

INSIDESOURCES

Journalists Would Do Well to Go Back to Basics



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I became an avid reader of newspapers in the fifth grade. I picked up this habit of industry from my grandmother who lived with us. She came to the United States in the early 1900s. She said she learned how to read and write English from reading a newspaper every day. She never mentioned formal schooling. This practice served her well.

I consider journalism a noble profession. I studied it formally in the early 1980s. While I did not become a journalist by trade, I keep a close watch on how news is gathered, written, disseminated and digested. We had excellent instructors in journalism school. They worked as AP reporters, city paper news writers, feature writers, sports writers, editors, and some as PR and copy writers.

There are several adages you learn in journalism training: Tell it first! The media does not tell you how to think, but what to think about. If it bleeds, it leads. Dog bites man is not news, but man bites dog is newsworthy. “The job of the newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

And the media has grown in public policy importance to be dubbed “The Fourth Estate.”

A grounding principle we learned for the role of journalists is reporters should be objective purveyors of the news. Unfortunately, that principle has been lost today; hence journalists’ recent spiral to the bottom of respectability by the public. There are several reasons for this loss of confidence in our journalists.

One is not of their making. With the advent of cable, the internet, and the 24/7 need for “news,” the business model for newspapers has changed. Owners and editors need to think about new ways to make money and to be more sensitive to what the readers want

to pay for. With the latter challenge, journalists are pressured to move away from “just the facts” to share space, and at times writing style, with commentary, opinion and entertainment. It is no longer your grandmother’s newspaper.

A second reason is the wearing thin of the long-standing explanation that while many journalists are supporters of the Democratic Party, they can keep at bay any bias in their news reporting. Truth be told for many writers today, the bifurcation does not work.

Another reason for the demise of the classic practice of journalism is the rise of what is known as public journalism. Proponents of this movement argue that journalists need to take on an advocacy style by not only reporting the news but pushing for policies for the common good, regardless of whether people actually understand what is good for them. The fear was the slippery slope of journalists advocating for public goods, such as clean public parks or rails to trails, to boosting their policy preferences, rather than reporting the news.

Enter Donald Trump! The 2016 election results not only exposed the dubious posture of journalists as a-political partisan but morphed the Fourth Estate to *primus inter paribus* (first among equals) in our politics and policymaking.

We the people expected a modicum of reflection on the state of journalism and a *mea culpa* that many journalists had gone well beyond their scope of practice during and after this election. Instead, we get a doubling down with full-page ads reminding us that our national newspapers are the bastions of truth — “Trust us.”

Foundations are giving money to organizations to find a way to tell us of the virtue of a free press — as they see it. We hear loud claims that those “other guys” are to blame for fake news. We are told that the elected officials fighting back against a barrage of negativity are threats to the press and our democracy. We continue to get a steady reminder that the press needs to be free and independent; yet mums the word on being responsible.

Again, reflecting back to my childhood, our parents asked that we consider three questions before “spreading the news”: (1) Is it true? (2) Is it necessary? (3) Is it kind?

Invariably we failed on the latter question. Holding journalists to the third question may be too much to ask, but the first two questions of telling what is true and telling what is necessary, we learned in journalism 101.

For journalists to recapture the confidence of their readers, a back-to-basics strategy will be more effective than PR and ad campaigns trying to convince the reading public that we are way off script. The benefit of being a free press is earned by being a responsible press.



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