

Journalism and the Measure of All Things

By

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Today I want to consider journalism as we continue envisioning how things might differ if, as Erich Fromm put it, the “sole criterion” for everything we do, was “[human] welfare.”¹ What might it look like in our society if our news media’s primary concern became, as he said, “the full human development of all its members.”²

Two days ago, when I began preparing this sermon, the frontpage of *The New York Times* headline read, “U.S. and China Agree to a Deal to Revive ZTE,” about a Chinese telecommunications firm that was going under because of American sanctions, along with another frontpage story, “E.P.A. Eases Way it Evaluates Risk from Chemicals,” about the Agency’s loosening of pollution regulations, and an article about the G-7 Summit in light of new U.S. Tariffs on Steel and Aluminum. *The Washington Post* cover story, “At last, Capitals hoist the Cup,” was about a U.S. hockey team winning the national championship. *The Post* also had a cover story about the G-7 summit, as well as one about House Speaker Paul Ryan’s promise to pass immigration legislation, and a story about a North Korean family that came to the U.S. as refugees in 1950. Our local paper, *The Spokesman-Review*, had a cover story regarding the release of a new movie about a group of men who grew up in Spokane, a story about Washington State having met its court ordered obligations to properly fund public schools, and one about Spokane having been chosen by HUD as a location for an office to help get people off federal assistance. As I turned to a few of the most popular online news sources according to Pew Research, like the British Daily Mail, Huffington Post, and Yahoo.com., the top story regarded the suicide of Anthony Bourdain, a celebrity chef. At the time. this was also the leading story on the websites of the New York Times, the Washington Post, and CNN, among several others.

I mention these different mediums because these days people get their news from far more than just the paper, which, not too many years ago, was about the only way to get it. In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, most Americans, about 57 percent, get their news from television, 38 percent get it online, and only 20 percent from newspapers. These days, more Americans get the news from radio than from papers.³ Most newspaper readers are 65 or older, while half of those between 18 and 50 get their news online, and high percentages of those over 50 also watch TV for news, between 72 and 85 percent.⁴ If there’s any solace for those in the print industry, it’s that the 11 most popular online news sources are those belonging to the most established papers, including *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Wallstreet Journal*, *L.A Times*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Post*, *Boston Globe*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *The British Daily Mail*. Another half dozen of

¹ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

² Ibid., p. 244.

³ http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/the-modern-news-consumer/pj_2016-07-07_modern-news-consumer_1-01/

⁴ Ibid.

the top online news sources belong to established television networks, including MSNBC, CNN, ABC, Fox News, CBS, and the BBC.⁵

So, on the one hand, newspapers are becoming passé, but, on the other, most Americans are still getting their news from long established news agencies. The difference, however, is the headlines in their papers are about what their respective editors consider the major events of the day prior to the print deadline, while their online outlets tend to emphasize more immediate, if not less pertinent matters, like the death of a celebrity chef. Increasingly, we find tweets are also becoming big news, and not just those from Donald Trump. Any tweet that goes against popular belief or is deemed politically incorrect can become huge these days. In other words, if someone says something many find offensive, or some simply disagree with, it may quickly become the main media event of the day.

On May 31st, for example, Harvard University researchers reported the death toll in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico was 70 times higher than had originally been thought. The category 4 hurricane that demolished the island last September has, according to the report, resulted in the deaths of more than 4,600 people, maybe as high as 5,700, making it one of the deadliest, if not the deadliest, in history. According to Media Matters, however, after a disturbing tweet by Roseanne Barr, the cable news networks covered the cancellation of her TV show 16 times more than they did the Puerto Rico report. Fox News spent almost 2 hours on the cancelation, and not one second on Puerto Rico. MSNBC mentioned the Puerto Rico study for 21 minutes and 18 seconds, while reporting on the cancellation of *Roseanne* for 3 hours and 38 minutes. CNN spent 12 minutes, 3 seconds on Puerto Rico, and reported on *Roseanne's* cancelation for close to 5 hours.⁶

From instances like these the question arises, how are decisions made about what the media covers and how much time and attention they give to a particular issue? There are two popular responses to this question, one held by news consumers, the other by those in the news industry, both of which are unfounded. The first of these responses can be summarized by the popular cliché, *if it bleeds it leads*. The thought here is that news agencies prioritize the news according to which stories are the most sensational. But we need only consider the example at hand to see how false this is. Regardless of her celebrity, the Harvard report about the enormous number of deaths resulting from Hurricane Maria is far more sensational than the cancellation of *Roseanne*. Though bleeding, it was not leading.

As a former TV reporter, I can attest the sensational nature of a story did not play into if or how it was covered. I recall, for example, I once did a story about an overnight emergency veterinarian. Afterward, I was chastised by a veteran colleague for not cutting away before showing the physician's scalpel make its first slice into a cat's broken leg during an operation. The truth is the news media is extremely conservative about sensational imagery. As a journalist I saw many horrible things, the gruesome images from which are still singed into my synapses, that could never had been shown on TV. It was our practice to show body bags being removed from a scene, for example, but never the uncovered bodies of accident, fire,

⁵ <http://www.journalism.org/2011/05/09/top-25/>

⁶ https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/puerto-rico-death-coverage.php

or murder victims. Sometimes, on a local level, a death in the community due to tragedy or fowl play, was often the lead story, but not always. This was so, not because it seemed sensational, but because, on a local level, these kinds of losses grieve us all. The point, however, is even when such tragedy is the lead story, it is not accompanied by “sensational” imagery. Yet, perhaps in the service of human interests, if it bleeds it should lead.

The reason many in the news industry itself use to explain why certain stories are covered is, *because it's what people want to know*. This explanation, which is more of an excuse, puts the onus for what's covered on viewers, listeners, and readers, rather than on the news agencies themselves. They reason that if, as ratings and sales prove, people are consuming their information it must mean it's the information they want. In logic this is an informal fallacy known as, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, meaning, “after the thing, therefore because of the thing.” It's like having Cheerios for breakfast then discovering you have a flat tire and concluding, “I'll never eat cereal for breakfast again!” Just because something happens after one event doesn't mean it was its cause.

Likewise, just because a newspaper headline is about the G-7 Summit, or local TV news leads with a fatal car accident, and consumers then read or watch these reports, doesn't mean these specific stories caused them to do so. How can they possibly know what stories are in the news before looking at it? Logically, it is their desire to know what's in the news that causes them to look at it. Looking at the news after it's happened cannot be its cause. Hence, the excuse the news media has no choice but to cover the stories people want to know about is unsound. The only conclusion ratings and sales logically lead to is the understanding that some people want to know what's going on in the news. What's covered in the news, however, remains the choice of those news professionals presenting it.

How, then, are the decisions about what gets covered made? From my limited personal experience in television news, I will briefly mention the three deciding factors I became familiar with. Firstly, I would say habit is the greatest factor. News organizations tend to cover and lead with the sort of stories they've always covered and led with. Such coverage is so routine its news value is seldom questioned. This is why, on a local level, the news is most usually about fatal accidents, fires, homicides, severe weather events, local politics, and unique or annual community events.

Another method of determining what the news should be is observing their competition. Sometimes news directors and assignment editors choose to cover a story purely because they don't want to get scooped by the competition. In such cases they attempt to predict what their competitors will report on. Television news rooms have a bay of screens tuned into different stations and networks for monitoring what everyone else is doing. Once, after being confronted by several police officers upset about a story my station ran showing a cop urinating behind his squad car in the middle of the night, which someone had captured on very grainy video, I rebuked my assignment editor for airing the story, stating emphatically it wasn't news. After he gave me some lame explanation for why it was news, I asked, “Why, then, is it news now, only after it was aired by another station, and not news a month ago when we first received the footage?” That was the end of the conversation.

A third reason for giving priority to certain stories more than or in place of others is simply the intuition of those in charge. Every morning the News Director, Assignment Editor, and other managerial staff meet to discuss which stories they want covered, taking into consideration what other news outlets are covering, if there are any local angles on national stories, the plethora of press releases received, and the routine events happening. They then disperse assignments to reporters and photographers to cover them in time for various newscasts. A problem, however, is that much of the time those making these decisions are among the least experienced persons in the newsroom.

This is so because being a show producer puts one on the fast track toward management. Being a producer, however, is an entry level position, considered a foot in the door of broadcast journalism. Unfortunately, it is also a highly stressful, low paying job that has a quick turnover rate. If one manages to stay in the position any time at all, one may find oneself promoted to executive producer within just a couple of years, if not a few months. The next step for an executive producer, who, again, is often one of the least experienced persons in the newsroom, is becoming a news director. You see the problem, it isn't uncommon for those with the least amount of experience to be the ones determining what should be covered with the full authority to tell more seasoned journalist how to cover it. Yet, without lots of experience, one's intuition about what should be covered is often lacking. Thus, even with the best intentions, some journalists cover news based on habit, what everyone else is doing, and inexperienced intuition, rather than looking at each potential story in light of a common standard.

For the past three decades, since the Reagan Administration removed regulations prohibiting corporations from owning more than a few stations in one market, now five, "media giants," as Robert Kennedy Jr. explains in his book, *Crimes Against Nature*, "own or control virtually all of the United States' 2000 TV stations, 11,000 radio stations, and 11,000 newspapers and magazines."⁷ Having also eliminated the Fairness Doctrine, established in 1949, requiring broadcasters to provide equal time for opposing opinions on controversial issues, Reagan made it possible for these few corporations to control the flow of information in their own best interests. The result is that political bias has become another reason for why and how the media covers certain stories, while downplaying or ignoring others. This may seem truer of the national media than of local news, but, as we discovered last April, Sinclair News Media, which has been rapidly acquiring and consolidating control of our country's local TV stations, sent out corporate scripts that were read verbatim by its news anchors everywhere, advising viewers, ironically, to be mistrustful of "fake news."

Intentionally presenting political and corporate propaganda as legitimate news, while using the same media to discredit other opinions, is a more insidious reason for determining what gets covered and what doesn't than are habit, competition, and inexperience, and further reflects the wonton disregard for both truth and democracy. Nevertheless, whether motivated by personnel gain or merely functioning by rote, the reasons for choosing the stories and issues covered and prioritized in the news are often reflexive, random, biased,

⁷ Kennedy, Jr., Robert F. *Crimes Against Nature*, Harper Perennial, New York, NY, 2004, 2005, p. 178.

and ignore many other more pertinent matters. But by making the humanitarian ethic its “sole criterion” for choosing what is covered in the news, journalism would be transformed.

Instead of mechanically covering the same kind of stories they’ve always covered, their assignment and editorial meetings would begin by asking what’s happening today that is the most detrimental or beneficial to human welfare and individual growth and fulfillment? Instead of prioritizing what gets the most coverage by observing or predicting what the competition is doing, journalists can be confident they have the best measuring tool to make their own choices. Instead of relying upon the intuition and experience of a few individuals to determine what’s newsworthy, every journalist and every consumer of the news will immediately recognize the value of a story. Instead of hours of Roseanne Barr, we’d have hours about the death and devastation that continues to impact the people living in Puerto Rico.

With human welfare and individual fulfillment as our guide, most newscasts and frontpages and blogs would have to lead and devote most their time to the issues of global warming, racism, women’s rights, poverty, refugee crises, mass incarceration, public education, threats to democracy, and the civilians caught in the crossfire of political conflicts around the world. Local news organizations would cover how matters like these are playing out at home, and the local weather report would include a global warming index. Imagine the impact if, all over the nation and the world, the news always began with how much arctic ice melted today, or how many species became extinct. Or if they reported how many African Americans were arrested and locked away, or remain unemployed, or have been suspended from school. Or if the tragedies befalling millions of civilians and refugees from war ravaged areas were shown to us every day. Or if the continuing impacts of 500-year-old white supremacist institutions upon the education, employment, housing, health, and freedoms of African Americans and other nonwhites were a top priority in the news. Sure, a random tweet or two might still get covered, especially if from someone who has the power to impact the welfare of a lot of people, but it would likely be on the back-page or closer to the the bottom of the show.

For this to happen, three changes must occur. Firstly, the free press must be restored. Even though it remains legally free to report what it chooses, the fact it is now controlled by five CEOs, means it is, at least potentially, a tool for promoting its owners’ special interests. Prior to Reagan’s deregulation of the FCC, journalists governed themselves by maintaining the journalistic ethics of truthfulness, factuality, verification, impartiality, and objectivity. The model we have had for the past 30 years has largely abandoned these principles. Hence, to free journalist to govern themselves with professional integrity again, our government must break up these massive news conglomerates, just as it used the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 to break up Standard Oil and AT&T in the past. If there are banks in our country that have become too big to fail, the national media has become too big to succeed. For it is not possible for the media to be free when it is owned and controlled by so few.

Secondly, the Fairness Doctrine must be restored. For journalist to succeed, and feel free to do their jobs without reflecting the biases and interests of those the corporations they work for, those licensed to operate in the public interest must again be required to do so fairly, by

including diverse opinions on controversial issues. And those opinions should be offered by special guests and experts, not by those posing as journalists.

Finally, journalist and reporters must behave childishly. They must never stop asking, *why?* When Donald Trump, for example, claims the Paris Climate Agreement was a “bad deal for the U.S.” that should never have been made, the follow up question should be, “Why?” When Donald Trump, for example, says the Iran Nuclear Agreement was a “bad deal for the U.S.” that should never have been made, the follow up question should be, “Why?” Anytime someone in politics makes a claim that impacts policies, it is not enough to merely report what was said, or what was tweeted. It is a reporter’s job to ask why it is supposed to be true, and to verify if the claim is, indeed, true or not.

On a global scale, journalism and the free flow of information is not fairing well. According to the most recent United Nations report, many countries have laws prohibiting some information from being reported, the global consolidation of media companies controls the flow of information, too many biased sources on the internet discourage people from experiencing opinions different from their own, “professional standards of journalism are being eroded by economic forces on the one hand and lack of recognition by political actors on the other,”⁸ and, for the past several years, an average of 2 or more journalists are murdered every week.

Although journalism has never been perfectly free and unbiased in the U.S., there once were regulations and professional standards and ethics in place that once prevented many of the problems with the news industry we’re seeing today. This enabled journalists in our nation to stand above the fray of State run media in other parts of the world. Today, corporatism and greed has changed this, even as some of the best journalists find themselves working for propaganda machines. But I am not suggesting we should go backward to my romanticized good old days. In an age of cable and satellite news, and internet blogs and tweets, going backward is not an option. I’m suggesting, rather, that we move forward by making fairness and accuracy the cornerstone of journalism by instituting regulations that make human welfare and individual fulfillment their main priority, and that these same priorities become the criterion for reporting and prioritizing the news.

Among everything else he did, Gandhi was a journalist. He even founded a newspaper, *The Indian Opinion*, in 1903, once explaining he didn’t believe it possible to struggle for justice without a newspaper. “I realized that the sole aim of journalism should be service,” he said, “...but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges whole countrysides and devastates crops, even so an uncontrollable pen serves but to destroy.”⁹ Today I am suggesting the journalist’s pen, or its modern equivalent, should be self-controlled in service to the welfare and unfolding of humanity.

⁸ <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002610/261065e.pdf>

⁹ Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers*, Continuum Press, New York, NY, 1982, p. 24f.