



The Power of Honest Journalism

The Power To Do Good

By

Mark McGee

As we approach the beginning of a new year, I want to share some thoughts about ‘honest journalism’ and its inherent power to do ‘good’ for our country.

In a ‘constitutional republic’ like the United States, an honest news media could and should hold ‘powerful officials’ to account for how they use the ‘power’ the electorate gives them. When I was in college and entering professional journalism in the 1960s, I was taught that journalists were the ‘watchdogs’ for both the Constitution and the rights of citizens.

The profession of journalism is enshrined in the First Amendment —

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.
First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black wrote this about the purpose of a ‘free press’ in 1971 in the case of *New York Times Co. v. United States* — “*The press was to serve the governed, not the governors.*”

I agree. The job of honest journalism is to ‘protect the weak against the strong.’ When journalism changes to protect the strong (government) against the weak (governed), the system of checks and balances breaks down quickly. That’s not what the Founders of our country intended.

Journalists should never ‘carry water’ for the government. Journalists should not be cheerleaders for elected officials. Journalists should never act as ‘protectors’ of the people who govern. They should not be ‘spokespeople’ (‘mouth pieces’) for the government. Those behaviors are abhorrent and against the purpose of being a ‘press that is free.’ Journalists are not employees of governments — at least not in the United States.

[One caveat — NPR and PBS receive some public tax-supported funding through the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967.]

Thomas Jefferson, Founding Father and third President of the United States, wrote this about the importance of the ‘freedom of the press’ —

No experiment can be more interesting than that we are now trying, and which we trust will end in establishing the fact, that man may be governed by reason and truth. Our first object should therefore be, to leave open to him all the avenues to truth. The most effectual hitherto found, is the freedom of the press.

I am...for freedom of the press, and against all violations of the constitution to silence by force and not by reason the complaints or criticisms, just or unjust, of our citizens against the conduct of their agents. The Heritage Foundation

The Problem

However, we have a big problem with the ‘press/news media’ today. Some people who work in journalism are not ‘honest and fair’ in their coverage of news. They have the Constitutional right to be dishonest and unfair in their coverage of news, but that doesn’t make it right.

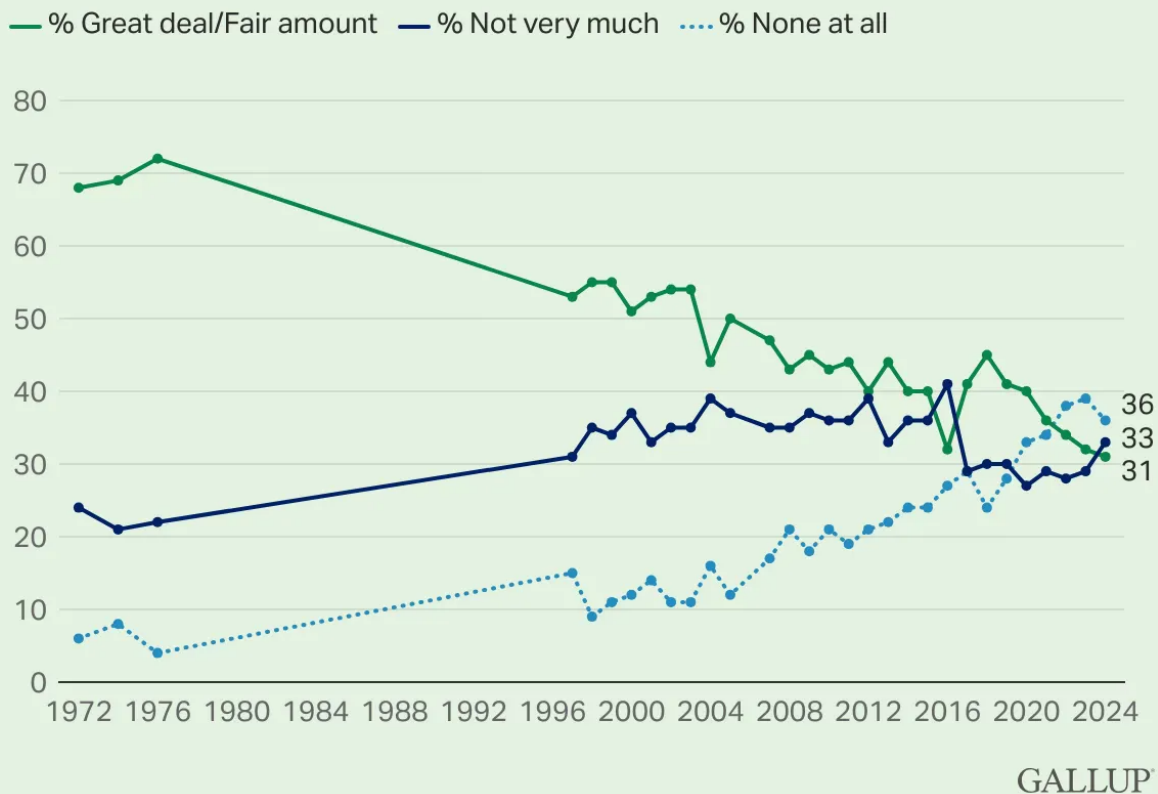
I write those words with great sadness — wishing I could say how great journalism is in our country — but that wouldn’t be honest. I’m not the only journalist to believe that, and I’m certainly not the only citizen —

For the third consecutive year, more U.S. adults have no trust at all in the media (36%) than trust it a great deal or fair amount. Another 33% of Americans express “not very much” confidence. Gallup, October 14, 2024

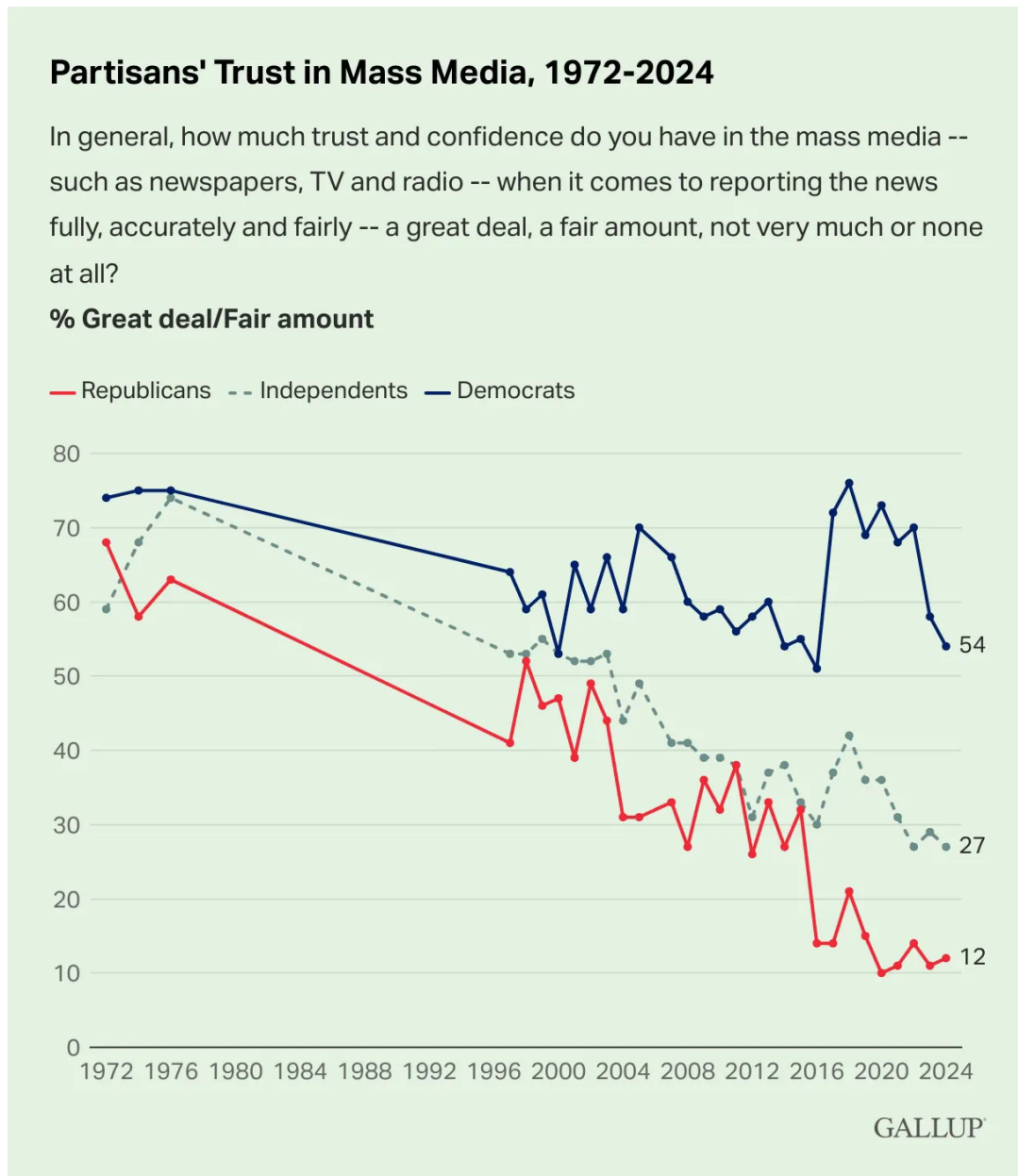
I began working as a journalist in 1967. The American public had a much higher trust in the news media then than it does now. Here's a look at American's trust in mass media from 1972-2024 according to Gallup —

Americans' Trust in Mass Media, 1972-2024

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media -- such as newspapers, TV and radio -- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?



I'm a political independent — as should be all journalists. Interestingly, independents' trust in the media has fallen from 74% in 1976 to just 27% in 2024.



That's extremely sad considering that these are political 'independents.' Independents are 'independents' for important reasons. They don't want to be beholden to any political party. They want to make decisions about their lives and country 'independent' of any particular political party influence.

The news media has failed independents who simply want to know the truth. Independents are not interested in the personal opinions of journalists who often insert their 'activist' positions into their news stories. Independents are not impressed with activist journalism, as well they shouldn't.

It should come as no surprise that registered Republican trust in the news media has fallen from 68% in 1972 to only 12% in 2024. Democrat trust in the news media is higher, but still fell from 74% in 1972 to 54% in 2024 — not as large a drop, but still less trust in the news media. That may seem a bit surprising to some journalists since the vast majority of journalists who admit their political affiliation say they are Democrats.

That in itself is not acceptable to me as a journalist and long-time news manager. Every journalist should be a political ‘independent’ — a true independent — not beholden to any political party or candidate. Imagine an army of independent journalists who care about only one thing — gathering and reporting the truth without any hint of political bias. If that were true, I believe the public’s trust in the news media would grow rapidly and our country would be in a better place.

As I mentioned earlier, the Founders of our nation thought so highly of a free press (media) that they included it as part of the ‘First Amendment’ to the Constitution. They realized that the success of the new nation would depend on a public that could express itself openly and receive news and information from a free and unfettered press.

If you research the history of the American news media, you'll see that the 'free press' has had its ups and downs as far as being fair and accurate since the founding of the United States. Fortunately, the early twentieth century saw the beginning of the era of 'professional' journalism with students attending journalism schools that taught 'standards' of how journalists should do their jobs. Those schools grew to emphasize the importance of journalists being 'neutral' and 'objective' in their reporting. As more students graduated and were employed by newspapers, and eventually broadcast news organizations, journalism became known as a 'profession.'

It is unfortunate that the emphasis on objective journalism waned toward the end of the 20th century into the 21st century. Many journalism professors, news managers, and press/media companies changed from being honest to promoting agendas and pandering to groups and people with similar political and social views. That was never the intention of the 'profession' of journalism or the 'Founders' of our country who wanted a 'free press.' Because of that, the

percentage of people who trust the news media has fallen dramatically.

Can Journalism Be Saved?

Can journalists reclaim a position of trust with the public? Yes, but ... it will take a huge shift in the news 'industry,' beginning with a large portion of humility and self-evaluation. My concern is that current news organizations, including schools of journalism, have no interest in changing. That's sad because the public is leaving 'mainstream/legacy journalism' in the dust. People want news they can trust, so they're finding alternative ways of getting their 'news.'

The lack of honesty in much of 'legacy mass media' has given birth to podcasts, websites, videos, social media, and other forms of 'independent information delivery.' However, moving from 'legacy media' to 'new media' doesn't guarantee that the information and news reported will be more honest. Many in 'new media' also have agendas and biases which cause them to be less than honest in their reporting.

I recently wrote about a Pew Research poll that found many American voters are having a hard time ‘distinguishing fact from fiction.’ While it is the job of real journalists to cover, confirm, and report the truth, many people accuse journalists of being biased and inaccurate —

A new Pew Research Center survey finds that about three-quarters of U.S. adults (73%) say they have seen inaccurate news coverage about the election at least somewhat often, including 37% who have seen this kind of information extremely or very often.

About half of Americans (52%) say they generally find it difficult to determine what is true and what is not when getting news about the election. And 28% separately say that it’s been difficult for them to find reliable information about the presidential election.

Pew Research

This does not bode well for journalism, whether mainstream or alternative. If a large majority of Americans don't trust journalists, where will they go to find honest reporting of news and information? Journalists, news managers, and corporate media leaders need to humble themselves and do the hard work of evaluating where they've gone wrong. If they'll do that and admit their errors to the American public, journalism 'might' be saved. I say 'might be saved' because it will take a long time to rebuild the trust that has been lost.

The Power of Honest Journalism

There is real ‘power’ in honest journalism. Journalists have made important contributions to communities, states, and nations by holding ‘powerful’ people in government and business accountable for their words and deeds. The work of honest journalists can improve the lives of the citizens they are supposed to represent.

Journalists have the ‘means’ to report information that can accomplish the true meaning of a ‘free press.’ The question is whether they have the ‘desire’ to put aside personal and corporate biases and do the work of ‘real journalism.’



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee