

Our Divisive News Media Needs Clark Kent

When I was a kid growing up in Boonville, North Carolina (population 600), my public library was the comic book and magazine section near the front of Weatherwax Pharmacy on Main Street. Because I occasionally spent the 12 cents to buy one of the comic books, Mr. Weatherwax tolerated my hours spent sitting on that tiled floor. It probably helped that my father was one of the town's two doctors.

At any rate, there I idled away hours of my adolescence. My favorite comics were the Classics Illustrated, but I also followed the adventures of Archie and Veronica, fought the Nazis with Sgt. Rock, smiled at Donald Duck and his Uncle Scrooge McDuck, and battled the bad guys with such stalwarts as Batman and Superman.

About the same time, actor George Reeves brought Superman to life on television. "It's a bird...it's a plane...it's Superman!" and "Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!" have lived in my memory for 60 years.

In his ordinary life, Superman disguised himself as Clark Kent, a "mild-mannered" reporter for The Daily Planet. Here he fought for "truth, justice, and the American way" with words and investigation, instead of his brawn, powers of flight, and x-ray vision.

Which brings me to the sorry state of today's mainstream news media.

It's a joke.

Only the joke isn't funny.

In conjunction with the Knight Foundation, a 2018 Gallup poll [found](#) that American trust in its news media is in the dumpster.

Consistent with the trend toward declining trust, 69% of U.S. adults in the current survey say their trust in the news media has decreased in the past decade. Just 4% say their trust has increased, while 26% indicate their trust has not changed.

Republicans (94%) and political conservatives (95%) are nearly unanimous in saying their trust in the media has decreased in the past decade. However, declining trust is not just confined to the political right – 75% of independents and 66% of moderates indicate they are less trusting than they were 10 years ago.

U.S. adults on the left of the political spectrum are less likely to say they have lost trust in the media, but at least four in 10 Democrats (42%) and liberals (46%) say they have done so. Democrats and liberals are about as likely to say their trust in the media has not changed as to say it has decreased.

Gallup conducted this poll just over a year ago. If administered today, we may safely wager the numbers would be even worse.

Those multitudes who have lost faith in the news media or abandoned it altogether cite as their reasons slanted news, rampant bias, inaccurate and irresponsible reporting, sensationalism, and a lack of transparency, meaning a failure to produce hard evidence in news reports.

Some fault Donald Trump for this decline, pointing to his attacks on “fake news” as the cause of their demise in the eyes of their fellow Americans.

Perhaps. But maybe media should spend some time looking at themselves in a mirror, examining their own principles of journalism instead of blaming others for this decline in trust. They were on the downhill slide long before the president took office.

Once upon a time, good reporters went after a story, not a person. They made some effort to put aside their own beliefs and prejudices, and to bring some degree of objectivity to their stories.

That approach has gone by the wayside. Rightly or wrongly, Americans view mainstream reporters and talking heads as biased in their coverage, twisting stories and information to fit their personal political beliefs and prejudices, aiming to damage or bring down those they oppose rather than digging for the truth.

And this is a disaster for all of us. Democracy depends on trustworthy journalism. Our citizens need reliable news. Yet today progressives watch and believe MSNBC and CNN while conservatives click on Fox News. Viewers in both groups might tell you that they find the news more believable on these networks, but in reality they are watching the news they want to believe.

In other words, the news as it is delivered in our time deepens the divisions in our country. The news media and some of our politicians are the chief culprits responsible for our cultural and political civil war.

Truth and justice have vanished, and the "American Way" in many newsrooms brings mockery and derision.

Clark Kent, where are you when we need you?

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