



WHY NO ONE TRUSTS THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA

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Trust in the media is at an all-time low—and for good reason.

We in the business of journalism have exempted ourselves from the normal rules that used to govern us, and so the most egregious kinds of reporting errors are becoming more common. Formerly well-respected news organizations and experienced national reporters are making the sorts of mistakes that wouldn't be tolerated in journalism school.

When these mistakes are corrected at all, it's with seemingly little regret. And the corrections never get anywhere near as much attention as the original salacious—but incorrect—narrative.

How did we get here?

I discuss that in detail in my book, *The Smear*.

Here are three factors:

First, firewalls that once strictly separated news from opinion have been replaced by hopelessly blurred lines. Once-forbidden practices, such as editorializing within straight news reports and the inclusion of opinions as if fact, are not only tolerated—they're encouraged. The result: It's never been harder for Americans to separate news that's real from news that's not.

Example: May 14, 2016, ten days after Donald Trump became the Republican presidential nominee, the *New York Times* published a blockbuster article titled, "Crossing the Line: How Donald Trump Behaved with Women in Private." The story's authors, Michael Barbaro and Megan Twohey, interviewed Rowanne Lane, an ex-girlfriend of Trump's. Her quotes made Trump sound, at best, like a jerk, and at worst, like a predator.

The reporters went so far as to provide their own quotes for the story, presenting their personal commentary as if it were established fact, writing, "This is the public treatment of some women by Mr. Trump...degrading, impersonal, performed."

The problem is, the reporting wasn't true—according to Trump's supposed victim. Once the story was published, she publicly accused the *Times* of misleading her, writing a "hit piece" against Trump and putting a "negative connotation" on what—she said—was "not...a negative experience."

No matter where you stand, this was a huge development in terms of journalism: the main source behind front-page national news discredited the entire premise of the story.

You'd expect something like that to rock the whole news organization and prompt investigations, a retraction, and re-examination of policies. Yet, I can find no record of any of that. The Times and their reporters never even apologized or printed a correction.

Second, though we may personally like or dislike a politician, as journalists we're obligated to treat them the same. Too often, that's not the case.

For example: In May 2008, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama said he had visited 57 states. Since there are only 50 states, everyone knew what he meant. He meant to say was that he had visited 47 states. The remark, nothing more than a verbal gaffe, drew little attention. And it didn't deserve more. But when Sarah Palin made a comparable gaffe, saying, "We've got to stand with our North Korean allies," she was relentlessly ridiculed and mocked in the media even though everyone knew she meant to say "South Korean allies."

Third, too many of us have allowed ourselves to become tools of politicians and spin-meisters—often in order to get something in return. I call this "transactional journalism."

Example: Emails show in July 2009, The Atlantic reporter Marc Ambinder was promised a scoop. He'd get an advanced copy of a speech by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton— but only if he followed certain conditions, as privately dictated by Clinton aide Philippe Reines.

Reines emailed Ambinder precise instructions, including: "Describe Clinton's voice as 'muscular'" and "Don't say you were blackmailed," by which Clinton aide Reines obviously meant, "Don't reveal our arrangement." "Got it," replied Ambinder.

His resulting article reads in part: "When you think of President Obama's foreign policy, think of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. That's the message behind a muscular speech that Clinton is set to deliver today."

That Ambinder, then considered a serious journalist, would allegedly violate basic ethics for such a minor story speaks volumes about the state of today's news media.

For the record, Ambinder defended himself by saying that he found Clinton's speech to be muscular, so the adjective was appropriate.

I think most Americans would like to believe their news is factual, well researched, and untainted by a reporter's opinion. To put it another way, they want their news straight up. But too often now, that's not what they're getting, and they know it.

I'm frequently asked, "Can the news be fixed?" The answer is yes...but the first step to fixing a problem is admitting that we have one.

Until we do that, nothing can change.

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