



CAN YOU TRUST THE PRESS?

JUDITH MILLER

Liberal or conservative, male or female, young or old, Americans love to bash the news media. Once among the nation's most trusted institutions, the news media have fallen from grace.

According to Gallup, even as recently as 2000 a majority of Americans trusted the press; by 2015 it had fallen to 40 percent; and lower than that, 36 percent, among those 18 to 49. It's hard to see how this decline will be reversed. The industry has become politically polarized and, in the highly competitive age of multiple 24-hour cable news channels and the Internet, it's under severe financial pressure. And this compounds an even deeper problem – failing journalistic standards.

In the 1950s, the media universe consisted mainly of a few national television broadcast networks, and local TV and radio stations, most of which got much of their “news” from major wire services and the nation's large newspapers. Most journalists were committed to producing “objective” journalism – fact-based stories independent of the government and of political parties. A reporter's job was to report, not offer opinion or advocate. Presented with the facts, it was up to readers to make their own judgments about news events. Opinions were supposed to be confined to editorial and op-ed pages.

That world no longer exists.

This lack of objectivity and the decline of standards is one reason, though not the only one, why newspapers and news magazines are a declining industry. According to Pew Research, print revenue from newspaper sales has declined from \$47 billion in 2006 to \$16 billion in 2014. Digital sales haven't come close to making up the difference. Most papers have been forced to cut operating expenses: slash staff and close bureaus – overseas, in particular. Ironically, there are more stories than ever to cover and fewer staff than ever to cover them.

This lack of information from professional journalists has been filled by a new source – social media and the blogosphere. When the Iraq war, which I covered for the New York Times, began in 2003, there were roughly one hundred thousand bloggers. Only a few years later, there were an estimated twenty-seven million.

The Internet as a news source has obvious pluses and minuses. On the plus side is that information is spread widely and instantly. The minuses have to do with the fact that the quality of reporting varies dramatically. It's not easy to separate the wheat from the chaff. Furthermore, many sites, including mainstream sites, have abandoned traditional journalistic practices and standards in search of more and more “eyeballs.” Objectivity, once the gold standard of reporting, is now often seen as old-fashioned, a ratings loser. When success is

measured mainly in terms of “clicks,” the outrageous beats the sober just about every time. Inserting opinion, even in the middle of a news story, is a way in which journalists can distinguish themselves. And in mainstream media outlets, those opinions overwhelmingly tend to be liberal. This might not be so bad if journalists acknowledged their bias. But they almost never do. Yet the bias is obvious.

According to a 2014 study by two Indiana University professors, reporters who identify as Democrats outnumber those who identify as Republicans by 4 to 1, 28 percent to 7 percent. The remaining 65 percent call themselves independent. But based on my long experience as a reporter, this is a fiction. That is, many reporters like to describe themselves as independent, but they’re not – not really. By any fair measure this group is overwhelmingly on the political Left. The obvious liberal bias has only served to push conservative readers to those sources that cater to conservative themes – further polarizing the media landscape. And, unable to attract conservatives, the mainstream media have chosen to double down on views and themes that appeal to their liberal constituency.

To give just one example, when Fox News broke a story in January 2016 about the discovery of top secret intelligence on the private email server that Hillary Clinton used while Secretary of State – classified information which she had denied ever having sent or received – the New York Times buried this news story deep inside the paper.

A decline in reporting standards, a decline in revenue and increase in bias have made many wary of the people who provide them with their news. A certain amount of skepticism is a healthy thing, but a thriving democracy depends on a dynamic and free press.

As much as people may like to bash the media, most people would far prefer to trust it.

I’m Judith Miller, contributing editor of City Journal for Prager University.