



Reflections of a River Rat:

Media loaded with hucksters, not journalists

When I was an everyday journalist, the ultimate compliment you could receive was “he is a newsman.”

Never mind that it ignored more inclusive terms like journalist or newswoman, that awakening occurred later. If you were the ideal “newsman,” you could write on deadline with depth and clarity, you didn’t spare asking sources the tough questions, and your news accounts were balanced and thorough.

That ideal seems mostly gone today, obscured by talking heads on the left or right who pass themselves off as journalists. They talk, they bluster, they spew opinions, but few approach the ideal of a journalist.

Rachel Maddow is not a journalist. Neither is Tucker Carlson or Laura Ingraham or Joe Scarborough or Sean Hannity. They are commentators.

Jim Nantz? Certainly not. He is a showman who hawks golf equipment and credit cards during every commercial break. Sideline reporters? They deliver little of substance.

Conservative radio talk? Sports talk? You are on the outskirts of a black hole.

All of the above perform well at their craft, but they aren’t reporting news. They are issuing their opinions of the news. Their goal is to connect with the pre-existing ideologies and sensibilities on the left and right, hold them to the TVs, tablet or cellphone, and ultimately generate income for their platform.

I cringe when someone refers to an on-air opinion piece, then says, “I heard in the news ...”

Welcome to the media in the 21st Century. When Fox News airs its “fair and balanced” motto, I chuckle. Nothing could further from the truth. Forget the partisanship embedded in most headlines and stories. On your next visit to a Fox



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News website, see if you can find any mention of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas's wife being deeply involved with the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol. Crickets. Nada.

Now cross the aisle to MSNBC. It relishes every misstep, every caustic remark, every feud with Mike Pence and Bill Barr that former President Trump initiates. Think about what type of news sells best for this cable outlet.

Baseball reached a labor deal last week. Critics of the players said they were sticking up their noses at an 8 percent salary hike during negotiations. While baseball salaries stayed flat over the past five years, owners' revenue grew 30 percent. When I snapped on the MLB Network to hear about the settlement, I heard talking heads questioning the players' posture during the 100-day lockout. Then I remembered – MLB is the owners' network.

I reached out to a former teaching colleague and veteran of newspapers, TV and radio in the Rochester market, Tom Proietti, to ask his insight on the state of the media. He shared a research paper that identified Americans as the most polarized news consumers in the world.

We Americans tend to dwell in media “echo chambers.” In other words, we rely on the same silos of news and commentary most days to affirm our political ideologies. This also entrenches our positive or negative views of the liberals and conservatives. America ranks as the most polarized country in the world.

For Proietti, the tug-o-war over news coverage comes down to a simple truth his father told him at the start of the career. “He was brilliant in his straightforwardness,” Proietti said. “He’d say, ‘There are two sides to every story, and probably neither of them is right.’ ”

What Proietti’s father was suggesting 50 years ago remains true today -- bias has a role in what we see on the airwaves, hear over the radio, and read in print. It’s the first lesson in media literacy.

If you consulted the bible of media literacy, some of the chapters might read like:

- Who owns the news source?
- What is the station’s demographic target?
- Why does a shooting, fire or the weather lead over a more substantive story?
- What events got ignored, downplayed or left out?
- How was the news presented in language, images, tone?

By Proietti's account, some of the best journalism occurs on BBC or NPR. The Wall Street Journal, too. He's correct. Conduct your own informal study. Check out some big international stories on CBS out of Watertown, then compare it to CTV or CBC out of Ottawa. Or listen to the BBC report on American politics. You'll find a different tone.

The point is the 5 W's and H -- who, what, when, where, why and how -- still form the basis of our news, but there is not a clear definition of news and opinion any longer. Newspapers used to make it easy for readers by restricting opinion to the op-ed pages. TV stations once labeled pieces commentary. But news writers today have license to offer instant analysis on everything and anything. They try to seek the truth, but they are being drowned out by shouting on the left and right, and an Internet rife with misinformation.

My hope is that 15 or 20 years from today, the media has learned to deftly handle the unhinged propagation of the Big Lie. Hopefully, consumers will look past the convenient charge of "fake news" and ask themselves what they are being sold. Young people already are better than the 55-plus crowd at doing this. They triangulate the news from reading websites, listening to podcasts, watching news shows and consulting the Internet.

The model of my youth -- the silo event of watching the evening network news -- has winnowed to a historical low of about 6 percent, or 21 million viewers, from a U.S. population of 330-plus million. It breaks down each evening to about 8 million each for ABC and NBC, and 5 million for CBS. Cable outlets seem to be everywhere, but they are a comparatively smaller silo.

Fox remains the largest at about 1.3 million viewers daily, but I take comfort that it reaches only .5 percent of the population. I cringe whenever family members quote Fox News -- I prefer Fear News for as unfair and unbalanced as it remains.

Even though our nation is become increasingly polarized, at the same time its younger generation is becoming more savvy. I'm counting on the next generation to improve on today's standard of finding the truth in media.

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