such journalism constitutes, "concealing one's subjective perspectives." That permitted Keller to continue his self-delusion that his journalism – at both the level of reporter and that reporter's larger institution – achieved that silence about opinions until they started fighting about the role of national allegiance and national security.

That argument developed this way.

Greenwald: Former Bush D.O.J. lawyer Jack Goldsmith in 2011 praised what he called "the patriotism of the American press," meaning their allegiance to protecting the interests and policies of the U.S. government. That may (or may not) be a noble thing to do, but it most definitely is not objective: it is quite subjective and classically "activist."

[snip]

Keller: If Jack Goldsmith, the former Bush administration lawyer, had praised the American press for, in your words, "their allegiance to protecting the interests and policies of the U.S. government" then I would strongly disagree with him. We have published

many stories that challenged the policies and professed interests of the government. But that's not quite what Goldsmith says. He says that *The Times* and other major news outlets give serious consideration to arguments that publishing something will endanger national security – that is, might get someone killed.

For what it's worth, I think Keller is clinging to the first thing Goldsmith said,

Glenn Greenwald complained that “the *NYT* knew about Davis' work for the CIA (and Blackwater) but concealed it *because the U.S. Government told it to*” (my emphasis). That is inaccurate. The government asked the *Times* not to publish, as it often does, and the *Times* agreed to the request, which it sometimes does. The final decision rested with the *Times*, which listens to the government's claims about national security harm and risk to individual lives, and then makes its own decision. The *Times* does not, in my opinion, always exercise this discretion wisely.

And ignoring what Goldsmith went on to say,

I interviewed a dozen or so senior American national security journalists to get a sense of when and why they do or don't publish national security secrets. They gave me different answers, but they all agreed that they tried to avoid publishing information that harms U.S. national security with no corresponding public benefit. Some of them expressly ascribed this attitude to “patriotism” or “jingoism” or to being American citizens or working for American publications. This sense of attachment to country is what leads the

American press to worry about the implications for U.S. national security of publication, to seek the government's input, to weigh these implications in the balance, and sometimes to self-censor. (This is a natural and prudent attitude in a nation with the fewest legal restrictions in the world on the publication of national security secrets, but one abhorred by critics like Greenwald.) *The Guardian*, al Jazeera, and Wikileaks, by contrast, worry much less, if at all, about U.S. national security interests.

That is, Goldsmith noted both that at an institutional level US news outlets entertained the requests of the government, and that at a reportorial level, individuals prioritized US "national security."

And from there, Keller repeatedly ignored or dismissed the efforts Greenwald, in his Edward Snowden reporting, or WikiLeaks, in its Cablegate publications, made to protect lives of individuals.

It's not until Greenwald's response where he gets to the crux of the issue.

As for taking into account dangers posed to innocent life before publishing: nobody disputes that journalists should do this. But I don't give added weight to the lives of innocent Americans as compared to the lives of innocent non-Americans, nor would I feel any special fealty to the U.S. government as opposed to other governments when deciding what to publish. When Goldsmith praised the "patriotism" of the American media, he meant that U.S. media outlets give special allegiance to the views and interests of the U.S. government.

The key word here is "interests." The cases

Goldsmith cites are primarily, if not exclusively, about protecting US interests, which he and Keller translate into US “national security,” perhaps to give it the gravity of dead (American) bodies.

Now, I’m not the person to raise this, because I’m far too close to Greenwald’s position, both as someone who questions the need to defer to US interests masquerading as national security, and as a privileged white person (though he’s gay and I’m female).

But I think two things are missing from this debate. One – which Goldsmith gets close to when he says self-censorship is a “natural and prudent attitude in a nation with the fewest legal restrictions in the world on the publication of national security secrets” – pertains to whether US interests are a less worse option than the interests of those who will capitalize on the US not being able to manage its press.

To explain what I mean, consider the worst case scenario for American interests of the disclosures of the extent of US spying around the world. NSA apologists say, correctly, that everyone who has the resources to, spies; NSA apologists almost never admit that US has technical advantages (partly, but not exclusively, its role astride the international telecom backbone) that make its spying much easier and therefore “boundless” (to borrow NSA’s own description of its dragnet). And that spying advantage is one key ingredient in the exercise of US global hegemony. Secrecy about it is another key ingredient to US hegemony.

In other words, though they may not admit it (some do), NSA apologists are criticizing disclosures that may well weaken America’s already eroding hegemonic position in the world. When they point out (correctly) that Russia has a worse human rights and civil liberties record than America, they’re suggesting that the disclosures may actually bring out more authoritarianism, not less. They may be right,

they may be wrong (that's why we live history, to see how such questions work out!), but I do believe some of the apologists are legitimately worried about this.

Another variant of this – that is not necessarily at all apologist – are technical observations that by undermining US dominance of the Internet's governance, these disclosures may actually lead to more nationalist authoritarian control of the Toobz. Again, it is possible that Edward Snowden's efforts to undermine the dragnet may actually strengthen it.

But underlying this question – and indeed, underlying the strong response to these disclosures in countries around the world – is the question of the value of US hegemony. In addition to all the financial and strategic reasons why Europe allowed us to provide their security for the last half century, there's the reality that for decades US hegemony brought prosperity to Europe. The same is assuredly not true for much of the rest of the world, which is why the BRICS, for example, are pushing back from another perspective (though globalization has benefitted, if for short and volatile periods, some of these countries as well).

Still, the question raised on both sides of that equation is whether, in the wake of the twin Iraq and Wall Street debacles, US hegemony is a net win anymore for the rest of the world.

Surely for the Bill Keller's of the world, it is. Surely for most of NYT's subscribers (and more importantly, advertisers), it is.

But if US hegemony is no longer (if it ever was) the least worst solution to global order, then what comes next and how do we get there and how does increased disclosure of the US dragnet come in?

That's something I think those of us in the disclosure camp need to think about.

Then there's the parochial side of it as well. As noted above, Goldsmith showed how US papers

both at least considered government concerns about US interests posing as national security, and US reporters considered how their reporting served US interests posing as national security.

But I am also uncomfortably aware that this conversation is transpiring between a group of privileged white people. Which brings me to my second issue, the institutional definition of US interests (masquerading as national security and “seriousness,” among other things) by elite papers. That is, the other thing going on is the cult of “objectivity” (largely taught at schools and in internships that are much more accessible to the affluent) has also expanded at the same time as the interests of communities of color and the working class increasingly disappeared from the papers. Bill Keller claims his and other “objective” papers have exposed “the malfeasance of the financial industry.” While I suppose he might be thinking of Gretchen Morgenson and Steven Greenhouse and ignoring Andrew Ross Sorkin, ultimately there are a slew of economic questions – questions that are at the core of the common good that should define “US interests” – that, even for Greenhouse, remain largely unmentioned at the NYT. That is, one of the big problems with the subjectivity that is claimed as objectivity at the NYT is that of a position of elite observation that barely hints at how far institutional “US interest” has been divorced from the interests of many struggling Americans.

And while I can point that out, I’m not the voice of color, of the working class, that needs to reclaim that issue.

That is, while I agree with Greenwald that the objectivity of the NYT is an institutional subject position rather than real objectivity, I also hope that (just) Glenn Greenwald (or I) is not taken as the future of journalism. Because if all we do is replace institutional “US interest” subjectivity posing as objectivity for the voice of white privileged subjectivity, we’re still only addressing a fraction of the

stories not being told.