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The Emergence of “Online Influencers” and the Blurring of Lines between Objectivity and Subjectivity

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether, and to what extent, hosts of current affairs programmes in South Korea employ various modes of subjectivity in their radio broadcasts. Subjectivity was examined through the following measures: (1) the frequency of subjective language use, such as first-person pronouns, opinions or evaluations, and narrative storytelling; (2) the types of interviewees invited by the hosts; (3) the nature of the issues selected and discussed; and (4) the extent to which the interviewees and issues were aligned with political affiliations, such as the ruling or opposition parties. Based on a content analysis of 129 episodes from South Korean current affairs radio programmes, the study found that both online influencers and journalists affiliated with news organisations frequently employed first-person pronouns and subjective evaluations during broadcasts. In terms of interviewee selection, approximately seven in 10 guests (68.2%) were politicians, although hosts tended to include representatives from both the ruling and opposition parties. However, with regard to issue selection, programmes hosted by online influencers demonstrated a higher degree of source subjectivity, as the issues discussed more closely reflected the host’s own political orientation.

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Objectivity has long been regarded as a fundamental principle of journalism (Schudson 2001). However, scholars have consistently highlighted that journalistic subjectivity has historically constituted an integral component of journalistic practice and culture (Chong 2019; Coward 2010, 2013; Steensen 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen 2013, 2020). For example, Chong (2019) noted that the news production process is “intrinsicly selective, partial and thereby subjective in its practice” (428). This body of research suggests that journalistic subjectivity has been pervasive across various journalistic genres, including reviews and critiques (Chong 2019; Larsen 2024), narrative journalism in print media (Schmidt 2021), and even quality journalism, such as Pulitzer Prize-winning work (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013). While journalists’ expressions of subjectivity and emotion are typically regarded as antithetical to journalism’s ideal social function—and as threats to professional standards,—other scholars have shown that integrating subjectivity through narrative and emotional elements can enhance audience comprehension, engagement, and enjoyment (Chong 2019; Machill, Köhler, and Waldhauser 2007; Oliver et al. 2012; Yaros 2011).

The advent of digital technologies and social media has further transformed journalism, giving rise to more emotionally driven forms of news content. Citizen journalism, for example—referring to the involvement of ordinary individuals in the production of news—has challenged the objective stance traditionally associated with professional journalism, as citizen journalists often lack formal training (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). Accordingly, scholars have proposed that digital technologies have “blurred the boundaries of the professional and the personal, the objective and the subjective” (Kristensen 2021, 1592). Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) further proposed that journalism has undergone an “emotional turn”.

The emergence of online influencers in legacy media has accelerated the debate about subjectivity in journalism. In the context of expanding digital platforms, increasing numbers of ordinary individuals are gaining visibility and influence, becoming what Senft (2008) terms “microcelebrities”—individuals who use social media and digital tools to cultivate personal fame. Online influencers have entered the mainstream news media not only in South Korea but also globally (Deuze 2007; Olausson 2018; Usher 2021). For example, Usher’s (2021) examination of two prominent social media influencers who also worked as columnists revealed that, within the digital media environment, “the lines are blurred between ‘social media influencer’, ‘celebrity’, ‘journalist’, and ‘political activist’” (2836). This dynamic is specifically relevant in the context of current affairs radio programmes, which differ from traditional news broadcasts in that hosts usually engage in dialogue with interviewees and incorporate their own perspectives (Ben-Porath 2007; Nee and Santana 2022). It is, therefore, important to examine the extent to which subjectivity prevails in these programmes.

Drawing on the evolving news media ecology, this study investigates how online influencers have introduced greater subjectivity into journalism practices in South Korea. Based on previous studies demonstrating the enduring presence of multiple modes of subjectivity in journalism (Chong 2019; Kristensen 2021; Pantti 2010; Schmidt 2021; Wahl-Jorgensen 2013) and building on Steensen (2017) typology of subjectivity, this study explores whether, and to what extent, subjectivity is present in current affairs programmes through two specific dimensions: *byline subjectivity*, referring to the stylistic imprint of individual journalists, and *source subjectivity*, referring to the infusion of subjectivity through interviews and personal accounts. Byline subjectivity involves the journalists’ own opinions and the use of first-person pronouns (Kristensen 2021; Larsen 2024), while source subjectivity occurs when journalists include the emotions or viewpoints of their sources (Chong 2019; Pantti 2010).

Specifically, this study examined whether online influencers have contributed to the blurring of journalistic norms in mainstream media by focusing on: (1) *byline subjectivity*—the expression of opinions and evaluations, the use of first-person pronouns, and narrative storytelling; (2) *source subjectivity*—reflected in the types of interviewees invited, the issues selected, and whether these interviewees and issues demonstrated bias in favour of a particular political party, such as the ruling or opposition party; and (3) whether source and byline subjectivities differ depending on the type of host—namely, online influencers versus journalists affiliated with news organisations.

Through a content analysis of current affairs radio programmes in South Korea, the study revealed a marked prevalence of subjectivity in journalistic practice. Both online influencers and traditional journalists exhibited significant byline subjectivity, frequently

incorporating personal opinions and evaluative language into their broadcasts. Notably, in terms of issue selection, hosts identified as online influencers were more likely than journalists to align their discussions with their own political orientations. These findings contribute to journalism research by illuminating how practices of subjectivity in news media have evolved in the digital era, particularly in response to the growing influence of online personalities within South Korea's media landscape.

Literature Review

The Norm and Principle of Objectivity in Journalism

Objectivity is fundamental to journalism (Post 2015). Norms of objectivity influence journalistic practices, including the separation of opinion from fact in news writing, the maintenance of an unbiased gatekeeping role, and the application of key principles such as impartiality and neutrality (Schudson 2001). Therefore, objectivity has been described as “a moral ideal, a set of reporting and editing practices, and an observable pattern of news writing” (Schudson 2001, 149). Many scholars have argued that the normative ideals of journalism in a democratic society—such as informing the public through neutral and unbiased information and fulfilling the role of an independent watchdog—require journalists to uphold objectivity, understood as the exclusion of personal opinion and the practice of impartiality. Based on this viewpoint, the expression of subjectivity or emotion in journalistic reporting has traditionally been viewed as incompatible with journalistic standards.

Nevertheless, defining objectivity solely in terms of specific journalistic practices, principles, or norms has proven inconsistent. For example, from the 1940s onwards, there was a growing criticism of factual objectivity. In response, many scholars proposed a scientific concept of objectivity, suggesting that journalists should model themselves on social scientists. In essence, observers' interpretations are inevitably influenced by preconceived notions of reality; therefore, as Popper (1965, as cited in Post 2015) proposed, it is important to verify whether such assumptions correspond with empirical reality. Therefore, scientists are expected to make their methods transparent, allowing others to replicate their findings under comparable conditions (Post 2015). Drawing on this theoretical foundation, an increasing number of scholars have advocated for journalistic objectivity to be reconceptualised in terms of transparency in the news-gathering process—for example, disclosing who the sources are, why they were chosen, and how the information was obtained (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021; Post 2015).

Another crucial practice related to objectivity norms is the journalistic gatekeeping role. Gatekeeping refers to the process by which journalists, editors, and news organisations select and omit potential stories based on professional news values (Landreville, White, and Allen 2015). This concept provides a framework for understanding how journalists determine which events or issues are deemed newsworthy. However, with the advent of digital technology, studies have shown that journalists' gatekeeping roles have increasingly been shared with other users on social media platforms (Bentivegna and Marchetti 2018; Enli and Simonsen 2018; Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012; Lawrence et al. 2014).

Objective norms are also closely related to other fundamental journalistic principles. For example, Westerstahl's (1983) concept of objectivity encompasses *factuality*—comprising the sub-concepts of truth and relevance—as well as impartiality—encompassing

balance, non-partisanship, and neutrality. Similarly, other scholars have equated journalistic objectivity with neutrality, impartiality, and non-partisanship (Landreville, White, and Allen 2015; Mindich 1998). Therefore, previous studies on journalists' adherence to objectivity norms has examined not only their news writing practices—such as the expression of personal opinion (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012; Lawrence et al. 2014; Singer 2005)—and their transparency regarding sources and processes (Bentivegna and Marchetti 2018; Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012), but also their commitment to impartiality and neutrality in gatekeeping and other professional expressions (Landreville, White, and Allen 2015).

Subjectivity in Journalism and How it is Related to Objectivity

Although objectivity has long been regarded as a foundational norm of journalism, it has also been the subject of extensive criticism from diverse perspectives. Numerous scholars have expressed scepticism regarding the feasibility of true objectivity in journalism, arguing that journalists' observations and representations there are inherently shaped by subjectivity (Chong 2019; Kristensen 2021; Larsen 2024; Schmidt 2021; Steensen 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen 2013, 2020). Tuchman (1972), for example, characterised objectivity as a “strategic ritual” employed by journalists to protect themselves from criticism.

Researchers have proposed that subjectivity has historically been an essential aspect of journalistic practice and culture—not only in opinion journalism, such as commentaries and reviews, but also within news reporting genres, including reportage, narrative formats, and storytelling (Chong 2019; Kristensen 2021; Pantti 2010; Schmidt 2021; Steensen 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen 2013). Empirical studies have demonstrated that various forms of subjectivity have been pervasive in journalism for decades. One such form emerged with the rise of narrative journalism and storytelling in the 1960s, particularly through the development of “new journalism”, which incorporated “storytelling elements of dialogues and scene setting in daily news articles” (Nee and Santana 2022, 3). Based on textual analyses and in-depth interviews with journalists from two major U.S. newspapers—*The Washington Post* and *The Oregonian*—Schmidt (2021) proposed that between the 1960s and 1990s, emotionality and subjectivity became increasingly evident in American print journalism as narrative formats gained prominence.

Another body of scholarship has examined the inclusion of subjective language and self-disclosure in journalistic contexts, particularly the use of the first-person pronoun “I” (Coward 2013; Kristensen 2021; Larsen 2024). Journalists often convey subjectivity by expressing personal opinions or employing first-person pronouns (Kristensen 2021; Larsen 2024). In a similar context, Coward (2010; 2013) coined the term “subjective and confessional journalism” to describe a style that fosters intimacy with the audience, especially within human-interest reporting. The rise of radio and audio storytelling formats has further popularised first-person narration (Lindgren 2016). Journalists also express subjectivity by outsourcing emotions—for example, through quoting sources' feelings and lived experiences (Pantti 2010). Wahl-Jorgensen (2013), in an analysis of 101 Pulitzer Prize-winning news articles in the U.S., found that journalists frequently employed affect—such as expressions of emotion, judgement, and appreciation—in their reporting by narrating the emotional responses of their sources.

Other scholars have focused on how journalistic subjectivity may manifest through bias. Chong (2019), through interviews with 40 book reviewers from prominent American

newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*, as well as leading blogs, found that bias—defined as “prejudices or inferences based on individual assumptions rather than the ‘reality’ of a situation” (430)—was the most salient form of subjectivity, surpassing emotion and self-interest. Bias, in this context, is closely linked to norms surrounding fairness and representation in journalism.

Drawing on prior research, Steensen (2017) proposed that journalistic subjectivity can be articulated in two primary forms: byline subjectivity and source subjectivity. *Byline subjectivity* refers to instances where journalists imbue news stories with their own perspectives, whether through the use of the first-person pronoun “I”, expression of opinions, or evaluative tone—both positive and negative. In contrast, *source subjectivity* pertains to journalists’ choices regarding news content, including the selection of sources and the framing of episodes. For example, Pantti (2010) found that television journalists in Finland and the Netherlands viewed the emotional expressions of their interviewees as a valuable component of broadcast news.

Based on previous studies concerning subjectivity in journalism and Steensen (2017) typology, this study raises the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does byline subjectivity—such as the use of first-person pronouns, expressions of opinion, and narrative storytelling—manifest in each of the current affairs radio programmes in South Korea?

RQ2: To what extent does source subjectivity, as reflected in the selection of interviewees and issues, appear in each of the current affairs radio programmes in South Korea, and to what extent is bias evident?

New Media Technology and the Emergence of Online Influencers

New media technologies, including blogs and social media, have facilitated more personalised forms of journalism. As ordinary individuals increasingly participate in news production, adherence to traditional objectivity norms has weakened (Larsen 2024; Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). As Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) observed, “citizen journalists are often amateurs who happen to be on the scene of breaking news events”, and “such accidental journalists have not been trained in objective reporting” (178).

Another notable development is the emergence of online influencers. Utilising social media platforms, these influencers—often referred to as microcelebrities—have gained prominence, with numerous studies documenting how individuals once considered “ordinary people”, have achieved celebrity status online (Senft 2008). Notably, the emergence of microcelebrities within mainstream news media has also affected journalism. As online influencers increasingly function as information providers, they have come to play a significant role in reshaping both political discourse and the journalistic landscape—not only within digital spaces but also in traditional media. The visibility of such influencers has, therefore, become widespread across legacy media (Usher 2021). Consequently, the boundaries between professional journalists and alternative information providers have become increasingly blurred (Deuze 2007). As Usher (2021) noted, “they significantly increased their visibility across media and shaped public spheres around self-performance as opinion spectacle” (2839).

Furthermore, previous studies have shown that new media technologies have altered journalistic practices. With respect to objectivity, studies have found that journalists’

adherence to this norm varies depending on certain factors—for example, whether they are professionally trained journalists (Enli and Simonsen 2018), or whether they are journalists as opposed to politicians (Lawrence et al. 2014). Differences have also been noted between mainstream and non-mainstream media outlets (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012; Singer 2005).¹ While Singer (2005) showed that journalists affiliated with “national” media outlets tend to remain gatekeepers, a content analysis of approximately 22,000 social media posts by mainstream journalists conducted by Lasorsa and colleagues (2012) revealed a tendency among these journalists to abandon the professional norm of non-partisanship, often freely expressing personal opinions. Furthermore, an analysis of 40 podcast episodes related to the COVID-19 pandemic found a notable departure from traditional journalistic objectivity towards more interpretive reporting, incorporating journalists’ own perspectives (Nee and Santana 2022).

In general, previous studies have shown, on the one hand, a clear shift in journalistic norms with increasing expressions of personal opinion and a redefinition of gatekeeping roles (Nee and Santana 2022). On the other hand, elements of the objectivity norm and traditional practices remain intact. Based on these findings, the current study examines whether differences exist between online influencers and professional journalists affiliated with news organisations in terms of byline and source subjectivity.

RQ3: Do differences exist between online influencers and professional journalists in terms of byline subjectivity and source subjectivity in current affairs radio programmes?

Methods

This study examined whether, and to what extent, byline and source subjectivity were present in current affairs radio programmes in South Korea and whether the expression of subjectivity differed according to the individual characteristics of the hosts.

Sample and Data Collection

Three current affairs radio programmes—including those produced by public broadcasting services—were selected for analysis. These were *Joo Jin-woo’s Live* on KBS, *Shin Jang-sik’s News High Kick* on MBC, and *News Show* on CBS. Episodes from two separate one-month periods were examined: October 2023 and March 2024.

The selection of these programmes was based on two key criteria: (1) the characteristics of the hosts (i.e., whether they were online influencers or professional journalists affiliated with a news organisation) and (2) the programme’s popularity and perceived credibility, as indicated by listener ratings from audience surveys. Among the hosts, Joo Jin-woo and Shin Jang-sik were well-known online influencers; however, Joo Jin-woo also had a professional background in journalism. Both individuals attracted criticism from politically unaffiliated listeners for perceived partisanship (Park 2024, January 29). As a result, their respective programmes were discontinued in November 2023 and February 2024. Following the cancellation of these programmes, KBS and MBC appointed two in-house journalists as new hosts (Table 1). These changes provided a unique opportunity to investigate possible differences in the use of subjectivity between online influencers and journalists affiliated with legacy news organisations.

Table 1. Descriptive profile of the current affairs radio programmes included in the study.

	Host	Title of Programme	Broadcasting Company	Number of Episodes	
				Oct. of 2023	Mar. of 2024
Online influencers	Joo Jin-woo	<i>Joo Jin-woo's Live</i>	KBS	17.1(22)	–
	Shin Jang-sik	<i>News High Kick</i>	MBC	17.1(22)	–
Journalists/ Anchor with affiliation	Kim Yong-joong	<i>Newsletter-K</i>	KBS	–	16.3(21)
	Kwon Soon-pyo	<i>News High Kick</i>	MBC	–	16.3(21)
	Kim Hyun-jung	<i>News Show</i>	CBS	17.8(23)	15.5(20)
	Total			100.0 (129)	

Percentages are reported as the main values, and the actual frequencies are shown in parentheses.

In addition, the *News Show on CBS* was included in the sample due to the professional credentials of the host, Kim Hyun-jung, who has been affiliated with CBS for over 20 years. According to a national survey of radio programmes, *News Show* ranked highly across four categories: trustworthiness, informational value, entertainment, and impartiality (Park 2024, February 7). Therefore, the programme was considered an appropriate comparator for the other selected programmes.

Only the first broadcast of each day's episode was analysed in this study. Across the selected five hosts, the episode formats were generally consistent, typically involving interviews conducted by the host. A total of 129 episodes were analysed over the two-month period, distributed as follows: October 2023– *News Show* ($n = 23$), *Joo Jin-woo's Live* ($n = 22$), *Shin Jang-sik's News High Kick* ($n = 22$); March 2024 – *News Show* ($n = 20$), *Kim Young-joong's Newsletter-K* ($n = 21$), and *Kwon Soon-pyo's News High Kick* ($n = 21$). The primary unit of analysis was the individual episode. However, for content-specific analyses of opinion expression and first-person narration, each sentence served as the unit of analysis.

Coding Scheme

To determine the extent to which hosts of current affairs programmes employed various modes of subjectivity, this study examined the first episode of each public radio programme according to two key dimensions: *byline subjectivity* and *source subjectivity*.

Byline Subjectivity

Based on previous studies on journalistic subjectivity, byline subjectivity was operationalised as the use of subjective language by programme hosts (Kristensen 2021; Larsen 2024; Wahl-Jorgensen 2013). It was measured using three indicators: (1) expression of opinions/evaluations, (2) use of first-person pronouns, and (3) narrative storytelling. Specifically, the expression of opinions or evaluations was defined as the presence of subjective language indicating positive or negative judgement (e.g., good/bad) (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013). The use of the first-person pronoun was measured by whether the host employed "I" in their speech (Kristensen 2021; Larsen 2024). Examples include evaluative or opinion-based statements such as "*The prosecution's investigation was flawed*" (opinion/evaluation) or "*I believe ...*" / "*In my opinion ...*" (first-person pronoun). Narrative storytelling was identified when an episode included story-like structures that resembled fiction,

often through the introduction of a central character or a personalised account of a criminal case. These narratives typically featured anecdotal leads, scene-setting, or a personalised style that diverged from the conventional inverted-pyramid format of hard news reporting (Chong 2019; Schmidt 2021; Van Krieken and Sanders 2021). For both opinion/evaluation and first-person usage, coding followed a four-category scheme: (1) host-only, (2) interviewee-only, (3) both host-interviewee, and (4) neither. Coders assigned each episode to one of these four categories during analysis. In terms of narrative storytelling, episodes were coded “1” if such storytelling elements were present and “0” if they were absent.

Source Subjectivity

Based on previous studies on journalistic subjectivity in reporting (Chong 2019; Kristensen 2021; Larsen 2024; Wahl-Jorgensen 2013), this study operationalised source subjectivity as the extent to which the selection of interviewees and discussion topics reflected journalists’ individual subjectivity. In other words, since the present study focused on radio programmes covering current social issues, source subjectivity was assessed through the interviewees invited and the issue addressed (Ben-Porath 2007). In addition, acknowledging that journalists’ selection of news items may reflect personal biases, this study investigated whether such inclinations influenced their selections—specifically by examining the political leanings of both the interviewees and the issues discussed.

Interviewees. Based on previous research (Ben-Porath 2007; Lee, Kim, and Kim 2023), interviewees were categorised into seven groups: (1) journalists from the same news organisation; (2) journalists from other news organisations; (3) experts (e.g., lawyers, professors, political commentators); (4) politicians or election campaigners; (5) online influencers; (6) interest groups; (7) and others (e.g., celebrities and members of the public). If an episode featured more than one interviewee, up to three were analysed. Among the 129 episodes included in this study, 122 featured two interviewees, while seven included three.

Political Propensity of Interviewees. Based on previous studies (Ben-Porath 2007; Lee, Jung, and Lee 2020; Singer 2005), the political propensity of each interviewee was determined by assessing their political attitudes. Interviewees were coded into four categories: (1) pro-ruling party (favourable to the ruling party); (2) pro-opposition party (favourable to the opposition party); (3) neutral; and (4) other or not applicable.² For political figures, the coding was based on party affiliation. For example, Representative Joon-Young Bae of the People’s Power Party—a conservative ruling party—was coded as conservative, whereas Representative Ik-Pyo Hong of the Democratic Party—a liberal opposition party—was coded as liberal. In the case of experts, university professors were typically coded as politically neutral, and the political orientation of several lawyers was determined using publicly available information about their political views or affiliations. For instance, one lawyer was identified as politically aligned based on their public endorsement of a specific candidate during the 2022 presidential election.

Targets of Political Issues. The political targets discussed in each issue were classified into five categories: (1) the ruling party and the president; (2) the opposition party; (3) both parties; (4) the third party; and (5) others.

Political Propensity of Selected Issues. The political propensity of each issue was assessed based on its characteristics and then categorised into four groups: (1) pro-ruling party (favourable to the ruling party); (2) pro-opposition party (favourable to the opposition party); (3) neutral; and (4) other or not applicable. For example, the topic “Candidate Cho Kuk is making a splash in the 22nd National Assembly election campaign” was coded as favourable to the opposition party, as Cho Kuk was an opposition candidate. Conversely, the issue “The opposition party’s lawmaker, Lee Jae-Myung’s abusive remarks against his sister-in-law” was coded as favourable to the ruling party.

Coder Training and Reliability

Three graduate students majoring in journalism, along with the researcher, collectively reviewed and interpreted the codebook to ensure a consistent understanding of each variable. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until full consensus was achieved. The coders attended four training sessions to improve coding reliability. To assess intercoder reliability, 18 episodes (approximately 14% of the samples) were randomly selected for coding. Reliability coefficients ranged from 0.70 to 1.³

Results

Overview

This study analysed 129 episodes from three radio programmes hosted by five different presenters. As shown in Table 1, 33.3% of the episodes were drawn from *News Show* ($n = 43$), 33.4% from *News High Kick* ($n = 43$), 17.1% from *Joo Jin-woo’s Live* ($n = 22$), and 16.3% from *Kim Yong-joong’s Newsletter-K* ($n = 21$). The episodes primarily addressed issues involving South Korean politicians and their families (48.8%, $n = 63$) and domestic politics (42.6%, $n = 55$). Other topics included social issues (3.9%, $n = 5$), the economy (2.3%, $n = 2$), and others (3.1%, $n = 4$).

Byline Subjectivity in the Current Affairs Episodes

The first research question (RQ1) examined the byline subjectivity of hosts by analysing three aspects: (1) expressions of opinions/evaluations, (2) use of first-person pronouns, and (3) use of narrative storytelling.

Among these, expressions of opinions or evaluations were most frequently observed (70.5%), followed by the use of first-person pronouns (41.1%). Narrative storytelling was the least employed technique (7.8%). Next, this study examined whether levels of byline subjectivity—specifically, the use of first-person pronouns, opinions/evaluations, and narrative storytelling—varied depending on the host. As indicated in Table 2, byline subjectivity significantly differed by host: first-person pronoun use, $\chi^2(4) = 14.43$, $p < .01$; expression of opinions/evaluations, $\chi^2(4) = 28.17$, $p < .001$; narrative storytelling, $\chi^2(4) = 32.50$, $p < .001$.

Table 2. The byline subjectivity of episodes in the programmes.

	First-person pronouns	Opinions/Evaluations	Narrative storytelling
<i>Kim Hyun-jung</i>	55.8 (24)	65.1(28)	0
<i>Joo Jin-woo</i>	22.7 (5)	81.8(18)	36.4(8)
<i>Shin Jang-Ssik</i>	45.5 (10)	90.9(20)	0
<i>Kim Yong-joong</i>	14.3 (3)	90.5(19)	0
<i>Kwon Soon-pyo</i>	52.4 (11)	28.6(6)	9.5(2)
<i>Totals</i>	41.1 (53/129)	70.5(91)	7.8(10)
	$\chi^2(4) = 14.43, p < .01$	$\chi^2(4) = 28.17, p < .001$	$\chi^2(4) = 32.50, p < .001$

Percentages are reported as the main values, and the actual frequencies are shown in parentheses.

Source Subjectivity in the Current Affairs Episodes

The second research question (RQ2) examined source subjectivity by focusing on the hosts' selection of interviewees and issues. Table 3 reveals that the 129 episodes featured a total of 235 interviewees. Politicians were the most frequently invited (68.2%, $n = 160$), followed by experts (12.8%, $n = 30$). In contrast, journalists from the same news organisation made up only 1.7% ($n = 4$), while those from other news organisations accounted for 8.9% ($n = 21$). Based on Ben-Porath's (2007) definition, more than 80% of the interviewees were not politically neutral, as they were affiliated with either the ruling or opposition party.

Given previous studies linking source subjectivity to journalistic bias and partiality, this study further examined the political propensity of both the first interviewee and the issue discussed in each episode. As shown in Table 4, 47.3% of the first interviewees were favourable to the ruling party, 27.1% to the opposition party, and 24.0% were politically neutral. Among the second interviewees, 44.9% were favourable to the ruling party and 25.8% to the opposition party. When considering the political propensity of both the first and second interviewees, 33.2% ($n = 72$) leaned towards the opposition, whereas 40.8% ($n = 89$) leaned towards the ruling party.

Next, the study focused on issue selection as a reflection of source subjectivity. It examined the target of each political issue in each episode and whether the issue aligned more with the ruling or opposition party. 90.7% of the episodes dealt with political issues. Among these, 45.0% focused on ruling party-related issues, 34.1% on issues involving both major parties, and 8.5% on opposition-related issues. A further 3.1% addressed third-party issues (Table 5).

To determine potential bias in issue selection, the political propensity of each issue was evaluated. As shown in Table 6, only 16.3% of issues were favourable to the ruling party,

Table 3. Types of interviewees, depending on the episode.

	Kim Hyun-jung	Joo Jin-woo	Shin Jang-sik	Kim Yong-joong	Kwon Soon-pyo	Totals
Journalists	2.7(2)	0.0(0)	2.7(1)	2.0(1)	0.0(0)	1.7 (4)
Journalists from outside	1.4(1)	2.4(1)	13.5(5)	0.0(0)	38.2(13)	8.9 (21)
Experts	17.6(13)	19.5(8)	13.5(5)	0.0(0)	14.7(5)	12.8 (30)
Politicians	75.7(56)	70.7(29)	54.1(20)	90.0(44)	32.4(11)	68.2(160)
Online influencer	0.0(0)	0.0(0)	13.5(5)	0.0(0)	14.7(5)	4.3 (10)
Interest group	1.4(1)	4.9(2)	0.0(0)	8.2(4)	0.0(0)	3.0 (7)
Others	1.4(1)	2.4(1)	2.7(1)	0.0(0)	0.0(0)	1.3 (3)
<i>Totals</i>	100.0(74)	100.0(41)	100.0(37)	100.0(49)	100.0(34)	100.0(235)

Percentages are reported as the main values, and the actual frequencies are shown in parentheses.

Table 4. Political propensity of the first interviewees during the episodes.

Favourable to which party	Kim Hyun-jung	Joo Jin-woo	Shin Jang-sik	Kim Yong-joong	Kwon Soon-pyo	Totals
Opposition	16.3(7)	13.6(3)	59.1(13)	4.8(1)	52.4(11)	27.1(35)
Ruling	48.8(21)	54.5(12)	22.7(5)	95.2(20)	14.3(3)	47.3(61)
Neutral	32.6(14)	31.8(7)	13.6(3)	0.0(0)	33.3(7)	24.0(31)
Others	2.3(1)	0.0(0)	4.5(1)	0.0(0)	0.0(0)	1.6(2)
Totals	100.0(43)	100.0(22)	100.0(22)	100.0(21)	100.0(21)	100.1(129)
$\chi^2(12) = 49.63, p < .001$						

Percentages are reported as the main values, and the actual frequencies are shown in parentheses.

whereas a majority (51.9%) were favourable to the opposition party. This finding indicates a lack of political neutrality in the issues selected for discussion on current affairs programmes.

The final research question (RQ3) examined whether differences existed between online influencers and professional journalists (affiliated with news organisations) in terms of byline and source subjectivity. Regarding source subjectivity, the study assessed whether the types of interviewees and their political propensities differed depending on the host. As Table 3 shows, *Kim Yong-joong's Newsletter-K* invited politicians most frequently (90.0%), whereas *Kwon Soon-pyo's News High Kick* did so the least (32.4%). Chi-square tests confirmed that the political propensity of interviewees varied significantly by host: for the first interviewees, $\chi^2(12) = 49.63, p < .001$; for second interviewees, $\chi^2(8) = 53.84, p < .001$. In addition, with the exception of *Shin Jang-sik's* and *Kwon Soon-pyo's News High Kick*, the first interviewees were more frequently aligned with the ruling party (Table 4). Therefore, the hosts' journalistic backgrounds did not appear to influence political bias in interviewee selection: online influencers such as Shin Jang-sik and Joo Jin-woo were not more biased in this regard than professional journalists.

However, different patterns emerged in issue selection. Chi-square analysis (Tables 5 and 6) showed a significant relationship between host type and the political propensity of selected issues: issue selection, $\chi^2(16) = 52.28, p < .001$; political propensity of selected issues, $\chi^2(12) = 48.85, p < .001$. Specifically, *Kim Yong-joong's Newsletter-K* most frequently covered issues involving both parties (61.9%), whereas *Shin Jang-sik's News High Kick* most often covered issues related to the ruling party (72.7%). Furthermore, as Table 5 shows, following the change in host from Shin Jang-sik (an online influencer) to Kwon Soon-pyo (a journalist affiliated with the MBC), the proportion of ruling party-related issues dropped from 72.7% to 23.8%, while coverage of both-party issues increased from 13.6% to 42.9%.

Notably, analysis of the political propensity of the issues further revealed that a majority of episodes discussed topics favourable to the opposition party (51.9%), compared to only

Table 5. Target political issues of episodes, depending on programmes.

Political Party	Kim Hyun-jung	Joo Jin -woo	Shin Jang-sik	Kim Yong-joong	Kwon Soon-pyo	Totals
Opposition	14.0(6)	0.0(0)	4.5(1)	9.5(2)	9.5(2)	8.5(11)
Ruling	55.8(24)	36.4(8)	72.7(16)	23.8(5)	23.8(5)	45.0(58)
Both	25.6(11)	36.4(8)	13.6(3)	61.9(13)	42.9(9)	34.1(44)
The third	0.0(0)	0.0(0)	0.0(0)	0.0(0)	19.0(4)	3.1(4)
Others/N.A.	4.7(2)	27.3(6)	9.1(2)	4.8(1)	4.8(1)	9.3(12)
Totals	100.0(43)	100.0(22)	100.0(22)	100.0(21)	100.0(21)	100.1(129)
$\chi^2(16) = 52.28, p < .001$						

Percentages are reported as the main values, and the actual frequencies are shown in parentheses.

Table 6. Political propensity of the targets of the political issues of episodes.

Favourable to which party	Kim Hyun-jung	Joo Jin-woo	Shin Jang-sik	Kim Yong-joong	Kwon Soon-pyo	Totals
Opposition	62.8(27)	31.8(7)	81.8(18)	14.3(3)	57.1(12)	51.9(67)
Ruling	18.6(8)	0.0(0)	4.5(1)	33.3(7)	23.8(5)	16.3(21)
Neutral	14.0(6)	40.9(9)	9.1(2)	47.6(10)	14.3(3)	23.3(30)
Others	4.7(2)	27.3(6)	4.5(1)	4.8(1)	4.8(1)	8.5(11)
Totals	100.0(43)	100.0(22)	100.0(22)	100.0(21)	100.0(21)	100.1(129)

$\chi^2(12) = 48.85, p < .001$

Percentages are reported as the main values, and the actual frequencies are shown in parentheses.

16.3% favourable to the ruling party. Online influencers were more likely than professional journalists to feature issues supportive of the opposition: *Shin Jang-sik's News High Kick* included opposition-favourable issues in 81.8% of episodes. After his departure, this figure fell to 57.1%, and issues favourable to the ruling party increased from 4.5% to 23.8%. In addition, Joo Jin-Woo's episodes never indicated issues favourable to the ruling party, whereas 31.8% of issues were favourable to the opposition. Following the transition to Kim Yong-joong, the issues favourable to the opposition dropped to 14.3%, and those favourable to the ruling party increased to 33.3%.

Regarding byline subjectivity, as Table 2 shows, although the findings showed significant differences in the use of the first-person pronoun and opinions/evaluations depending on the hosts, online influencers did not demonstrate greater subjectivity than professional journalists in these respects.

In short, the findings of this study provide mixed results regarding the influence of hosts' journalistic backgrounds on levels of subjectivity (RQ3). While source subjectivity—particularly in relation to the political propensity of selected issues—varied significantly depending on whether hosts were online influencers or professional journalists affiliated with news organisations, byline subjectivity did not differ across host types.⁴

Conclusion

As subjectivity in journalism has become increasingly visible, scholars have proposed that advancements in digital media technology have accelerated this trend. For example, previous studies have shown that emerging forms of civic or “citizen journalism” have blurred the traditional boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity, as “citizen journalists” often possess educational and professional backgrounds that differ from those of conventional journalists (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). In addition, the introduction of online influencers or microcelebrities—individuals who have gained prominence on social media—into legacy media as columnists or news hosts may have further intensified this phenomenon. These online influencers and mainstream journalists differ notably in their incorporation of subjectivity into journalistic output and their adherence to established journalistic norms.

Drawing on previous studies on subjectivity in journalism (Kristensen 2021; Wahl-Jorgensen 2013) and Steensen (2017) framework, which argues that *byline subjectivity* and *source subjectivity* have become integral to journalistic practice, the current study examined *byline subjectivity* – i.e., first-person narration, opinions/evaluations, and narrative storytelling (RQ1) and *source subjectivity* – i.e., types of interviewees and issues that

were included in the current-affairs programme (RQ2). Finally, the current study examined whether hosts' subjectivities differed between online influencers and professional journalists who are affiliated with news organisations (RQ3). For example, like Usher's (2021) study that found political activists in the UK also worked as columnists for newspapers in the general election in the UK, this study examined whether politically leaning online influencers impacted journalistic subjectivity by hosting current-affairs programmes broadcast by public service stations in South Korea during the 22nd general election in 2024.

A comparative analysis of current radio programmes revealed several important findings. First of all, regarding byline subjectivity, it was found that this form of subjectivity was frequently exhibited not only by online influencers but also by professional journalists hosting current affairs programmes (RQ1)—notably through the use of opinions/evaluations and first-person pronouns. Specifically, 70.5% of episodes included the hosts' opinions/evaluations ($n = 91$), and 41.1% featured the use of first-person pronouns ($n = 53$). However, narrative storytelling was rarely employed, with only 10 out of 129 episodes including such content (7.8%).

Second, regarding source subjectivity in terms of interviewee types (RQ2), the findings indicated that approximately 70% of all interviewees were politicians. Of the 235 interviewees, 160 (68.2%) were politicians who aligned with political parties. Furthermore, issue selection was shown to be politically skewed: over half of the issues (51.9%, $n = 67$) were favourable to the opposition party, whereas only 16.3% ($n = 21$) were favourable to the ruling party. In terms of episode content, 90.7% dealt with political issues. This is notable given that the programme titles included terms such as "news" or "newsletter", yet the content was heavily concentrated on political discourse.

Interestingly, the study found that the journalistic practices of online influencers differed from those of professional journalists, particularly in terms of source subjectivity in issue selection (RQ3). Specifically, journalists affiliated with South Korean public broadcasting companies were more likely to include a balanced selection of issues compared to online influencers, who tended to exhibit a clearer political leaning. For example, the proportion of pro-opposition (liberal) issues discussed in *News High Kick* dropped from 81.8% to 57.1% when the host changed from Shin Sang-sik (an online influencer) to Kwon Soon-pyo, a journalist affiliated with MBC. Similarly, Kim Yong-joong, another journalist affiliated with KBS, most frequently dealt with neutral issues (47.6%), followed by pro-ruling (conservative) issues (33.3%), and pro-opposition issues (14.3%). By comparison, Joo Jin-Woo—an online influencer known for his liberal stance—discussed only pro-opposition issues (31.8%) and did not address any pro-ruling issues.

These findings yield several important implications. First, the overall results showed that various forms of subjectivity are prevalent across current affairs programmes in South Korea, regardless of whether the hosts are online influencers or professional journalists—especially with regard to byline subjectivity (e.g., expressions of opinions/evaluations and use of first-person pronouns). This finding aligns with previous studies suggesting that journalists often express personal views on social media platforms such as blogs and Twitter, thereby challenging traditional objectivity norms (Kristensen 2021; Larsen 2024; Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012; Lawrence et al. 2014; Singer 2005). Moreover, these findings support existing literature on journalistic subjectivity (Kristensen 2021; Larsen 2024). For example, Larsen's (2024) longitudinal analysis music criticism in

four Norwegian newspapers (1981, 2001, and 2022) revealed a growing presence of emotion and the first-person expression, “challenging the dichotomy between emotions and objectivity that exists in both journalism studies and the history of music criticism” (1).

Second, findings concerning source subjectivity—especially regarding the types of interviewees and the nature of selected issues—present a more nuanced picture. In terms of interviewee selection, hosts generally invited individuals favourable to both ruling and opposition parties. This trend may reflect the influence of regulatory oversight in South Korea. The Korea Communications Standards Commission (KCSC), which monitors news and current affairs content, focuses heavily on interviewee balance in its enforcement of journalistic standards. Given the potential for sanctions, producers and hosts may actively seek to present a balanced selection of interviewees, especially in terms of political leanings. In fact, most legal penalties imposed by the KCSC pertain to political bias in interviewee selection that is deemed to violate journalistic objectivity norms.

However, in terms of issue selection, this study found that radio hosts addressed more issues favourable to the liberal opposition party than to the ruling conservative party. Furthermore, a significant difference emerged in the extent to which issues were favourable to the opposition, depending on the type of host. In other words, online influencers—who are known for their political leanings—were more likely than in-house journalists affiliated with news organisations to select and discuss issues aligned with their partisanship. Therefore, while the subjectivity of online influencers in issue selection was clearly associated with their own partisanship, that of in-house journalists appeared not to be.

These findings are consistent with previous research (Enli and Simonsen 2018; Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012; Lawrence et al. 2014), which suggests that professional journalists tend to adhere more closely to normative standards such as objectivity and impartiality. Studies examining the influence of new media technologies on journalistic practice have demonstrated that adherence to objectivity norms varies depending on journalists’ professional training and affiliation. Moreover, source subjectivity is intrinsically linked to journalistic gatekeeping. As Van der Meer et al. (2017) note, “Besides the selection of news items, the decision as to which sources should be selected in stories is a crucial aspect of gatekeeping practices’ (1108). Similarly, Janowitz (1975) observed that “the gatekeeper’s central concern is with the inherent search for objectivity” (626).

Finally, the findings support the proposition that subjectivity in journalism is not only genre-dependent—more prominent in critiques and podcasts—but also effective in fostering audience engagement (Chong 2019; Machill, Köhler, and Waldhauser 2007; Oliver et al. 2012; Yaros 2011). For example, subjectivity is particularly salient in narrative journalism, critiques, commentaries, and podcasts (Nee and Santana 2022), where it has been shown to enhance engagement. The current affairs programmes analysed in this study also fall into the category of podcasts, where the strategic use of subjectivity may have been employed to attract and retain audience interest, especially during South Korea’s 2024 general election.

This study has several limitations. First, only the first episode of the programme was analysed. It is possible that subsequent episodes may have exhibited different patterns. However, the first episodes were selected on the assumption that they would likely hold greater significance, similar to lead stories in traditional news broadcasts. In addition, these episodes shared a common format, including interactive conversations between

interviewees and hosts. Nevertheless, future studies should consider analysing all episodes for a more comprehensive understanding.

Second, this study determined host bias based on two forms of source subjectivity—types of interviewees and issues—while byline subjectivity was limited to examining the use of first-person pronouns, expressions of opinion/evaluation, and narrative storytelling. As a result, it was not possible to determine whether byline subjectivity itself was politically biased in favour of any party.

Third, the findings must be interpreted cautiously, as only two online influencers were included in the analysis. To the best of the author's knowledge, no popular conservative online influencers were employed on public radio during the sampling period. Thus, both online influencers in the study were politically liberal. It is important to note that this study did not aim to compare subjectivity across political leanings among online influencers, and, to date, no known study has specifically addressed this gap. Future studies including both politically liberal and conservative online influencers would allow for more precise conclusions about the role of political motivation in journalistic subjectivity.

In this study, Joo Jin-woo and Shin Jan-sik were categorised as online influencers because they had gained popularity through appearances on famous podcasts and as YouTube content creators. Notably, while Joo Jin-woo had prior experience as a journalist for a weekly current affairs magazine, Shin Jang-sik had no such background. Although this study defined professional journalists as those affiliated with news organisations, it may be more accurate to consider Joo Jin-woo both a professional journalist and an online influencer.

Finally, during the sampling period, both online influencers in this study were removed from their hosting roles following sanctions by the KCSC and were replaced by in-house journalists. These changes enabled a direct comparison of subjectivity practices between the two host types. However, the differences observed may not necessarily reflect differing commitments to journalistic objectivity; rather, they could stem from the in-house journalists' obligations as employees of news organisations. In other words, the prospect of legal sanctions may prompt in-house journalists to exercise greater caution when assuming hosting roles. Although this study revealed differences in subjective bias between online influencers and in-house journalists, it is worth noting that the two public broadcasters involved—KBS and MBC—also differed significantly. Despite its public broadcaster status, MBC has exhibited a markedly progressive political stance over the past decade (Jeon and Kang 2024), which may explain its more critical coverage of the current conservative administration.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to journalism research by focusing on the impact of online influencers. The findings support the view that the dichotomy of objectivity and subjectivity in journalism has become increasingly blurred, affecting not only emerging online influencers but also professional journalists who host current affairs radio programmes.

Notes

1. In Lasorsa et al's study (2013), journalists affiliated with national newspapers, major television broadcasters' news divisions, and cable news channels were grouped as "elite", in contrast to those working for other news outlets. Similarly, in Singer's study (2005), 10 national news

organisations—including ABC News and *The New York Times*—were categorised as “National”, while 10 regional media outlets—including the *American-Statesman* and the *Observer-Reporter*—were classified as “local/regional”.

2. Although South Korea does not operate under a strict two-party system, the Conservative (ruling) party and the Liberal (opposition) party remain the dominant political forces. For example, in the 22nd National Assembly election, the Liberal Party secured 175 out of 300 seats, while the Conservative Party obtained 108. Within South Korea’s media landscape, traditional newspapers have historically leaned conservative, prompting progressive groups to seek alternative media platforms, particularly in response to the evolving digital environment. Podcasts emerged as a significant alternative medium in the early 2010s, gaining popularity among progressive audiences. One such figure, Kim Eo-jun, rose to prominence as a progressive commentator and later transitioned into public broadcasting following the election of a progressive government (Lee, Jung, and Lee 2020). This trend reflected a broader pattern wherein public broadcasters began recruiting non-journalists and online influencers as programme hosts. A notable example is Shin Jang-sik, a progressive and liberal political commentator who served as the host of *News High Kick* on Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC)—a major public broadcaster—until February 2024. Despite lacking formal journalistic training or prior affiliation with MBC, Shin was appointed due to his online popularity as a liberal activist and critic on platforms such as podcasts and YouTube. His subsequent election as a proportional representative for the Progressive Party in the most recent election further highlights the intersection of alternative media influence and political engagement in South Korea.
3. The types of the first interviewee .952; the political propensity of the first interviewee .816; the type of the second interviewee .947; the political propensity of the second interviewee 1.0; the target of political issues .856; the political propensity of political issue selected .785; the expression of opinion .784; the first-person pronoun .702; narrative storytelling 1.0.
4. Given that this study explored variations in byline and source subjectivity across programmes in March and October, additional analyses were conducted to determine whether any changes occurred in the case of Kim Hyun-jung. The results indicated no statistically significant differences between the two periods in any of the measured variables: the use of first-person pronouns, $\chi^2(1) = 1.279$, $p = 0.258$; opinions and evaluations, $\chi^2(1) = 1.685$, $p = 0.193$; the political propensity of the first interviewees, $\chi^2(3) = 4.718$, $p = 0.194$; and the political propensity of the issues discussed, $\chi^2(3) = 3.902$, $p = 0.272$.

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