
THE
ELEMENTS
OF
JOURNALISM

From: the elements
of journalism.

Kovach, B / Rosenstiel, T

Three Rivers Press,

2007

INTRODUCTION

When anthropologists began comparing notes on the world's few remaining primitive cultures, they discovered something unexpected. From the most isolated tribal societies in Africa to the most distant islands in the Pacific, people shared essentially the same definition of what is news. They shared the same kind of gossip. They even looked for the same qualities in the messengers they picked to gather and deliver their news. They wanted people who could run swiftly over the next hill, accurately gather information, and engagingly retell it. Historians have pieced together that the same basic news values have held constant through time. "Humans have exchanged a similar mix of news . . . throughout history and across cultures," historian Mitchell Stephens has written.¹

How do we explain the mystery of this consistency? The answer, historians and sociologists have concluded, is that news satisfies a basic human impulse. People have an intrinsic need—an instinct—to know what is occurring beyond their direct experience.² Being aware of events we cannot see for ourselves engenders a sense of security, control, and confidence. One writer has called it "a hunger for awareness."³

One of the first things people do when meeting a friend or acquaintance is to share information. "Have you heard about . . . ?" We want to know if they've heard what we have, and if they heard it the same way. There is a thrill in a shared sense of discovery. We form relationships, choose friends, and make character judgments based partly on whether someone reacts to information the same way as we do.

When the flow of news is obstructed, "a darkness falls" and anxiety grows.⁴ The world, in effect, becomes too quiet. We feel alone. John McCain, the U.S. senator from Arizona, writes that in his five and a half years as a prisoner of war in Hanoi, what he missed most was not comfort, food, freedom, or even his family and friends. "The thing I missed most was information—free uncensored, undistorted, abundant information."⁵

Call it the Awareness Instinct.

We need news to live our lives, protect ourselves, bond with each other, identify friends and enemies. Journalism is simply the system societies generate to supply this news. That is why we care about the character of the news and journalism we get: they influence the quality of our lives, our thoughts, and our culture. Writer Thomas Cahill, the author of several popular books on the history of religion, has put it this way: you can tell "the worldview of a people . . . the invisible fears and desires . . . in a culture's stories."⁶

At a moment of revolution in communications, what do the stories we tell say about our worldview—our fears, desires, and values?

This book began on a rainy Saturday in June 1997, when twenty-five journalists gathered at the Harvard Faculty Club. Around the long table sat editors of several of the nation's top newspapers, as well as some of the most influential names in television and radio, several of the top journalism educators, and some of the country's most prominent authors. They were there because they thought something was seriously wrong with their profession. They barely recognized what they considered journalism in much of the work of their colleagues. Instead of serving a larger public interest, they feared, their profession was damaging it.

The public, in turn, increasingly distrusted journalists, even hated them. And it would only get worse. By 1999, just 21 percent of Americans would think the press cared about people, down from 41 percent in 1987.⁷ Only 58 percent would respect the press's watchdog role, a drop from 67 percent in 1985. Less than half, just 45 percent, would think the press protected democracy. That percentage had been nearly ten points higher in 1985.⁸ By 2005 some of these numbers saw

slight improvements—28 percent of Americans believed the press cared about people.⁹

What was different that day in Cambridge was that many of the journalists in the room—and around the country—were beginning to agree with the public. "In the newsroom we no longer talk about journalism," said Maxwell King, then editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "We are consumed with business pressure and the bottom line," agreed another editor. News was becoming entertainment and entertainment news. Journalists' bonuses were increasingly tied to the company's profit margins, not to the quality of their work. Finally, the late Columbia University professor James Carey offered what many recalled as a summation: "The problem is that you see journalism disappearing inside the larger world of communications. What you yearn to do is recover journalism from that larger world."

Implied in that was something more important. If journalism—the system by which we get our news—was being subsumed, what would replace it? Advertising? Entertainment? E-commerce? Propaganda? Online news aggregators? Some new hybrid of all these? And what would the consequence be?

The answers matter to the public and newspeople alike. Journalism provides something unique to a culture: independent, reliable, accurate, and comprehensive information that citizens require to be free. A journalism that is asked to provide something other than that subverts democratic culture. This is what happens when governments control the news, as in Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. We're seeing it again in places like Singapore, where news is controlled to encourage capitalism but discourage participation in public life. Something akin to this may be taking root in the United States in a more purely commercial form, as when news outlets owned by larger corporations are used to promote their conglomerate parent's products, to engage in subtle lobbying or corporate rivalry, or are intermingled with advertising to boost profits. The issue isn't just the loss of journalism. At stake is whether, as citizens, we have access to the independent information that makes it possible for us to take part in governing ourselves.

In the years since 1997, when the group met in Cambridge, those pressures have only increased. During the administration of George W.

Bush, the president and other top aides openly dismissed the press as nothing more than another interest group in society with its own private agenda.¹⁰ While that pose may have been partly political, and the president in early 2005 would back away from that position with an endorsement of the independence of the press, these politicians were articulating something the public increasingly felt already.¹¹

The administration also went further than either the Clinton or the previous Bush administration in creating government-produced media. It distributed deceptive video news releases to local TV stations. It paid a company to place one-sided stories, written by the American military, in Iraqi media. It also paid columnists in the United States to produce material that supported policies on education and marriage.¹² And it tried to criminalize whistleblowing with investigations into press revelations about extra-legal domestic wiretapping and secret prisons overseas.¹³

Technology did not only help the government's efforts to create and distribute material. When blogs achieved mainstream notoriety in 2004, people increasingly began to publish on their own websites. This citizen journalism movement may have helped wash away any particular fear of the idea that government was creating its own official journalism.

In 1997, the group of journalists who met in Cambridge on the cusp of these changes decided on a plan: engage journalists and the public in a careful examination of what journalism was supposed to be. We set out to answer two questions. If newspeople thought journalism was somehow different from other forms of communication, how was it different? If they thought journalism needed to change but that some core principles needed to endure, what were those principles?

Over the next two years, the group, now calling itself the Committee of Concerned Journalists, organized the most sustained, systematic, and comprehensive examination ever conducted by journalists of news gathering and its responsibilities. We held twenty-one public forums attended by 3,000 people and involving testimony from more than three hundred journalists. We partnered with a team of university researchers who conducted more than a hundred 3½-hour interviews with journalists about their values. We produced two surveys of journalists about their principles. We held a summit of First Amendment and journalism scholars. With the Project for Excellence in Journalism

we produced nearly a dozen content studies of news reporting. We studied the history of those journalists who came before us and have conducted training in newsrooms nationwide.

This book is the fruit of that examination. It is not an argument. It is, rather, a description of the theory and culture of journalism that emerged from three years of listening to citizens and journalists, from our empirical studies, and from our reading of the history of the profession as it evolved in the United States.

We learned, among other things, that society expects journalists to apply this theory, and citizens to understand it, though it is seldom studied or clearly articulated. This lack of clarity, for both citizens and newspeople, has weakened journalism and is now weakening democratic society. Unless we can grasp and reclaim the theory of a free press, journalists risk allowing their profession to disappear. In that sense, the crisis of our culture, and our journalism, is a crisis of conviction.

There are, we have distilled from our search, some clear principles that journalists agree on—and that citizens have a right to expect. They are principles that have ebbed and flowed over time, but they have always in some manner been evident. They have survived because journalists have been able to adapt the principles to the demands of new platforms and ways of doing their basic work of informing the people. But they have adapted their work—not their principles—just as the public has adapted to the way they receive their news. These are the principles that have helped both journalists and the people in self-governing systems to adjust to the demands of an ever more complex world. They are the elements of journalism. The first among them is that the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing.

To fulfill this task:

1. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification.
4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power.

6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
8. It must keep the news comprehensive and in proportion.
9. Its practitioners have an obligation to exercise their personal conscience.
10. Citizens, too, have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news.

Why these ten? Some readers will think items are missing here. Where is fairness? Where is balance? After synthesizing what we learned, it became clear that a number of familiar and even useful ideas—including fairness and balance—are too vague to rise to the level of essential elements of the profession. Others may say that this list is nothing new. To the contrary, we discovered that many ideas about the elements of journalism are wrapped in myth and misconception. That journalists should be protected by a wall between business and news is one myth. That independence requires journalists to be neutral is another. The concept of objectivity has been so mangled it now is usually used to describe the very problem it was conceived to correct.

Nor is this the first moment that the way we get news has gone through momentous transition. It has happened each time there is a period of significant social, economic, and technological change. It occurred in the 1830s and 1840s with the arrival of the telegraph, in the 1880s with the drop in the price of paper and the influx of immigrants. It occurred again in the 1920s with the invention of the radio and the rise of the tabloids and the culture of gossip and celebrity. And it occurred with the invention of television and the arrival of the Cold War.

It is occurring now with the advent of cable, followed by the Internet. The collision this time may be more dramatic. For the first time in our history, the news increasingly is produced by companies outside journalism, and this new economic organization is important. We are facing the possibility that independent news will be replaced by rumor and self-interested commercialism posing as news. If that occurs, we will lose the press as an independent institution, free to monitor the other powerful forces and institutions in society.

In the new century, one of the most profound questions for a democratic society is whether an independent press survives. The answer will depend on whether journalists have the clarity and conviction to articulate what an independent press means and whether, as citizens, the rest of us care.

This book is intended as a first step in helping journalists articulate those values and helping citizens demand a journalism connected to the principles that spawned the free press in the first place. Some may ask whether there is a specific program laid out here to do that, to “fix” journalism’s problems. Our answer to that comes in two parts.

The first answer is that the yearning for a single moment, the bold action, or the formulaic solution, is not how history works. Nor is it how journalism grew up or came to be in its current predicament in the early twenty-first century. Journalism evolves continually. At any given moment, one can point to trends of improvement and disorientation simultaneously.

In 2006, there are maybe more young people observing their world and sharing what they find in a journalistic way, complete with a higher sense of public mission and public ethics, than at any other time in history. And there are self-appointed pragmatists—people in corporate settings—who are convinced that the current economics of journalism prove that quality and commitment to the public interest are quaint notions and naïve ideas that knowledgeable realists must forgo.

The second answer—the reason one will not find a five- or ten-point program to solve the problems of journalism’s role in society—is that our collective experience of more than seventy years in this business suggests a clearer lesson on how to find that solution.

The answer will be found in those who produce the news mastering the principles of journalism and rigorously applying them to the way they work and think every day. The solution will be found the same way that athletes perfect performance: in the repetition of doing, until these elements become second nature. This is what will breed clarity of purpose, confidence of execution, and public respect.

The key to this, first, is to distinguish between the principles that guide journalism’s purpose and the techniques that one generation

develops in a specific medium to fulfill those principles. Only by recognizing the primacy of principle can journalism change ethically and come out the other side still fulfilling the same democratic purpose for a new century, a new technology, and a new kind of information-wired citizen.

ENDNOTES

1. Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996), 27.
2. Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester, "News as Purposive Behavior: On the Strategic Use of Routine Events, Accidents and Scandal," *American Sociological Review*, 39 (February 1974), 101-12.
3. Stephens, *History of News*, 12.
4. Ibid.
5. John McCain, with Mark Salter, *Faith of My Fathers* (New York: Random House, 1999), 221.
6. Thomas Cahill, *The Gift of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Anchor Books, 1998), 17.
7. Committee of Concerned Journalists (CCJ) and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Striking the Balance: Audience Interests, Business Pressures and Journalists' Values," March 1999, 79.
8. Ibid.
9. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Public More Critical of Press, But Goodwill Persists," June 26, 2005; available at <http://people-press.org>.
10. Ken Auletta, "Fortress Bush," *The New Yorker*, January 19, 2004; available at www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/040119fa_fact2.
11. Associated Press, "Bush to Agencies: Don't Hire Columnists to Promote Agendas," *USA Today*, January 26, 2005; available at www.usatoday.com.
12. Susan Goldenberg, "Bush Payola Scandal Deepens as Third Columnist Admits Being Paid," *The Guardian*, January 29, 2005; David Folkernflik, "Video News Releases Find News Airtime," National Public Radio, March 25, 2005; David S. Cloud, "Quick Rise for Purveyors of Propaganda in Iraq," *New York Times*, February 15, 2006; Gail Russell Chaddock, "Bush Administration Blurs Media Boundary," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 17, 2005; available at www.guardian.co.uk.
13. Scott Shane, "Criminal Inquiry Opens into Spying Leak," *New York Times*, December 31, 2005; Walter Pincus, "Prosecution of Journalists is Possible in NSA Leaks," *Washington Post*, May 22, 2006.