

Dear Reader

This issue of the Newsletter is on the topic of the news media. More specifically, it is on the distrust of the news media. According to polls, less than 20% of the population trusts the news media. From the beginning of the country, the theory has been that a vigorous, truth-seeking press is needed to keep government officials upright and produce an informed citizenry. The “press” was daily newspapers and weekly publications. In the twentieth century the “media” dramatically expanded so that citizens had many more outlets to keep themselves informed. Radio, then television, then the internet, represented revolutions in communication.

The strange result has been not a better informed citizenry but skepticism about almost everything said in the major organs of the “media.” By providing people with almost unlimited information on which to make up their minds, the news media seem to have only confused most people. Not knowing who or what to believe, people declare that no one knows the truth about anything.

In some ways this phenomenon is psychologically understandable but it is puzzling where people go from there. How do you make sense of anything if you reject the work of people who have the training, experience, resources and intention to provide accurate information? The answer seems to be: Find someone or some organization that gives you a simple key for constructing a consistent world that you can live in. You might discover the truth by such a maneuver but the odds are heavily against it.

Nearly all news organizations today are somewhat defensive about the accuracy of what they do. They have to admit that they sometimes make mistakes. If they immediately admit a mistake and correct the problem, they are hardly blameworthy and are not proved to be biased or prejudiced. The bigger problem is not with what is said but what is unsaid. Kellyanne Conway has been widely ridiculed for introducing the term “alternative facts.” But she could have been making a legitimate point (though maybe it was not her point). No matter what facts are reported on an issue there are always other facts that are unsaid. A different or a more extended context can change the meaning of what is said. Every news source in the country needs to struggle with this dilemma.

*Note:* A different feature of this issue (p.8) is a letter to the editor critical of the essay “American Religion, American Priesthood” by Gabriel Moran in the December, 2017 issue (the essay is available at [gabrielmoran.net](http://gabrielmoran.net)).

## OBJECTIVITY AND THE NEWS

By Gabriel Moran

A common way to discuss the accuracy of the news media is with the term objectivity. The question of whether news media are objective or not presupposes the question: Should news media be objective? The answer that is given in this essay is: Sometimes. There is ambiguity these days on what constitutes “the media” and what “news” means. And that is before getting to the more complex question of what constitutes “objectivity.”

Some historical perspective is helpful in understanding the question of accuracy in reporting the news. The short period between wars, 1945-1950, is instructive for struggles of today. During the Second World War there had been one subject which excluded nearly everything else. The news consisted of how the United States was doing in the wars in Europe and the Pacific. There was only one side to the news, our side, and the news was censored by the war department of the government and self-censorship by the press.

In addition to newspapers, *Life* magazine was an important news source for people each Saturday and the weekly newsreel in movie theaters brought the war home to people in a vivid way. *Life* magazine had brave reporters and photographers on the front lines of the war who no doubt reported the war as they saw it. But *Life*, similar to the newspapers, emphasized only success. *Life* did not include a picture of a dead U.S. soldier until two years into the war. And facts such as that one third of the marines who landed at Iwo Jima were killed or wounded, and that the navy suffered the worst destruction of its history during the battle of Okinawa were not the kind of thing brought up in the press.

World War II changed the country but afterward, similar to the 1920s, there was a widespread desire to return to “normalcy.” Unlike the decade of the 20s which ended with a bang, the normalcy of the 40s and 50s was a thin covering of what exploded in the 1960s, especially among women and “negroes.” During World War II when all the healthy young men marched off to war and the women were left to run the country, the feminist movement of the 1920s picked up steam. And negro soldiers who got a taste of the whole world while bravely fighting next to white soldiers (though segregation in the military lasted until Truman’s time) recognized an obvious claim to civil rights at home.

The war was barely over when Winston Churchill announced in a speech on March 15, 1946 that an “iron curtain” had fallen on half the world. It was a powerful even if an inaccurate metaphor which divided the world into two spheres: America and Communism. The actual governments and policies of the United States and the Soviet Union were overshadowed by the total opposition between the “free world” and the threat of world domination by godless communism.

Fortunately, U.S. policy was profoundly affected by the “long telegram” in February 1946 sent from Moscow by George Kennan of the State Department. He argued that the Soviet Union had to be contained by the United States using every force – except military force. This principle of “containment” became U.S. policy for the next four decades, although there was never agreement about what containment meant. General Curtis

Lemay, who had supervised the firebombing of fifty-seven Japanese cities in which hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed and who then became head of the Strategic Air Command, was overruled. Lemay advocated a preemptive nuclear attack on the Soviet Union in the late 1940s.

It quickly became apparent between 1945-1950 that there were two sides in the country. There were people who were staunchly anti-communist and other people who were “soft” on communism and therefore suspected of being un-American. One of the big questions of the time was “Who lost China?” That might sound like a joke today but it was a career-ending accusation directed at politicians and their advisers. The period reached its culmination in the person of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Obscure until a 1950 speech in which he claimed to have the names of hundreds of communists in the state department, he became the most famous and infamous politician in the U.S. for three and a half years.

The case of Joseph McCarthy has been revisited recently by the press and other “media” in search of the fair and proper way to cover some politicians. Some newspapers became instant and ardent supporters of McCarthy. As a fifteen-year-old, I enthusiastically read and was completely convinced by his book, “McCarthyism: The Fight for America.” Many newspapers were forced to work out new rules for covering a prominent person who was crude in speech, was surrounded by a small circle of equally crude characters, and was obviously lying about his list of communists in the State Departments and lying about numerous other matters. The press itself (including the conservative New York Times) was accused of harboring communist sympathizers. The phenomenon of McCarthyism rather suddenly collapsed thanks in large part to television which for the first time played a prominent role in shining a camera “live” on a court trial. It was a simpler time when a lawyer named Joseph Welch could be credited with bringing down one of the most powerful men in the country by simply asking: “Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last? Have you no sense of decency?”

The division continued to exist between anti-communists and people who by self-description were trying to view the plurality of viewpoints in the world but who were suspected of being un-American. Adlai Stevenson, who was badly beaten twice by Eisenhower in presidential elections, embodied the intellectual type that has always generated suspicion in the U.S. and never more so than in the 1950s. John Kennedy presented a glamorous surface but was firmly on the anti-communist side of the country. Even when communism died as a threat, the division continued and it remains in the present. What is now the main dividing line is anyone’s guess; it can be race, gender, sex, wealth, age, region, educational level, religion or some combination of these factors.

When network television began in the late 1940s it was seen as a threat to movies not newspapers. Television news mainly consisted of John Cameron Swayze reading before a camera from 7:30 to 7:45 EST. When it was suggested that the news be extended to a half hour, local stations protested and many people doubted there was enough news to fill a whole half hour. Television became a force in news via the Republican and Democratic conventions. CBS stood out with its reporters who were seasoned by their reporting during the war. Its dominance was threatened when NBC teamed Chet Huntley and

David Brinkley at the 1952 conventions. The idea of news coming from a conversation between people undermined the god-like anchor who could say in Walter Cronkite's sign-off line: "That's the way it is."

During the 1950s television had begun to threaten the existence of newspapers. By the time I arrived in New York in the 1960s, there were only 5 or 6 newspapers left. I read the Times and the Herald Tribune in the morning, the Post and the Daily News in the afternoon. All were serious papers; the description "tabloid" simply meant it was shaped for reading on the subway. Television, however, was forcing an imitation of itself. Speed became all important and sensational headlines took over from detailed reporting. When USA Today began publication in 1973 it explicitly imitated the look of a tv screen.

CBS and NBC were the voices of television news (ABC was sometimes called the Almost Broadcasting Company). The pictures were assumed to be incontrovertible evidence of the truth of what the reporters and the anchor said. Television played a major role in the Vietnam War but that role is still disputed. It brought war into the living room of every home but the repeated war scenes tucked in between advertisements for cars and beer, might also have had a deadening effect.

The 21st century brought the greatest change in the dissemination of news since television's entrance. There has been an almost unimaginable increase in sources. More news is available at any minute of the day than at any previous time. Accurate news is still dependent on reporters who are out covering the stories. At the same time, many of these actual news sources are strapped for cash. Only the Associated Press remains of what use to be competitive news services. The New York Times is one of the few newspapers that has reporters on the scene nationally and internationally. Television has foreign correspondents but they do not usually have the time and resources to do in-depth investigations. Jeff Bezos' Amazon money has given new life to the Washington Post but the economic situation of every newspaper in the country remains precarious. A shift to digital for newspapers is still in the process.

What constitutes a medium of news is now unclear. Outlets in print, on television or online that repeat third-hand what others have said or just make up stories should not be dignified with the name news medium. There are many small-town newspapers that do a good job covering the news of their town despite their having little money to do their work. Of national news media, it seems obvious that the major t.v. networks and some newspapers of big cities do their best to report national and international news accurately. The "social media" (a ridiculous name since all media are social) widely purvey news though they seldom have their own reporters digging up news or doing research for a story. Sixty percent of people have said that their main source of news is Facebook which was not intended to be or designed to be a news source. And it is not.

The bright line that newspapers used to have between reporting facts on the front page and offering opinion on the editorial page has blurred. Television also used to distinguish between its evening news program and commentary on the news. The news should be objective; the commentaries by definition are not. The phrase "mainstream media" might

have been a helpful way to indicate the most trustworthy sources. Unfortunately, the phrase was invented and continues to be used as a slur on journalistic professionals who do their best to provide accurate news (Sarah Palin was one of the main popularizers of the phrase).

Objective is a complex idea. In the physical sciences objective as the standard of truth means that no human emotion has compromised the mathematical accuracy of the data. Nineteenth-century thinkers realized that in studies of human beings, that is, studies of subjects not objects, one has to take account of human thought and feelings as part of the data. The most common method for trying to reach the (inter-subjective) truth is to have a conversation of opposing viewpoints. Television programs attempt to have debates though both parties often simply try to score points for their side. Responsible newspapers try to present both sides of an issue and to have some diversity of columnists on their op-ed page.

The 2016 presidential campaign was an especially difficult problem for responsible t.v. and print coverage. The problem continued throughout 2017. Most news media thought that Hilary Clinton would win the election by a comfortable margin. Ninety-eight of the hundred largest newspapers in the country supported Clinton. Was that bias or a simple reckoning of who was better prepared to be president? After the election, many papers did some agonized soul-searching. In one discussion by editors of leading newspapers, Dean Baquet, editor of the *New York Times*, said he had learned that Manhattan is not the real world. If he really believed that, he should have immediately resigned. What he presumably meant was that the *Times* had given insufficient coverage to people who voted for Trump.

The irony is that the news media in trying to be objective by being even-handed were easily trapped into not calling out bombast, self-contradictory promises, and obvious lies. As a result, Trump was given implicit support by the *Times* which he constantly attacks though he is obsessed with having its approval. The *Times*, in its attempt to be fair, was harsh on Clinton to match the negative coverage of Trump. But to say, for example, that both of them told lies obscured the fact that he is an inveterate liar and she is not. A non-partisan group in 2016 found that Clinton told the fewest lies of the twenty people who campaigned for the presidency. Trump told by far the most lies. The *Times* with the strictest definition of lying counted 103 lies in Trump's first 300 days.

During 2017 the *Times* sometimes made itself look ridiculous by repeatedly providing portraits of Trump voters, including one on Thanksgiving weekend of a man proud to be a Nazi. Unbiased reporting does not exclude a judgment by intelligent professionals that a claim is not true or is morally reprehensible. An editor, while acknowledging his or her fallibility, has the indispensable job of separating truth from falsity. To say that no one knows the truth about an issue can be true in some cases and true to a degree in others. But to say that truth is no longer important is simply stupid and untrue.

## IS DISTRUST OF THE MEDIA NEW? IS IT ALL BAD?

By Jonathan Ladd

James Fallows writes: “Americans have never been truly fond of their press. Through the last decade, however, their disdain for the media establishment has reached new levels. Americans believe that the news media have become too arrogant, cynical, scandal-minded, and destructive.” Fallows wrote that in 1996. The existence of an independent, powerful, widely respected news media establishment is an historical anomaly. Prior to the twentieth century, such an institution had never existed in American history. We should not misinterpret this unusual circumstance, whatever its merits, as the historical norm.

There are structural factors working against the existence of a dominant institutional news media. Politicians who desire public support feel threatened by independent sources of information. Thus, they tend to use whatever means are available to prevent the media from becoming a trusted independent news source. Political leaders have used various methods for this task throughout history, including government suppression of independent media, founding and promoting government controlled news outlets, and publicly attacking the credibility of outlets outside their control.

Another structural impediment is market demand for more partisan or entertaining styles of news. Even when journalists desire to produce informative, nonpartisan, non-sensational news, which can enhance the profession’s respectability and trustworthiness, the market for this style of news is limited. It is difficult to find a large audience willing to regularly consume this type of news when other options are available. In this way, market pressure leads to more sensational and partisan forms of news. Both reduce trust in the institutional media, the former directly and the latter by transmitting partisan media criticism

The mid-twentieth century institutional news media gained the public’s trust for two reasons. First, low levels of economic competition enabled journalism to become highly professionalized. Journalists had the autonomy to enforce a professional norm of “objectivity,” greatly reducing salacious or explicitly partisan news coverage. Second, the lack of party polarization reduced political criticism of the institutional press. When these two things ended, trust in the media declined.

The assertion that media distrust has major negative consequences is true to some extent. Media distrust is consequential. It changes the way people acquire information and form political preferences. Overall, it leads to substantial information loss among the mass public. Those who distrust the media both resist the information they receive from institutional news outlets and increasingly seek out partisan news sources that confirm their preexisting views. As a result, these individuals are less responsive to national policy outcomes, relying more on their political predispositions to form beliefs and preferences.

As the institutional media's mid-twentieth century hegemony ended in recent decades, journalists producing a professionalized style of news have not disappeared. Rather than returning to the media landscape that existed before journalism's professionalization, institutional journalists and news organizations now compete with newer news outlets employing different styles. As a result, institutional media trust has not become less important as the media has fragmented. If anything, people now have stronger views about the institutional media and those views are more consequential.

Media trust is at the forefront because people must regularly choose whether to believe messages coming from institutional or alternative sources. In this way, declining media trust is a contributing factor to the polarization of the American political system (while also being a partial consequence of it). In the extreme, the partisanship and unresponsiveness to information that results from media distrust could prevent the public from holding politicians accountable for policy outcomes.

However, while largely agreeing that media distrust has potentially negative consequences, I add an important caveat. It is doubtful that returning to a depolarized party system with a highly respected and homogeneous news industry is either feasible or desirable. The mid-twentieth century party system was a product of a unique historical circumstance, where civil rights constituted a salient national issue while remaining separate from the main partisan and ideological cleavages. Additionally, the lack of competitive pressure faced by news organizations was a product of a unique period in the media's technological development, which would be impossible to recreate.

In addition to being infeasible, these circumstances are not necessarily even desirable. Party systems that fail to offer voters clear alternatives can also prevent them from holding elected leaders accountable, the same consequence we fear media distrust producing. Furthermore, there are other reasons to doubt whether the public should put all its faith in a homogeneous style of news practiced by a relatively small number of media organizations. What if the media establishment fails to live up to its professional ideal of providing accurate and objective information? In addition, is it not desirable for people to have the personal freedom to choose to consume more partisan or sensational news? Finally, would there be unintended consequences of policy interventions intrusive enough to completely reverse the natural tendency toward a more fragmented, less professionalized media landscape?

In light of these considerations, the United States should strive for a balance between a highly trusted, homogenous media establishment with little viable competition, and an extremely fragmented media environment without any widely trusted information sources. In this middle path, individuals would continue to have a wide range of choices, including partisan, sensational, or conventionally "objective" news, as well as the option of avoiding news altogether. Yet, the remaining institutional journalists and news outlets would continue to transmit important political information, with a significant portion of the public retaining enough confidence in the institutional press to use this information to hold government accountable

To the Editor

The picture of America that emerges from your article is that this country is a white supremacist, militarized, covetous, domineering and supremely unjust nation from the day of its inception. To my eyes this is a colossally jaundiced view. You quote Edmond Randolph's caution that there might be "insufficient checks against the democracy." While there was a concern at the beginning regarding the demonstrable instability of a democracy where people can be swayed by whim or by passion, the principal attention of the writers of the Constitution was to prevent an over-weaning government that might stifle individual rights. The first Ten Amendments succinctly reflect their concern.

You opine at one point that "there is serious question whether a federation of 50 states is governable at all." It surely is IF the federal government understands its limited role and accepts it. The majority of states are governed very well, most likely because their governors are closer to the people who elect them. There is always someone to remind us that "the states created the federal government. The federal government did not create the states."

You express alarm at "the frightening meaning of 'American Religion' in which America is the religion unrestrained by any tradition." I find the statement historically perplexing. There never was such a thing as an "American Religion." From the very beginning the federal government was prohibited from establishing a religion for the country. This was in direct reaction to the European countries from which the early settlers fled and where there was a state established religion. The question of religion was reserved to the individual states among which there were variances. You describe the Civil War as a contest "to decide who represented the real America." This is quite misleading. The South was not intending to dominate the country: they sought to leave it.

Your detestation of the military is clearly apparent. Why would you deny the use of the word "sacrifice" in referencing those soldiers who have lost their lives or their limbs in the course of duty to their country as they perceived it? Seems uncharacteristically ungenerous. You likewise disparage the reference to a soldier's comrades as "the best America has produced" and go on to repeat the tired left-wing put-down that the military is composed of "the poor, who could go no further in education and did not have a job." There are studies which establish the opposite.

You spent much of your article on a one-sided narration of the Congresswoman Fredericka Wilson - Chief of Staff John Kelly episode. You do not object to Rep. Wilson's crass revelation of a very private moment between the widow, Ms. Johnson, and President Trump. Nor do you question her motivation which surely was to create maximum embarrassment for the president, and your lengthy account of the exchange appears to indicate your support for her very partisan and ill-mannered conduct. You even call General Kelly a liar. I saw his news conference and I heard a replay of the words by Wilson at the dedication of the federal building. In my mind there was sufficient evidence there to justify Mr. Kelly's impression at the time that here was another self-aggrandizing politician claiming more credit than was appropriate.

The general lack of objectivity in this article is no different from the vast majority in the media today who have declared themselves at war with the president and see themselves as agents of his destruction. I believe that this widespread dishonesty in the media is the gravest internal threat to our country today and is truly to be regretted and feared. There is much room for pessimism. I firmly believe, however, that there is a loving God who remains present in and to his creation and this keeps the flame of hope alive.

-----James Curwood

