

Journalistic integrity



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Media's Role in Informing the Public

“ We do not often print everything we know,” reveals David Lawrence, publisher of the Miami Herald (qtd. in Valente 4). There is a contrast between printing everything that is known, selecting information to disregard, and presenting information that is simply false. This difference has an impact on society. Media personnel representing a major bias also have an affect on facts that are being analyzed by the masses. Thus, accuracy in journalism is important to help an informed public make decisions.

“ Journalists are trained to operate under a professional code of values and ethics...” states a foreman for the Society of Professional Journalists (“ Code of Ethics” 1). According to the SPJ, each individual in the media is aware of their code of ethics. An important ethical concern of the society is that journalists need to be accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers, and each other. They are responsible to “ test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error” (1). The society does not permit the deliberate misuse of information. Not only that, but “ unethical practices of other journalists...should be uncovered and exposed” (2). The SPJ does contend however, that a journalist's main interest should be the public's right to know (2). Lastly the society states that if there is any miscommunication between the public and journalists, the public should be “ encouraged to voice their grievances against the news media” (3). The SPJ, along with other organizations such as AIM. org and FAIR. org, is promoting accuracy and media fairness, but also trying to ensure careers of respectable journalists without compromising the legitimacy of information.

Many editors and journalists in the media agree that there are journalists

who do not abide by the code of ethics presented by the Society of Professional Journalists. The most popular belief among conservatives is that the news media has a liberal bias. The liberals, believe the news media has a conservative slant. Conservatives contend that the press gives short shrift to traditional conservatives topics such as religion and family values, while giving disproportionate attention to liberal positions such as abortion, feminism, gay rights, and the environment (“ Media Bias” 157-158). The journalist may be liberal and might claim that attention is unbalanced in favor of the conservatives. Such seems to be the opinion of liberals in the 1996 election when 111 daily newspapers supported Dole’s campaign, while only 65 endorsed Clinton’s (158). This shows that although media bias does for the most part tend to be liberal and democratic, conservative bias does exist and still affects the public. However, the affect any bias has on the public varies because “ consumers define bias in sources differently than journalists do” (158). Scholars argue that at certain times the American press has been more liberal or conservative, reflecting the climate of the country at the time (Valente 10). Although one critic reasons that the problem may not be journalistic bias, but the way journalists approach balance and fairness might be misunderstood, even rejected by the news consumers (Hess 65). A crucial job of a journalist is to appease the public while maintaining a balance of opinion in his or her work.

Another technique to alter the appearance of a story is to present false information. The popularity, for example, of one-hour newsmagazines has placed pressure upon these moneymakers to create flashy and sensational reporting often at the expense of accuracy and honesty (Hess 65). As in the case of Dateline, a newsmagazine

affiliated with NBC, two car crashes were staged to show that GM trucks were unsafe and hazardous to the public. Later it was discovered that the “holocaust” fire that was described was in fact planned by NBC to “get a decent show” (61). The piece was later retracted due to obviously fraudulent actions on NBC’s part.

What the public views on TV has a great impact on how they act in life. According to a poll conducted at the Roper Center, 71% of those surveyed said they relied on news in helping them make “practical decisions...in manners such as investing, purchasing, voting, health, and education” (Valente 4). Accurate and honest information is then crucial to the quality of the decisions made by the public.

The poor material, as well as the responsible material, impacts society as a whole, says Lou Prato in his article “Most Journalists Are Ethical.” He continues to say that “responsible, honorable journalism still exists” (74). However, there are members of the media who believe that they themselves have not done an adequate job covering news that builds community, inspires people, and offers solutions. “We must better this,” says Richard Oppel, a journalist himself (qtd. in Valente 4). Although the people of America seem content with the old-fashioned way of getting news, such as Nightly Network News, Local TV news, and local newspapers (Newport 32), 90% of the public said the media’s desire to profit “improperly influences the news” (Valente 5). The fact that the traditional news outlets are the least trusted intensifies the pressure on these journalists to improve their reporting.

The task of reporting the news is a demanding one. How the journalist may

be impacted is often overlooked in cases of inaccuracy, censorship, and bias. It must be taken into consideration, however, the impression a journalist has on current events in the media.

In a study done by FAIR. org, it was discovered that 90% of the news media agreed that the Nightly Network News was not as accurate as it could be (“Examining the Liberal Media Claim” 3). This shows that the media is aware of the problem at hand. However, what it does not show is the impact sloppy reporting has on a respectable journalist. Stereotypes tend to tarnish the work of the entire profession. Many respectable reporters are out working to give the media a decent name. “The performance by local broadcasting and print media during the 1992 Florida hurricanes and the 1993 floods in the Midwest is proof” (73), says Prato. He agrees that the media does have reporters in it that are irresponsible and immoral, but those are the ones that need to be pointed out and scrutinized (73). “It is counter-productive for anyone to...tar the work of the entire profession,” explains the article (Prato 73). There is the belief that the journalists do not show enough respect for, and knowledge of, their readers and communities, but it goes both ways. The readers and communities need to trust those journalists who are doing a decent job. Alexandra Marks explains in her article, “To the Public, the Press too Often Gets it Wrong,” from SIRS Researcher, that the public needs to hold up their end of the deal. This is where the solutions to media problems may lay.

The past is often a blueprint for the future. Lessons learned in the past can change and alter activities later on, and care must be taken in how one writes, and how one interprets the news. Society is informed today. When discrepancies first

appeared, however, the public's difficulty knowing whom to trust was evident.

“ Twenty or thirty years ago there was plenty of plagiarism, embellishment, and other unethical short cuts,” explains Howard Kurtz, media critic for the Washington Post

(qtd. in Koch 1129). The number of cases within the past five, ten, even twenty years, in which the public's well being is put at risk, is what is disturbing. The severity of the cases, and the varying punishments, also cause controversy.

Gays in the military is an issue on the front burner nowadays. In 1993, there was an overwhelming controversy concerning this issue. Most of the reports were negative. However, a positive RAND study never got significant coverage. This report supposedly cost the Pentagon \$1. 2 million, and President Clinton based his 1993 Executive Order on this study. This study, as found on the “ Real News Page” website, revealed that 76% of military participants were against discrimination based upon sexual orientation. When the “ don't ask, don't tell” policy was struck, RAND was reluctantly forced to back itself and it's study off due to the lack of enthusiasm to print controversial issues. As a result, the American people were deprived of a substantial educational document that could have provided research information and facts to the public's debate on gays in the military. , Magazines, newspapers, and TV are responsible in some part for the distribution of this information, and they obviously failed to inform the public in this incident.

Twenty-seven out of 41 articles. That is the ratio for how many of Stephen Glass', an ex-columnist for the magazine New Republic, writings included inaccurate or fabricated information. This may have been one of the most striking and controversial cases because it struck the hardest and it blackened the eyes of journalism (Koch 1129). What shocked most was that Glass was never formally charged, just quietly dismissed.

In the case of CNN and Time Magazine, the issue was not dealt with immediately and modestly. The television news station and the magazine were reporting that the U. S. military was using nerve gas to kill American defectors in Laos during the Vietnam War (Koch 1129). The ““ serious faults in reporting’” were not acknowledged until the U. S. government exposed information that disproved the story. The program and the magazine only then retracted the article (1129).

In the past, cases have been more localized as well. Two Boston Globe columnists, including popular Mike Barnicle, were dismissed for fabricating people and quotes, and plagiarism (Koch 1129). In this case, the situation was handled properly by the staff of the Globe, and dealt with neatly. The guilty were punished, and it was made clear that that sort of behavior would not be tolerated.

The final scandal is that of the Cincinnati Enquirer retracting an 18-page investigative “ expos of the Chiquita Brands Company, apologizing and agreeing to pay \$10 million in damages after learning the reporter had stolen information” (1129). The interesting thing about the Chiquita case is

that the paper has still not said what, if anything, is untrue, says Kurtz (qtd. in Koch 1129). “...it is disturbing that a paper would pay \$10 million before the company even filed suit,” questions Kurtz. The case has come to a close, however, and the public will never know if the information contained in the lengthy report was accurate or not.

In some ways, journalistic ethics have improved over the last half-century (Koch 1129). “ The latest scandals are just because journalists want to be stars, and that goes on in Washington more than anywhere else”, says Koch, defending the media (1129). There are also cases where a crime may be truly grisly, and it might not be in the public’s best interest to have it published. Thus, not all the stories that are not presented in full context are meant to mislead the public.

Cases of past media inaccuracies have affected the way journalism is reported today. As a direct result of early discrepancies, some journalists are taking it as their cue to shape up their reporting. Others are taking the fact that poor reporting in the past has been punishable only with a slap-on-the wrist to mean that lazy and irresponsible reporting is not a concern of the public’s. Some companies are out to prove these journalists wrong.

As stated in Tim Jones’ article, “ Gannett Unveils Rules for Ethical Reporting, Editing,” selected from SIRS Researcher CD-ROM, Gannett Co., Inc., America’s largest paper company, created new ground rules for it’s papers to abide by. These rules include forbidding reporters from misstating their identities, and urging their editors not to publish a story “ if it doesn’t feel right.” According to Jones, Gannett is the owner of 50-some papers worldwide, and this is quite a task to tackle. Misgivings about the paper’s

<https://assignbuster.com/journalistic-integrity/>

confidence are also arising, states Jones, because the paper's affiliated with Gannett have had troubles in the past. These misgivings do not concern the company. Gannett is now satisfied, with the positive image it's projecting, and hopes others follow in it's footsteps, concludes Jones. The company's actions in trying to improve its reputation is a step in the right direction for improving the media.

Gannett is a rare case, however, and other situations in reporting cause groups to try to ignite new changes. Liberals are in an upheaval about conservative slants in the media because "major segments of the media are run and owned by large corporations that tend to favor conservative viewpoints," states the article "Media Bias" (159). Liberals believe that a solution to bias and false reporting is breaking up existing mergers where a few major companies own everything. This currently is a problem because "it makes reporters less likely to cover potentially negative news about the products or management of the network's parent companies" ("Media Bias" 159). The breaking up of mergers does not appeal to many Republicans who contend that the mergers keep the media simple (158). The editorial pages of the American Press have been consistently more Republican as a whole, says David Broder (qtd. in "Media Bias" 158). The compromise expressed by the liberals would also decrease a popular belief that society is plagued by liberal bias. In coming to an agreement, they're setting aside politics to better the media industry.

Changing the media for the better is always a goal of society. Always trying to achieve perfection is the American way. Comments with negative slants

tend to set back society, and change its outlook, however. Nothing can be accomplished in the way of progressing to journalistic heights with comments such as, "...media reform is a societal illness," as stated in the article by Kwame Okoampa-Ahoofe, Jr., found on EBSCOHost. The comment by an anonymous journalist projects the idea that reform is a waste of time, when in reality, in order to succeed, reform and change is necessary. In the future, society can hope that journalists strive to meet the standards their held up to.

Readers and viewers have their own opinions about the way the media handles itself. Distrust of the media increases with time. Forty-six percent of the public believes conversations they have with their family and friends are more reliable than local newspapers, according to a study done by American Journalism Review in Gallup (Newport, Saad 33). Another interesting result of the study was that CNN and Headline News both got a trust percentage of 59 and ranked highest. "Conspicuously missing from the top tier for perceived credibility is the nightly network news, with a net trust rating of only 43%," say Newport and Saad (33). The results confused many journalists such as Carol Marin, who questions how "trash TV can prosper in a climate that people profess to abhor..." (Langone 238). People are proving, however, that they want things to change.

Thomas Rush, a democratic senator from Illinois, wants to get a bill passed in Congress to force inaccuracies and laziness in the media to be more punishable. The Rush bill is aimed to target the incorrect media that is affecting the public directly. Another aspect of the bill is to improve racism in the media work place, which also causes bias (Langone 238). The bill has a <https://assignbuster.com/journalistic-integrity/>

myriad of backing, but the support continues to fuel the fire between the media and the public.

Contention is that the media is irresponsibly presenting the public with information that is either false or bias. The motives behind these actions need to be taken into consideration by the public, however. A myriad of journalists report the news conscientiously, leaving out pieces of stories here and there to either cut down on time, to possibly protect the victim of a crime, or to protect the public from something truly gruesome. These good deeds of responsible journalists do not black out the inferior work of poor journalists. However, the poor journalism should not damage the work of an profession. Thus, journalistic integrity is localized to specific journalists, and it must be society's role to weed these reporters out and separate their poor doings from the rest. Society is teetering on decision. The media has showed themselves, purposely or otherwise, to have inaccuracies in their reporting. The media affects the public's decisions in multiple aspects of life. Unless ““ they the media give the public a sense that they take reporting seriously, I don't think there is an opportunity to regain that trust,”” says Andrew Kohut to Alexandra Marks in the article “ To the Public, the Press too Often Gets it Wrong,” from SIRS Researcher CD-ROM. It can be agreed upon, in retrospect, that the media's reputation has been damaged in not presenting all the information, and it will take time and a different news environment to regain that respect.