Follow The Candidates

How Journalists Cover Political Campaigns

By

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This is another election year. Journalists have an excellent opportunity to report about candidates for various local, state, and federal elections. Journalists have both primaries and a general election to cover, which gives them many opportunities to gather, confirm, and report truth about candidates and the real issues at stake for the voting public.

Keep in mind that candidates are not celebrities. Journalists should not fawn over political candidates. They are people with families, careers, and histories. They are people who want the public's vote for a variety of reasons. Some candidates want the power and influence that come along with holding political office. Maybe they'll use that power wisely — maybe they won't. Some candidates want to be part of improving government even at personal cost. Your honest and objective reporting could help the public come to the best conclusion about motives.

Who are the candidates — really? Not who do they say they are in their campaign speeches and ads, and not what their opponents say about them. After covering hundreds of campaigns through decades of voting, I've generally found the truth to be somewhere between what the candidates claim about themselves and what their opponents say about them. Do some original journalism and help news consumers cut through the usual campaign year clutter to reveal the truth about each candidate. Who are they — really?

If the candidates are incumbents or have held previous political office, ask them probing questions about what they are doing now or what they did previously for the public. Do your research before the interviews and bring documents and statistical information with you. Be curious and skeptical. Don't be misled by shiny objects candidates will use to distract you.

Keep your eyes and ears open. The longer you cover elections, the better you'll get at sensing whether you're getting to the truth or uncovering deception. It's easy to make promises. It's much harder to keep them. The public deserves to know what's real and what's not.

If candidates have never held office, find out what they've done in previous jobs. That can tell you a lot about what they might do with the power of public office and access to taxpayer money. If they ran a business, how they did that might give some insight into how they would operate in a public-funded office. Find out why they really want the elected position and what they would if they got it.

Politicians are supposed to work for the public good. Don't let them slip and slide away from answering your tough questions. Be politely diligent in your questioning. Don't forget to talk with people who have known the candidates for many years. That includes family, friends, employers, employees, co-workers, and neighbors. Be sure to include people who may have complained about the candidate in the past. Check the courthouse for legal documents that might give you insight into problems or issues the candidate might prefer to keep out of the public light. Any lawsuits filed by or against them? Property legal issues? Family legal issues?

I also recommend that journalists familiarize themselves with libel and slander laws pertaining to political candidates. Once a private citizen announces that they're running for public office, their legal protection changes in the eyes of the law. That's because the law provides greater protection for people who did not voluntarily place themselves in the public eye.

These definitions from Merriam-Webster's Law Dictionary may be of some guidance in how to approach people for stories.

- Public Figure — an individual or entity that has acquired fame or notoriety or has participated in a particular public controversy
- Public Official — a person holding a public office the nature of which requires that in order for the person to prevail in a defamation action he or she must show actual malice on the part of the defendant

Public figures and officials have legal rights, so be cautious in what you say or write about them. However, legal precedent has allowed journalists more leeway in covering them.

> There are some people who are in the public spotlight, who must endure the opinions and publications of the public, largely without recourse. Statements made about people such as government officials, political candidates, celebrities, sports players, and authors, are usually exempt from claims defamation, whether

the claims are libelous or slanderous. This is true even if the statements, or pictures, are untrue and damaging. If, however, untrue statements are made about such a public person with malice, or with hate and a desire to cause harm with no regard for the truth, the public person may have a right to bring a civil lawsuit. Legal Dictionary

General Elections

I've been a political Independent since starting as a journalist in the 1960s, and so I've never voted in a primary. Who political parties choose to represent them in general elections was a matter for party members. My job was to cover the primaries accurately and objectively. Even though I did vote in general elections, that did not change the way I covered the general election campaigns — whether local, state, or federal. I hope you as a journalist will do the same during this election season. Be accurate. Be objective.

News or Opinion?

One more word about following political candidates as a journalist. There is a difference between *reporting* the news and expressing *opinions* about the news. That includes candidates.

When I started in news 55 years ago the difference was clear in both print and broadcast. Editorials and opinion pieces were presented by non-news personnel in special segments of a newscast (e.g. editorial segment) and special sections of a newspaper (e.g. editorial page). The segment often began with a verbal or written announcement that what viewers were about to see or read was an ‘editorial’ that did not necessarily represent the views of the station or its advertisers. The same was true for newspapers. Media owners used to care about making sure audiences knew whether they were getting news or opinion. The two were separated on purpose — and for good reason.

Unfortunately, that's not the case with many networks, cable outlets, local stations, and newspapers today. Some news anchors express strong opinions about the news content in their shows, including candidates for public office. The methods they use are sometimes subtle, which means news consumers have to be on alert. Subtlety can be as simple as a facial expression or eye roll from a reporter, anchor, or host. Some reporters add personal opinion to the stories they cover. Journalists who do live reporting will banter with the show hosts about their personal opinions of the story or candidate they are covering. That often leads viewers to misunderstand opinion as news content.

Guests who have obvious biases are often presented as experts on subjects without alerting viewers to their biases and personal or professional backgrounds. Their expertise often disguises their bias, personal preference, and opinion. The lines are blurred to the point that the public thinks it's getting news when it's really getting opinion. That goes toward the loss of trust the public has in the news media today. It is unfortunate and has only gotten worse over time.

Journalists need to do better in this area if they ever hope to rebuild trust with the viewing/listening/reading public.

1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee