

Grade the Press

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All democracies are founded on the basis of an informed citizenry.

We teach our children that one of the most important people in our society is the journalist and their duty is to inform our citizens of the news of the day in an impartial and thorough manner. Then the public can discuss the issues and our society can vote on what we want to do.

Because journalism is the foundation of any democracy it is the duty of every generation to answer the following question: *“Do the citizens of a democracy have the right to know how correct the news is?”*

If you answer this question with a “no” or a “maybe” or a “we need to think about that and discuss it” then you have answered the question with a no.

If you answer yes then it is every citizen’s duty to make sure this happens.

Please note that I did not say “...how accurate the news is...” Or “....how well rated the news is...” If a clown delivered the news they could get a very high rating but they would get a very poor grade as a journalist. Likewise someone can be extremely accurate at presenting one side of an issue. Their accuracy would be very good but they would have a very poor grade as a journalist.

At the present moment our society has answered the question *“Do the citizens of a democracy have the right to know how correct the news is?”* with a no because we have never created a way for our citizens to know how correct or distorted the news is.

How did this happen and how can we correct it?

First let's discuss how it happened and then see how to correct it.

Many decades ago our forefathers had to decide how to have the news delivered to our citizens. We did not want the news to be delivered by the government because whoever was in political power would just distort the news to their advantage. On the other hand it is very expensive to deliver the news. You need reporters, buildings, employees, electronic hardware, etc. We finally decided the ideal way to solve the problem was to have advertising companies deliver the news to the public. We reasoned that advertising companies will be independent because they make their money from ad revenue and that keeps the news away from the influence of the politicians.

Unfortunately we made one major mistake: *We left nothing in place to make sure the advertising companies would be good journalists.*

If you have to describe the function of an advertising business in a sentence it would be something like this:

Advertising companies are in the business of broadcasting and printing the maximum number of ads they can to the largest possible audience they can at the highest possible dollar price they can charge per ad and all this at the lowest possible production cost.

That is it. That is what their business model is and that is how they get their money to exist. There is nothing in that statement regarding being a good journalist.

Everyone knows that the people that pay for ads tell the advertising companies that they will pay for their ads based on how many eyeballs and ears their ads are exposed to. So the hard fact of life is that the advertising business is designed to sell ads. This means that the news along with movies; comedy shows, etc. are just enticements to get the eyeballs and ears needed for the advertising companies to make a living.

In the beginning this was not much of a problem for journalism. Business was good for the advertising companies because there were very few TV stations or newspapers and very little competition. Consequently the news departments of these advertising businesses had high viewership and acquired a lot of real estate, employees, and overhead. Unfortunately, as time went on many more TV stations,

newspapers and other media came on line to compete for the limited number of eyes and ears.

As the audience of people listening to and reading the news declined the people in charge of the news departments were in trouble because the ad revenue was declining but they still had a huge overhead in real estate, hardware and employees.

Suppose you were in charge of the department. It would be wise to bring in an expert and ask the question: *“I absolutely have to have more eyeballs and ears. What do I need to do to get this? Our business depends on it and we will do whatever we need to do. What is the answer?”*

The expert would probably answer: *“This is a simple problem. If you absolutely have to get someone’s attention then walk up beside them and stand on their right hand side. Then you stomp as hard as you possibly can on their right foot. I guarantee you that you will get maximum attention from the person immediately and it works every time.”*

Translated to the news, this means that you have to identify what the average American believes in and then you have to shock their senses or threaten their beliefs by promoting what they do not believe in when you deliver the news to get their attention. That is why you hear the old sayings: *“Dog bites man is not news. Man bites dog is front page news in bold headlines.”* Another one is: *“If it bleeds it leads.”* In short, there are many ways to tell the truth and your way better be shocking.

Because of all this most of our mass media news has degenerated to being shocking stories that are based very, very loosely on current events. Unfortunately the average person informs themselves with mass media news. As methods of delivering information exploded the pressure for bad journalism increased tremendously.

You would think that this situation could not get worse but it does.

As time went on the advertising companies were bought out by large national conglomerates who thought this was a good financial investment for their portfolio. Unfortunately this now allowed the politicians to influence the news in a big way. If your giant company wants to get huge contracts from the government then the politicians in charge of releasing those contracts can say: *“Well, we could*

give you the contract but let's see.....how are you treating my political party in the news...let me watch your newscasts for a while and I will call you and tell you if you get the contract." The other problem is that the large conglomerates owned a lot of the movie business so the news became a platform for hyping their latest movie or TV show.

How can we correct this problem with no government involvement?

The answer is actually fairly simple but it will take a huge outcry and pressure by average citizens to make it happen and this is our greatest challenge as a nation. If we correct the problem there will be enormous changes to our society.

Suppose a real journalist was in charge of delivering the news and their only job was to be a good journalist. What would they do?

Well, the first thing they would want to know is whether or not they are doing a good job. So once a month the journalist in charge of a news program would ask the following people to grade them just as you would grade a student in school:

- 1) Politics:** Ask the Democratic Party to grade them as to how well they presented their party's point of view.
- 2) Politics:** Ask the Republican Party to grade them as to how well they presented their party's point of view.
- 3) History:** Have the historical society grade them as to how well they presented both sides of historical information and how correct they were.
- 4) Science:** Have the association of Physicists grade them on how correctly they presented scientific facts and both sides of any arguments.
- 5) Business:** Have a panel of very pro-business people grade the news people on how well they presented their point of view.

The real journalist would then boldly display these five scores every time they delivered the news and also prominently display a short, easy to remember, internet address that people can go to and see why the graders gave the scores they did. Every month the poll is taken again so you can improve your performance.

If the news was graded in this way the people that offered poor journalism would get very bad marks and very few people would watch them which would cut down on their ad revenue. Circulation would increase for the programs that had a good journalism score. Since ratings are updated monthly there is always the ability to improve your standing at the start of the next month.

Note that this would not prevent us from having investigative journalism or news commentary. In fact very conservative or very liberal “*news commentary*” shows would proudly display a lopsided political rating as a badge of honor for their side.

It is very important that this rating service extend to the news wire services like the Associated Press as well.

If you pick the top 100 sources of news (ranked by the number of people that receive their news) then you would cover most of the country.

I think you see what needs to be done. The challenge is to get someone, perhaps a University, to simply collect the data each month and put out the ratings and upload the comments from the graders to a web site. The public will then need to pressure the news businesses to prominently display their ratings.

If we can eventually get the top 100 places that people go to for news to do this we would make a dramatic change in our society. Rational reasoning and not hysteria to sell ad time will become the norm because a high grade and good journalism will get more eyes and ears than a low grade and poor journalism. We will be using the natural structure of the advertising business to correct our problem and it will give our public fairly unbiased news.

We should never have a large force in our society that has no counter force to keep them honest.

Many, probably most, of those in the advertising business will not want this change. They will say they think things are fine the way they are. Average people can compare news sources, they will say. This is kind of like having the foxes guard the chicken pen where the foxes are the newscasters and the chicken is the journalistic presentation of the news. We look at the foxes and say: “*Hey, wait a minute. Who is watching you?*” and the foxes say: “*Oh, you don’t need to watch us. We are watching each other. You have nothing to worry about here. Everything is fine. Go away. Look somewhere else.*”

If you sit down and think about it for a while I think you will agree that many of the most fundamental problems we have in our society can be traced to the problem I have just described.

Life today goes something like this:

- The news service distorts the news to get the ratings they need to survive.
- The public takes distorted news and assumes that it is truth.
- Politicians know that whatever is in the news the public believes so they parrot and even hype the inaccurate news to get votes.
- Consequently we get very poor public servants with a distorted view of reality and a very confused and angry public.
- Taken to the extreme it produces an environment that is almost like the Mad Hatters Tea Party from Alice in Wonderland.

Good journalism that is graded will produce level headed thinking and a much, much better government where truth and rational reasoning will rule the day.

As citizens we now know what we have to do.

Now we need to do it.

Evolve or die.

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