

Rumor and Bias, Inaccuracy and Ignorance: The Low State of Journalism

William Tecumseh Sherman, a Civil War general not known for his delicacy of speech, once said, “If I had my choice, I would kill every reporter in the world, but I am sure we would be getting reports from Hell before breakfast.”

Like many people today, Sherman detested reporters and journalists. On another occasion, he stated: “I hate newspapermen. They come into camp and pick up their camp rumors and print them as facts. I regard them as spies, which, in truth, they are.”

Regardless of political persuasion, Americans have lost faith in today’s mainstream news media. Reporting on a 2018 poll inquiring about trust in major institutions, the [*Columbia Journalism Review*](#) found print and television news at rock-bottom, exceeded in the matter of distrust only by Congress. When asked why they distrusted the media, about 45 percent of responders cited factors such as bias, inaccuracy, and “fake news.”

The results of the Mueller investigation have brought certain television and print outlets to new lows. Some have lost viewers or readers, while others, accused of Trump Derangement Syndrome (TDS), have faced a barrage of criticism for their bias and for the amount of time they gave – and are giving – to the investigation and the Mueller report at the expense of other newsworthy stories.

It should also be noted, as some commentators have pointed out, that these same reporters and journalists have done little to investigate the Clinton campaign, its connections to Russia and to certain European intelligence agencies, the

illegal infiltration into the Trump campaign, and the alleged attempt by certain U.S. intelligence agencies to destroy an elected president. (Whether you are liberal or conservative, that last possibility ought to scare you to death.)

The *Columbia Journalism Review* also reported that, when asked how journalists might once again gain their trust, people cited such factors as greater accuracy in the news, less bias, and transparency, including the provision of fact-checking resources.

In other words, Journalism 101.

In [*The Elements of Journalism*](#), Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel came up with nine guiding principles for reporting the news:

- 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 proportional.
- 9) Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

The contrast between these principles and the debacle of the last few years raises some obvious questions. Do journalists recognize that their first obligation is to the truth? Do

reporters practice a discipline of verification, i.e. do they have solid sources for their stories? Does the press serve as an independent monitor of power? Do television and print media keep the news comprehensive and proportional?

In many cases, the answer to each of these questions is no.

As to how those in the media might regain the respect of the American people, the answer is simple: Practice the nine principles of journalism.

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