



# Journalists Should Be Skeptical

By

Mark McGee



## Shaken and Stirred

We've already established that the majority of news consumers in the United States don't trust the news media. That should "shake" journalists to the core; not because journalists should ever expect everyone to agree with their reporting, but because of how far and how quickly the fall has occurred.

Gallup reported last October that Americans' Trust in Media Dips to Second Lowest on Record.

Americans' trust in the media to report the news fully, accurately and fairly has edged down four percentage points since last year to 36%, making this year's reading the second lowest in Gallup's trend.

Continuing with the *James Bond* theme for another moment, I believe journalism needs an internal “stirring.” I say that based on being involved in journalism for 55 years and having been a news consumer ten years prior to that. We need to take a serious look inside our newsrooms and consider what can be done to regain the trust of those we serve — the public.

As I mentioned in a previous newsletter, journalists should be at least four things —

1. Curious
2. Skeptical
3. Objective
4. Accurate

We looked at being *curious* last time, so we turn next to being **skeptical**.

# Be Skeptical

A journalist should be **skeptical**.

**skeptical** - an attitude of doubt or a disposition to incredulity either in general or toward a particular object — *Merriam-Webster*



Being skeptical in the original sense of the word (from the Greek *skeptikos*) means being “an inquirer.” That’s someone who is “unsatisfied and still looking for truth” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). It doesn’t mean that we

are still skeptical when we find the truth. Skepticism ends when truth is found. It means we're not *satisfied* until truth is found. Truth should satisfy the skeptic. Truth is always the goal.

Like you, I am a news consumer. I read dozens of news stories every day on a wide variety of news sites. What I mean by a *wide variety* is at least a dozen news sites each morning that vary in how they lean. Some lean to the left and some lean to the right. Unfortunately, it's difficult to find news sites that don't have a political or social leaning (as in "just the news").

The same is true when we listen to news on the radio and watch it on television. It becomes obvious as you hear or see news stories on different stations that something's not right. The stories are either missing information or presenting conflicting information. It's very difficult as a news consumer to get to the truth about many stories

because the people behind the news often don't do their job of *being skeptical*.

## No Leaning Allowed

You might wonder in which direction I lean. Hopefully, I don't. I was trained as a young journalist to be a political independent and social moderate. Most people understand that a political "independent" is not a member or supporter of any political party, but what's a social moderate?

**Social Moderate** —Being within reasonable limits; not excessive or extreme. *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 5th Edition*

Why would it be important for a journalist to be a political independent and social moderate? Here's an example —

The fact that I was an atheist with strong feelings about many political and social issues in the 1960s (e.g. ending the Vietnam War, improving civil rights, legalizing abortion, legalizing marijuana, etc.) made becoming a journalist an interesting challenge for me during that decade. Fortunately, my professors and early news directors demanded neutrality from me as a journalist. That meant in the newsroom, on the street, and on the air. I had to be both politically independent and socially moderate in my approach to gathering and reporting news.

Becoming a Christian several years later didn't affect my views on politics, but it did have an impact on my view about people and society. I saw both through the lens of a God who loves the world and created humans in His image. Would that change the way I reported news stories? While I personally gained more empathy and



compassion for people as a Christian, the training I had received as a journalist continued to help me cover all stories without leaning in any particular political or social direction.

Bottom line: *no leaning allowed in journalism*. That should be a rule in every newsroom. However, as we saw in a recent newsletter, some news organizations have changed their ethics policies to allow journalists to openly protest and march for social causes, and participate in political rallies. What should news consumers think about how those journalists cover stories on politics or social issues? Some would certainly question whether they could trust their reporting. We've also seen that some news organizations with stricter written policies about journalistic activism are often lax in enforcing those policies with their journalists.

**activist journalism** — The use of journalistic skills within \*activist media to report on, and inspire political engagement with, one or more issues. Activist journalists are typically activists first and journalists second, with the latter function serving the former. *Oxford Dictionary of Journalism*

While there is some debate about whether *activist* or *advocacy* journalism can be objective, my own experience as a journalist is that solid journalism should come before any action is recommended. It's a topic worth discussing and we will in future newsletters.

## Skeptical of Powerful People

I have long been skeptical of what people in power say and how they answer my questions. Just because someone in power says something does not make it true. Powerful people at every level of government, military, business, education, and religion may or may not be telling the truth at any given time. Our job as journalists is to be *skeptical* of what powerful people and their allies tell us until we find the truth. Once truth is found, we can report the truth and be satisfied that truth has been told. Then we move on to the next story with the same curiosity, skepticism, and drive to find truth again. It's a wonderful process that will get you up early in the morning and keep you up late at night.

That truth-seeking skepticism led me to become an investigative reporter and eventually manage a team of investigative reporters. Unfortunately, there are not many investigative reporters today. Instead of investigating, many reporters simply repeat what powerful people tell them. If you find that what powerful people say is not true, confront them and get their response. Don't be afraid to find the truth and report it.

I will admit that it is not an easy thing to report stories that are negative of powerful people. I've had powerful people come at me verbally and even physically in courtrooms, in the halls of government, and on the street. I've had government and private employees yell at me and give me a one-finger salute because of stories I did about their employers. That's part of being an investigative journalist. Let me add that it also includes the photographers, producers, editors, and managers who work with investigative journalists. The entire investigative team

comes under attack from powerful people who don't like where a story may be headed.

I can tell you from personal experience that *real* journalism will take over your life. It can also be tough on your family and friends. They can also be threatened. Journalism is a high calling that comes with a personal price, but a price worth paying in a free society.

## Beware of First Impressions

Journalists need to be careful about first impressions. What I mean by that is your first impression of a powerful person. Powerful people include government and business leaders. We get to meet and interview presidents, vice-presidents, senators, congresspeople, governors, state legislators, mayors, city councilors, school board members, and heads of government departments. We get to meet and interview CEOs of large companies and leaders of major colleges and universities. We may also have the opportunity to meet and interview national celebrities (e.g. actors, musicians, sports stars).

Meeting powerful people and getting the opportunity to interview them for news stories is certainly a privilege for a journalist. However, it can also be a dangerous trap if we're not careful. What I mean by being careful is that we need to remain *skeptical* during the news gathering process. Some of the people who became most angry with me as a journalist were those who had tried to get me on their side when I first covered them. The only "side" a journalist should ever take is the *side of truth*.

## News Consumer Skepticism

I also recommend that news consumers be skeptical. Just like journalists should be skeptical of powerful people and what they say, news consumers should be skeptical of journalists and what they say.

You may think that a strange thing for a journalist to recommend, but I'm serious. Journalists should not get a pass from news consumers just because they're on television or radio or published in print or online. Journalists are also powerful people. I would argue more powerful than they should be, but I'll address that in a future newsletter.



Depending on your age you may remember a time when news consumers had a limited choice in news. I remember in the 1950s that we had a morning newspaper, afternoon newspaper, three television stations with newscasts in the evening, and a few radio stations with newscasts during the day. We read the papers, watched our favorite TV station news, and listened to news on the radio. Our trust in the news media was pretty high 65 years ago.

My father was interested in the news of the day, and so I watched local and national newscasts with him after supper. Seeing those news anchors and moderators of the mid-50s started my interest in becoming a journalist. I remember watching journalists like Edward R. Murrow, John Cameron Swayze, Lawrence Spivak, Chet Huntley, David Brinkley, Douglas Edwards, and later Walter Cronkite.

Did the journalists of the 50s and 60s deserve a higher level of trust than today's journalists? That is debatable as we look back at the history of mid-century news coverage, but the majority of news consumers thought they could trust what journalists said and wrote.

One of the early polls about trust in the mass media showed that 72% of Americans trusted what the media told them (Gallup, 1976). However, as I mentioned at the beginning of this newsletter, that number has fallen dramatically to just 36%.

In all, 7% of U.S. adults say they have "a great deal" and 29% "a fair amount" of trust and confidence in newspapers, television and radio news reporting -- which, combined, is four points above the 32% record low in 2016, amid the divisive presidential election campaign between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. In

addition, 29% of the public currently registers "not very much" trust and 34% have "none at all." Gallup Poll

A recent Edelman poll also tracked news consumer trust. It found that 58% of American news consumers think “most news organizations are more concerned with supporting an ideology or political position than with informing the public.” (As reported in Mediaite and Axios)

Without a trusted leadership source to look to, people don’t know where or who to get reliable information. The global infodemic has driven trust in all news sources to record lows with **social media** (35 percent) and owned media (41 percent) the least trusted; traditional media (53 percent) saw the largest drop in trust at eight points globally. Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021

One way of looking at the falling trust in news media is that news consumers are holding journalists accountable. Consumers are voting with their feet. If they don't like what they see, hear or read, they go somewhere else. The question for many news consumers is where. Where do you go for news you can trust? Look for journalists who are **curious** and **skeptical**.

## Newsletter Purpose

The purpose of this newsletter is to help journalists understand how to do *real journalism* and the public know how they can find *news they can trust* on a daily basis. It's a simple purpose, but complicated to accomplish. We'll do our best to make it as clear as we can in future newsletters.



1960s Radio News © Mark McGee

