

ANOTHER PART OF THE STORY:

THE READER PLAYS AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THE
PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM OF TED
CONVOVER'S *NEWJACK*

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For a long time, journalism has utilized an objective style of writing. In the introduction to his book titled *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism*, David T. Z. Mindich states that "objectivity" as a news strategy has dominated the mainstream press for the better part of this century" (9). However, new forms of journalism have recently emerged and are gaining momentum. The authors that use these new forms leave many of the tenets of objective journalism behind in favor of the use of subjectivity in their writing. This new use of subjective reporting has created a conflict within the world of journalism. Mindich writes that "lately, objectivity has come under fire, a casualty of a bitter battle over the future of journalism" (1). There are two main, opposing sides of the debate: objectivity vs. subjectivity and dialogue (Soffer 473). In his article titled "The Competing Ideals of Objectivity and Dialogue in American Journalism," Oren Soffer writes that "the basic characteristics of journalistic trends identified with objectivity and those identified with dialogue are

contradictory, relating to two distinctive world perceptions” (474). Newer journalists are questioning whether complete objectivity can actually be achieved.

Soffer describes objectivity as “a distancing of the reporter from the phenomenon being reported on and [an] absence of any deep dialogical relationship” (Soffer 478). In other words, the reporter must not be in dialogue with the subject of his or her writing, as this would invoke emotion or bias; the reporter must remain simply an outsider looking in. Soffer writes that “objectivity assumes that journalists can avoid bringing their personality, values, and inner world into their works...the reporter is expected to remain distanced from the social and political phenomena and actors observed and reported on” (477). His use of the words “assumes” and expect[s]” show that the intentions of objectivity are not always present or possible to achieve. Mindich writes that “journalists often reveal a skepticism that there is an objective ‘is,’ unfiltered by our personal lenses” (5). Because journalists cannot always achieve complete objectivity, “personal lenses” have become a part of reporting, and the use of subjectivity has emerged as a new strategy for journalism.

Subjectivity in journalism includes dialogue, emotions and opinions. The reporter is personally invested in the subject he or she is reporting, and this shows throughout the story. In his article titled “In Search of Subjectivity—One’s Own,” Alan Peshkin writes that “subjectivity can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers’ making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected” (18). A subjective news story of course includes the facts, the background information and the sequence of events that took place; the “data.” But the story is something original and is different than any other news story concerning the same topic because it contains the “personal qualities,” or personal investment and involvement, of the writer; it is, as Peshkin says, a “distinctive contribution.”

Despite all of the progress that subjective journalism has made, there are critics who think that objectivity remains the better news strategy and that

subjectivity is a negative addition to news reporting. In the introduction to his book *Objectivity and the News*, Dan Schiller lays out some of the criticisms of subjectivity. One claim in favor of objectivity that he discusses is that “news is a map, a veridical representation, a report on reality, and hence not really a story at all, but merely the facts” (2). In other words, news reports should consist only of the straightforward facts, and have no subjective elements whatsoever. In his book, Mindich discusses the *CBS Evening News* reporter Dan Rather several times. Rather is someone who negatively criticizes subjectivity as a news strategy. Mindich explains that “Dan Rather’s claim [one evening on-air] that his [news] program was ‘real’ implied that his show was ‘objective’ and others were not” (138). Rather believes that news reports that contain any sort of subjectivity are not real. Mindich, however, acknowledges the fact that this claim is unfounded because Rather cannot seem to give a clear definition of “objectivity,” and that “whenever the hegemony of elite news brokers is threatened, intense debates over the nature of news occurs” (138). This threatening force is the growing use of subjectivity in journalism.

One form of subjective journalism that has emerged from this new movement is known as Participatory Journalism. Participatory journalists “penetrate their subjects’ minds...they immerse themselves in their subjects’ daily lives” (Weinberg 19). When researching a topic, participatory journalists insert themselves into the situation and live the story as it unfolds. The use of subjectivity combined with the firsthand look at the subject allows the reader to get up close and personal with the events and the story, and gives them a point of view that is not just the outside looking in; they see everything from the inside, in action. But while they read the story and develop a connection to it, they are also getting the facts. The readers are exposed to the story in a way that objective journalism cannot provide. Steve Weinberg writes that participatory journalism “[uses] big picture thinking to entertain while educating; even when [it] approaches serious topics, [the] words and ideas sparkle” (19). Participatory and subjective journalism convey the story in a more

effective manner than objective, traditional journalism does in that they give the reader the complete picture and a more in depth experience of the story.

Critics have called Ted Conover “one of the finest participatory journalists of his generation” (Boynton 3). In their review of some of his work, Kenneth A. Prober and John J. Gibbs state that “Conover has become quite a master of this genre” (“Sing Sing Tightrope” 289). Conover is known for his use of what he calls the “participant-observer method,” in which he not only observes the situation and events, but participates in them as well (Boynton 5). As participatory journalists do, he lives the story as it unfolds. He then writes a narrative in which he includes all of the facts, but develops it in such a way that it reads more like a story than a news report, because it is written subjectively, with his own emotions and points of view. Pertaining to his own work, Conover states, “I write nonfiction narratives” (Boynton 7).

Conover’s participatory journalism work has covered a large variety of topics. His first project is titled *Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails with America’s Hoboes*, in which he tells of his travels on trains across the country with the hoboes that ride them. He then wrote *Coyotes: A Journey Across Borders with America’s Illegal Migrants*, for which he lived, worked and crossed the United States-Mexican border with illegal Mexican immigrants for about a year. Conover’s next work focused on a different class of the American population, and it is titled *Whiteout: Lost in Aspen*. For this project, Conover moved to Aspen, Colorado, got a job and followed the lives of the wealthy people who lived there. He has studied and written about the two opposite ends of social classes in the United States.

From there, Conover became a corrections officer in a prison and wrote *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing*. He applied for, trained to be and worked as a corrections officer at Sing Sing prison in Ossining, New York for almost a year. In his review of *Newjack*, Todd Jermstad explains that “[When] Conover [noted] that there [was] very little material examining prisons from the vantage point of those employed to

confine a growing and increasingly dangerous population of inmates, he decided that this approach would be the freshest means of shedding new light on America's prisons" (60). Conover's first attempt to embed himself in the prison system failed when the New York Department of Correctional Services would not allow him to observe and study prison life. He then applied for a job as a corrections officer and, to his surprise, was accepted for the job, despite the fact that his request to observe the prison had been denied a few years earlier. His original plan was to only go through the seven weeks of training at the Academy. However, as his training came to an end, he decided that he wanted to keep going and work as a full time officer in a prison. During the chapter of *Newjack* in which Conover describes the corrections officer training process at the Academy, he discusses the realization he has that he wants to continue his investigation. He says,

More and more, the thought of leaving now was unimaginable. Everything so far had been prelude: from what we'd been told, you could be a star at the Academy and then fall flat on your face inside a real prison. There was no true preparation for the main act—you just had to do it. I wanted to see if I could; I wanted to see what would happen to all of us [him and his fellow officers]. The group had momentum, and a probable trajectory—Sing Sing. Down that road lay fear, but the deal was that we went anyway, together (48).

As readers, we know that we are going to get a view of the story that is intertwined with Conover's emotions, thoughts and personal involvement in the events. Soffer explains that "the postmodern perception is that we always view the world subjectively" (483). We see the story unfold through Conover's eyes. This subjective viewpoint cannot be avoided because Conover's personal involvement is part of what shapes the story.

Throughout the rest of the book, Conover describes all of the events and emotions he experienced while working as a corrections officer at Sing Sing prison. He explains the different parts of the prison, the types of people that work there and their jobs, the variety of posts at which he worked, the processes and procedures at the prison and the events as he saw them. But with all of this, he also includes his own emotional states throughout his work, his perspective of the events as they happened, his personal feelings towards the inmates, other officers and the way the prison functioned, as well as explanations of how everything he experienced affected him personally. Glen Peterson states in his review of *Nenjack* for the magazine "Corrections Today" that "[Conover's] experiences shape the book... perhaps the most important element of *Nenjack* is how Conover conveys the emotional impact of the prison culture on the correctional officers who live with it" (11). These elements of personal involvement on the part of the writer are what differentiate participatory journalism and Conover's style of writing and reporting from that of traditional journalism.

Comparisons between passages from Ted Conover's *Nenjack* and passages from traditional news stories about events at Sing Sing prison give a closer look at the personal involvement of the reporter in his or her writing. They also show, however, exactly what participatory journalism brings to a news story that traditional journalism does not. As we see through Ted Conover's *Nenjack*, it is not only the writer who participates in and is an active part of the story he is reporting, but the reader as well. Participatory journalism is written in such a way that the reader becomes an active participant in the story, as it calls for the reader to show emotions, to question and to actually see the events that transpire. In his article titled "Texts, Readers---and Real Readers," Geoff Hall states that "without a reader there is no text, [and] without a text no reader" (331). In other words, readers make up a part of the text that they are reading. Similarly, Patricia Harkin writes that "readers make meaning: readers—and not only authors—engage in an active process of production-

in-use in which texts of all kinds...are received by their audiences not as a repository of stable meaning, but as an invitation to make it" (413). Readers take an active role in the text in that they provide meaning to and are affected by the story that is being told.

We can draw the first comparison between a section of Conover's work and an article titled "Going up the River, for a Visit" from the *New York Times*, written by Scott Christianson. Christianson and Conover both discuss the fact that Sing Sing was built in 1826 by the very prisoners that were going to be transferred there to finish out their sentences. As might be expected, however, they discuss this point in different ways. Christianson gives the straightforward facts, nothing more. He writes that, "the prison wasn't even built when the first prisoners arrived—they had to do the job themselves. Under the command of an autocratic warden, Elam Lynds, they transformed the local granite into what at the time was the world's largest cellblock. Today, only traces of this original structure still exist" (Christianson). There is absolutely no subjectivity in Christianson's statements about the construction of Sing Sing; everything he mentions is a fact, and there is no emotion or personal perspective in the writing. Furthermore, the reader is not involved in any way. The report is written in such a way that there is nothing to draw the reader into the story. On the same topic, Conover writes:

I spot the treeless gap in the ridgeline where, an officer has told me, inmates quarried marble for the first cell block. Nobody could believe it back in 1826: a work crew of convicts, camping on the riverbank, actually induced to build their own prison. They had been sent down from Auburn, New York State's famous second prison, to construct Sing Sing, its third. How would that feel, building your own prison? (3).

The first thing that Conover does is include himself and his own perspective in his description of the construction of Sing Sing. He shares with the reader what he sees

and what he has been told, and instantly introduces subjectivity. His description is much less straightforward than that of Christianson in that he words it in a way that evokes some sort of emotion in the reader: “Nobody could believe it... [convicts] induced to build their own prison.” Not only does this statement call for an emotional response in the reader, but it also shows Conover’s personal emotions. When he asks the question, “How would that feel, building your own prison?,” we as readers are forced to think about how we would feel. Conover is clearly wondering this, and hopes that the reader will wonder, too.

Soffer writes that “‘traditional’ objective journalism is based on the perceptions that journalism is a product of the observations of a professional and objective journalist and that the readers of the newspapers are passive consumers” (486). This is exactly what we see in Christianson’s work. He states the details matter-of-factly, and does not relate to the reader in any way. His intentions are for the reader to get the facts and nothing more. Conover, on the other hand, does the exact opposite. Through his question, he is urging the reader to be an active participant in the story. He wants the readers to wonder, to put themselves in the prisoners’ shoes, and by doing so, to become part of the story. The rhetorical question is meant to evoke an emotional response in the reader, which is something that a traditional news story does not, will not, and cannot do. As we see here, “the monologic professional voice is replaced by a polyphony of voices: the journalist’s is blended with the comments of the corresponding readers” (Soffer 486). Conover reaches out to his readers, asking to hear their voices, too. The voices of the reader combined with that of the journalist create a dialogical atmosphere in the text, which is not present in traditional objective journalism. Soffer explains that “the undermining of the objective position...creates an atmosphere in which dialogue can flourish: the loss of the sense of objectivity leads us to valorize a dialogical perception that provides an alternative sense and purpose for the communication

process” (474). Conover “undermines” the objective technique in order to set up communication with his readers.

We can also see the differences between traditional and participatory journalism in an example as simple as a physical description of Sing Sing prison. In “Going Up the River, for a Visit,” Christianson writes that Sing Sing is “an H-shaped complex of gray concrete walls, glistening razor wire and multicolored brick and stone [that] looms above one of the Hudson’s widest... points.” On the other hand, Conover describes the same aspects of Sing Sing in the following ways: “The blocks are loud because they are hard. There is nothing inside them to absorb sound except the inmates’ thin mattresses and their bodies. Every other surface is of metal or concrete” (9); and “[It’s] six-twenty A.M and the sun rises over a dark place. Across the Hudson River from Sing Sing prison, on the opposite bank, the hills turn pink. I spot the treeless gap in the ridgeline where, another officer has told me, inmates quarried marble for the first cell block,” (3). Both Christianson and Conover are describing the same exact aspects of Sing Sing: the concrete and metal that make up the physical structure of the prison, and the location of the prison on the Hudson River. Christianson’s descriptions are straightforward and basic in that he explains little more than simply the colors and materials of Sing Sing’s structure: H-shaped, gray, concrete, razor wire, brick and stone. Conover not only describes the materials that make up the prison, metal and concrete, but also the effects that these materials have on the prison. He writes that the sound is “an encompassing, overwhelming cacophony of radios, of heavy gates slamming, of shouts and whistles and running footsteps” (8). The way that he portrays the items inside the blocks, or lack thereof, makes the reader see the sadness and desolation that overwhelm the prison: “the inmates’ thin mattresses and their bodies” are the only objects that do anything to help buffer the sound. Through Conover’s detailed descriptions, the reader feels like he or she is standing inside one of the prison blocks, looking around. In this way,

the reader becomes an active participant; the readers are actively looking around the prison blocks.

Christianson depicts Sing Sing's location on the river simply and minimally in that he briefly mentions that it is located on one of the widest points of the Hudson River. Conover illustrates the location in such a way that he turns it into a setting, as we would expect to see in a novel or narrative fiction. He describes the time of day, the lighting and the colors of the scenery. His description not only forms a setting, but does so in a way that the reader is able to picture it, as if he or she is looking at it alongside Conover. In his article, Soffer explains that when writing subjectively, "[the] reporters should observe, gathering and presenting all the relevant facts. The journalist's testimony is a substitute for the observation of the [readers] themselves: therefore, the reporter's observation should reflect the world as if the reader was seeing it" (479). Conover follows these rules perfectly. The readers get the full, in-depth look at the story that only participatory journalism can provide; they can actively picture the setting as if they were seeing it alongside the writer.

While those few short sentences are Christianson's only representations of the physical aspects of Sing Sing, Conover devotes pages to the task. His descriptions include the following statements: "[A-block and B-block] are massive human warehouses, two of the largest prison housing units in the world, containing over a thousand inmates between them" (6); "A-block and B-block are the most impressive buildings in Sing Sing, and in a totally negative sense. A large cathedral will inspire awe; a large cellblock, in my experience, will mainly horrify" (9); and "A series of tall, barred windows runs down either side of the shell. They would let in twice as much light if they were washed" (9). Conover represents Sing Sing in a way that puts together a setting for the book. He takes the reader on a walk through the prison at the beginning of the book in order to develop the setting of the story. His descriptions also convey the characteristics of the prison blocks: dismal and depressing.

As Conover shows throughout the book, group fights among inmates are fairly common. Some inmate group fights lead to lock-downs of entire prison blocks so that any conflicts can be settled and the aftereffects of the fight can pass. These fights are an expected part of Conover's *Nenjack*, as he works closely with the inmates and observes what happens among them. They are sometimes discussed in news stories, such as an article titled "Sing Sing Inmates Kept in Cells after Brawl," from the *New York Times*. The author of the article describes the fight and the proceeding lockdown by writing that "a third of the inmates at Sing Sing prison were confined to their cells earlier this week after a fight in the recreation yard, officials said" ("Sing Sing"). The author gives only the basic facts of what happened during and after the fight. The description is completely objective, neutral and detached from the situation. Conover, on the other hand, tells of a particular inmate fight in a way that includes his personal opinions and investment in the fight, and is anything but neutral. He writes,

It had been a long, hot summer in B-block—a long, low wave of attacks and reprisals, and then lockdowns to let everything cool off... I remembered the day I'd been standing outside the commissary... [when] some kind of fight had broken out in the block. Frustrated that I missed it, I paced the floor, locked my inmates behind another gate, and waited for some news... Apparently, three or four inmates had chased and beaten two others as they were leaving the gym (275-276).

The most notable difference between the *New York Times* article and Conover's description of an inmate fight is the complete lack of subjectivity in the first work and its strong presence in the second. Conover sets the scene with his description of the summer and how it affected the prisoners and their behavior. He brings his first person perspective in with a personal memory: "I remembered the day..." He then explains his own emotional reaction to and his personal investment in the fight. He

is very emotionally involved in the goings on in the prison, and seems almost unable to detach himself from them in that they so deeply affect his mood and behavior: “Frustrated that I’d missed it, I paced the floor...” Conover does not fail to include the objective elements of the story as well, such as the location and the people involved. He gets the facts across to the reader, but he turns them into a story, one that captures the reader and appeals to his or her own emotions and investment in the story.

The *New York Times* article goes on to describe the officers’ search for weapons intended for or used in the fight: “Anthony Sportiello, an official of the prison guards union, said, ‘We’ve found more than thirty weapons already; homemade knives, single-edge razor blades’” (“Sing Sing”). The readers are provided with a simple, short quote from an official that conveys only a small piece of information. When Conover describes his and his fellow officers’ search for weapons, he says,

Following almost every series of incidents, officers would search the yard, gym, and other places inmates congregated and prepared for battle, looking for weapons. Usually, we would find scores of them—in trash cans, under rocks, on ledges, or just beneath the dirt. Sometimes our efforts seemed to forestall the next wave, sometimes not (275).

Conover covers the objective elements in his description, such as the process of the search for weapons. Within that, however, he adds his own participatory journalism elements. First of all, he makes the reader active by causing him or her to wonder. Instead of giving the straightforward number of weapons they found after the fight, he describes the amount found as “scores of [weapons],” leaving the reader to wonder just how many weapons the prisoners were able to make and hide without any authority figure noticing. Secondly, Conover uses his personal experiences to

explain the search process by reflecting back on searches he had been a part of.

Soffer explains that

objectivity assumes that journalists can avoid bringing their personality, values, and inner world into their works...the reporter is expected to remain distanced from the social and political phenomena and actors observed and reported on. The journalist is supposed to be an expert, and this expertise reflects the reduction of the 'I' into the professional sphere, detached from other personal sphere of existence (477).

The author of the *New York Times* article follows all of these rules and tenets of objective journalism. He does not show any of his personality, or any personal involvement in the story; he is completely detached. But if this is the case, one has to wonder: how can he be an expert? An expert is someone who is completely engaged in and knows every detail of the subject he or she is studying. If anything, Conover is the expert as it pertains to this story. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes an expert as "one whose special knowledge or skill causes him to be regarded as an authority; a specialist," and that someone who is an expert was "trained by experience or practice" ("Expert"). Conover's special knowledge and skill come from his experiences and practice as being a corrections officer in Sing Sing for almost a year. He learns and gains the skills necessary to be an officer, which in turn qualifies him as an authority, or expert. Furthermore, he is an expert because he is *not* distanced or detached, but instead is living the story and is extremely close to the "phenomena" on which he is reporting. Conover does the exact opposite of what is expected of an objective journalist, and does include his personality, values and inner world. He is in both the professional sphere in that he provides the reader with the facts, and the personal sphere, as he shows how the events and stories affect him.

Objective, traditional journalism expects that journalists will leave all personal involvement at the door while investigating, and that they will remain unbiased and write a neutral story. Mark Allen Peterson says that, “journalistic objectivity seeks to establish representations of the world of objects independent of individual consciousness or wills” (208). In other words, the story should not contain any personal interests or opinions from the writer. Ken Macrorie, however, completely disagrees with this goal of objectivity. He says that “the human animal just can’t detach himself from the world he lives in and come up with reports about it that reflect no interest, preconception, or opinion on his part” (“Objective Reporter” 385). He goes on to say that it is impossible for the writer to completely exclude all personal interest or values in the story he is reporting because self-investment in the world is part of being a human being. “For [the journalist], like all human beings, of necessity perceives events...through what he believes—his value system” (Macrorie 390). Throughout his entire book, Conover continually shows his personal interest, preconceptions, opinions, values and beliefs, just as Macrorie says that a journalist will and should do. The most intriguing way he does this is through his expressions of empathy towards the prisoners, which come from his personal values and beliefs as a human being. Conover describes that “it was easier to stay incurious as an officer. Under the inmates’ surface bluster, their cruelty and selfishness, was almost always something ineffably sad” (293). Despite the front that the prisoners put up and the way that they treat him, he feels empathy for them. During Christmas time, many of the inmates receive packages from their families or friends. Conover writes, “I thought of the inmates I knew whom nobody was likely to remember at Christmas. There were lots of them. My heart went out to the most pathetic” (295). Despite what he knows about the inmates and the struggles he has to go through with them on a daily basis, he still feels for them.

Macrorie writes that “whatever a good newsman’s values or assumptions...may be, he will have them, and they will affect his perceptions. He

cannot escape his humanity” (390). Conover certainly cannot escape his humanity. He cannot hold back his feelings, despite his negative experiences with the inmates. At one point in the book, Conover discusses a time when he is at home reading the newspaper and comes across a story about several young men who had committed murders. He writes, “I felt I’d never heard sadder stories in my life. And as a CO, I knew something the newspapers didn’t: the next step, the kinds of lives these boys would lead from here on in. I felt sad for them, sad for me, sad for the world” (245). The readers can relate to this show of humanity and compassion. His emotions are most likely those that the reader would experience if they were witnessing first hand all of the events that Conover sees. This show of emotion on Conover’s part demands empathy from the readers for the prisoners, which in turn makes the readers active in the story. The reader, as a human being, naturally shows empathy towards another human being in a situation such as that of the prisoners’, despite knowing who they are, what they have done and even how they have treated Conover as a guard. It is impossible for Conover to suppress his emotions, and it is impossible for the readers to suppress theirs.

Not only do the readers feel empathy for the prisoners, but they feel it for Conover as well. They can understand why he feels the way he does towards the prisoners after seeing the way many of them have treated him. They feel bad for him because of everything he deals with and witnesses on a daily basis. Even though Conover entered this world by choice, it is natural that the readers would have compassion for him. They watch him deal with the extremely difficult tasks and abuses of being a guard, and witness the disheartening situations of the prisoners. The elements of participatory journalism that Conover employs here, such as his emotions and feelings, provoke the readers’ own emotions and cause them to become personally invested and active in the story.

In his article titled “The Objectivity-Subjectivity Trap,” Ken Macrorie writes that “in art, the ‘I’ and ‘It’ must be balanced, but if the scales are not swinging wildly

up and down at times, chances are slight for either originality or communication” (486). In Conover’s *Newjack*, and participatory journalism in general, the scale leans more towards the subjective side, which allows for the personal involvement of the writer in his or her work. As we see through the comparisons between passages from *Newjack* and traditional news articles, the subjectivity and the writer’s involvement in participatory journalism create an originality that cannot be achieved through objectivity. This lean towards subjectivity not only creates originality, but establishes communication as well. Communication between the writer and the readers is set up through participatory journalism because the reader becomes an active participant in the story alongside the writer. The writer calls for the reader to ask questions, to wonder, to “walk” through the story, and to show their own emotions. In this way, the reader becomes an active participant in the participatory journalism of Ted Conover’s *Newjack*.

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