



From Truman To Trump

Journalistic Objectivity in Covering Politics

By

Mark McGee

In the last parts of this series I've shared some of the reasons that many younger journalists want to change ethical standards in journalism that have stood for more than a century, specifically the standard of 'objectivity.' Here's a reminder from the last part —

“The consensus among younger journalists is that we got it all wrong,” Emilio Garcia-Ruiz, editor in chief of the San Francisco Chronicle, told former Washington Post executive editor Leonard Downie Jr. They believe: “objectivity has got to go.”

“Amid all the profound challenges and changes roiling the American news media today, newsrooms are debating whether traditional objectivity should still be the standard for news reporting. “Objectivity” is defined by most dictionaries as expressing or using facts without distortion by personal beliefs, bias, feelings or prejudice. Journalistic objectivity has been generally understood to mean much the same thing.” Newsrooms that move beyond ‘objectivity’ can build trust

“In some cases, that has led to newsrooms leaning into their reporters’ personal perspectives, as when reporter Kevin Rector of the LA Times wrote about the legal threats to gay marriage via the lens of his same-sex marriage. Is Objectivity Still Worth Pursuing?”

Perspective For Younger Journalists

I was born soon after the end of World War II and have lived under 14 U.S. Presidents, from Harry S. Truman to Donald J. Trump. Every one of them had their supporters and detractors. They were often vilified for their policy positions and attacked professionally and personally. One of them, John F. Kennedy, was assassinated in 1963. His brother, Robert Kennedy, was assassinated following a presidential campaign event in 1968. Alabama Governor George Wallace was shot and paralyzed when he ran for president in 1972. President Ronald Reagan was shot and almost killed in 1981 at the beginning of his first term. President Trump was shot and almost killed during his political run for a second term in 2024. Trump faced a second attempt at one of his golf courses a couple of months later. Trump also faced numerous other physical threats ([Newsweek](#)).

Some of my older relatives told me about serious political differences, including violence, during the decades before I was born (including Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt). Some of them also told me what their older relatives told them about presidents and their opponents who had lived in the early to mid-1800's and the dangers they faced, including President Abraham Lincoln who was assassinated in 1865.

The first President I covered as a journalist was Lyndon Johnson, which means I've been involved in reporting about presidential campaigns for decades. I also covered hundreds of local, state, and other national political campaigns (e.g. U.S. Senate, House of Representatives) during that same period of time. I have personally witnessed verbal and physical violence among political candidates and their followers. Unfortunately, political violence is not new. So, why would journalists want to do away with objectivity when that's exactly what our country needs so badly at this moment?

The Desire for Change

Where did journalists get the idea that objectivity had no place in the ‘era of Trump?’ Look no further than their journalism professors, mentors, and managers.

“Traditional journalistic norms and conventions for covering politics and politicians were not created for a president like Donald Trump,” said Rod Hicks, executive editor of the St. Louis American and formerly the director of ethics and diversity at the Society of Professional Journalists.”

“One of the legacies of Donald Trump’s presidency is that politicians have learned they can manipulate the press—more so than before—with few, if any, repercussions. Traditional journalistic norms and conventions for covering politics and politicians were not created for a president like Donald Trump.” Rod Hicks

I'm a former member of the Society of Professional Journalists, so Hicks' words caught my attention. The SPJ meetings and conferences I attended in the past promoted what I thought were among the highest ethical standards for journalists. So, why would a former director of ethics at SPJ say that covering President Trump was an exception to 'traditional journalistic norms and conventions?'

Hicks is not new to journalism. He just became the Executive Editor of the St. Louis American newspaper this past summer. Here's how the newspaper introduced him to its readers:

"Rod Hicks, a longtime journalist and unwavering advocate for diverse newsrooms, inclusive news coverage and high ethical standards, has been selected to lead the St. Louis American as its top editor.

A newsroom leader with four decades of journalism experience, Hicks will oversee the editorial direction of The American with a focus on elevating its digital presence, strengthening its connection with its

audience and raising the overall quality of its journalism.

Most recently, Hicks served as director of ethics and diversity at the Society of Professional Journalists, where he helped shape national conversations on professional integrity and newsroom inclusivity. He also helped journalists across the country navigate ethical challenges, drawing on the SPJ Code of Ethics and his extensive newsroom experience.” The St. Louis American

Rod Hicks is one of the ‘leaders’ in American journalism, meaning his words and deeds have deeply impacted young journalists. Hick’s own journalism background included a BA at the University of Alabama and an MS in Journalism at Northwestern University. Hicks spent many years as a reporter and editor at various newspapers in Alabama, New Jersey, Michigan, Missouri, and Pennsylvania, in addition to his work with SPJ.

As ‘Journalist on Call’ and ‘Director of Ethics and Diversity’ for SPJ, Hicks would have been honor-bound to abide by the organization’s Code of Ethics:

“Maintaining high ethical standards is essential to the practice of journalism, particularly in a climate of eroding public trust in the American press and the pervasive spread of misinformation. The Society of Professional Journalists devotes considerable effort to advancing ethical journalism through a variety of resources, programs, training opportunities and our widely recognized Code of Ethics.” Society of Professional Journalists

The Preamble to the SPJ Code of Ethics reads:

“Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity.” SPJ

Though the words ‘objective’ or ‘objectivity’ are not mentioned in the SPJ Code, the words ‘fair’ and ‘fairness’ are mentioned. Those words are synonyms for ‘objectivity,’ so I would expect anyone associated with SPJ to be objective (fair) in their reporting.

The word ‘objectivity’ means “lack of favoritism toward one side or another” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Read that again — “lack of favoritism toward one side or another.” News consumers should know that when they turn on their television or radio news program, or read their favorite newspaper or online news, they are getting news that has a ‘lack of favoritism toward one side or another.’ That would go a long way to revising public trust in the news media.

Another strong voice in the push to change ‘ethical standards’ in the era of Trump is Jay Rosen. He recently retired from being an Associate Professor of Journalism at NYU for 39 years and plans to continue his work as a consultant to journalists. He is the author of *What Are Journalists For?* (Yale University Press, 1999), and *The New News V. the Old News: The Press and Politics in the 1990s*.

He received his BA at State University of New York in Buffalo, and his MA and PhD at New York University. He became a junior professor in NYU's journalism program and later served as chair of the department.

Rosen has been a vocal opponent of Donald Trump for the past decade. Here are some of Rosen's views that he passed along to his students, fellow journalism professors, those who have read his writings, and those he consults:

“We have a two-party system and one of the two is anti-democratic. By “anti-democratic” I mean willing to destroy key institutions to prevail in the contest for power. This is true, not only of individual politicians, but of the party as a whole. As (Republican) and Washington Post columnist Michael Gerson writes, “For the activist base of the Republican Party, affirming that Donald Trump won the 2020 presidential contest has become a qualification for membership in good standing.” A qualification for membership.

Journalists had adapted to the old system by developing a “both sides” model of news coverage. It locates the duties of a non-partisan press in the middle between roughly similar parties with competing philosophies. That mental model still undergirds almost all activity in political journalism. But it is falling apart. As I wrote five years ago, asymmetry between the major parties fries the circuits of the mainstream press.

We are well beyond that point now. Now we live in a two-party world where one of the two is anti-democratic. Circuits fried, the press has to figure out what to do. I spend a majority of my puzzling time on that.

The GOP is both counter-majoritarian and counter-factual. By “counter-majoritarian” I mean the Republicans see themselves as an embattled — and overwhelmingly white — minority who will lose any hope of holding power, and suffer a catastrophic loss of status, unless extraordinary measures are taken to defeat a sprawling threat to their way of life. This

threat comes from almost all major institutions, with the exception of church and military.

It includes — they believe — an activist government opening the borders to immigrants, Black Lives Matter militants destroying property and intimidating police, a secretive deep state that undermines conservative candidacies, “woke” corporations practicing political correctness, big tech companies tilting the platform against them, a hostile education system with its alien-to-us universities, an entertainment culture at odds with traditional values, and the master villain in the scheme, the mainstream media, holding it all together with its vastly unequal treatment of liberals and conservatives.

The conflict with journalism and its imperative of verification is structural, meaning: what holds the party together requires a permanent state of war with the press, because what holds the party together can never pass a simple fact check. This is a stage beyond working the refs and calling out liberal bias.

Basic to what the Republican Party stands for is freedom from fact. For that to prevail, journalism must fail.” Professor Jay Rosen

Toward A More Balanced Journalism

These are just two examples of influential leaders in journalism who are and have pushed for changes in ethical standards because of President Donald Trump and the Republican Party. Both men have a right to freedom of speech and their personal opinions, as do all journalists. However, I find their ‘political leanings’ concerning given that journalists are not supposed to lean left or right — Democrat or Republican. Remember the definition of fairness and objectivity? A “lack of favoritism toward one side or another.”

I am a political independent and always have been as a journalist. That was drilled into me in the 1960s when I was in college and when I began working professionally in 1967. Because of my political independence I can look at all political parties and their candidates with an independent eye. I have not chosen sides. I still believe in the ethical standards established by journalism schools of the early 20th century and upheld by the people who were my teachers, mentors, and news managers.

The idea of abandoning objectivity because of disagreeing with any political candidate — whether local or national — is absurd. As an investigative reporter and manager of investigative teams, I have uncovered political corruption on ‘both sides of the aisle.’ As I wrote recently, lying is what many politicians do: Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. It’s up to journalists who believe in objectivity and accuracy to call them out for their lies. By that I mean calling out the lies of ‘all politicians of all parties,’ not just the ones journalists don’t favor.

That’s what I don’t like — the sad fact that journalists turn a blind eye to the obvious lies of politicians who belong to the journalists’ own political persuasion (e.g. agenda). I believe the fact that many journalists are activists for their preferred political party is a major problem for the future of journalism. Journalists should not be members of any political party and should never choose sides in politics. No wonder trust in the news media is so low. As Gallup recently reported following a national poll of news consumers: “Generational patterns don’t bode well for media trust in the future.” They added:, “Confidence in news has fallen more than confidence in other

institutions.” Local and state governments garnered more trust than both the media and the legislative branch. The media was at the bottom of the trust poll. (Gallup)

I spent much of my life as a journalist and I trust little of what I see, hear, or read when it comes to the national media’s coverage of national politics. I know how journalism works from the inside. I can smell rotten journalism, and much of what presents itself as journalism today in the national political arena is definitely rotten.

One thing I find interesting is that activist journalists aren’t even trying to hide their lack of objectivity any longer. They are saying it out loud for everyone to see and read. Opinion-based newscasts abound on television screens, radio programs, podcasts, newspapers, and online media across the country.

I don't care who journalists vote for when they cast their ballot. Voting is a private right of every American citizen. What I do oppose are journalists who actively and openly support or oppose candidates for political office, then cover the winners and losers in ways that are dependent on which party they support. Politicians usually serve the political party that put them into power. Journalists should serve the American people without regard to political position or persuasion.

Painting with a Broad Brush

Another problem I have with what many leaders in journalism believe and say out loud is painting all members of a political party with a 'broad brush.' I spent decades interviewing voters from all parties and found most of them to be friendly, informed, and involved in making their communities and country better places to live. Based on the 'journalism' I've seen, heard, and read during the past 20 years, I think many national journalists live in 'bubbles' where they hang out with people who only think like them. I recommend those journalists get outside their bubbles and start acting like real journalists.

Yes, there are people in every political party who may have ideas that seem to be radical. However, that doesn't mean all members of a party view life the same way as everyone else in their party. Professor Rosen wrote, "Basic to what the Republican Party stands for is freedom from fact." Really? Isn't that statement painting all members of a political party with a 'broad brush?'

How many Republican voters do you know outside of your academic bubble, Mr. Rosen? I assume from your writings and videos that you are a staunch Democrat. I really don't care what political party you personally align with, but I shouldn't be able to tell from what you write, say, or teach. Why? Because journalists are supposed to be aligned with the 'public' rather than any particular political 'party.' You spent almost 40 years 'teaching' journalism and now consult journalists. Based on what I've read and seen, your attacks on any political party are concerning. That's not your job, nor is it mine.

Our job is to prepare young journalists to be curious, skeptical, objective, and accurate. Our job is to help them learn how to think critically and originally, not to think like any group of people who they want to like them. Our job is also to teach journalists how to do the hard work of investigative journalism. That means developing the evidence necessary to demonstrate corruption in governments and businesses. I rarely read or hear journalists present evidence to support their opinions. They just throw out their opinion as 'truth claims' and expect their audience to believe it. Do I need to

remind journalists that they are among the least trusted and respected occupations in our country? How did that happen?

I also expect more from Mr. Hicks. He once led an organization which I gladly joined and trusted because of its stand on the importance of objectivity and accuracy. Again, I don't care what political party he personally aligns with, but the public should not be able to tell from what he says and does. I think all journalists should be political independents so that the public will have no reason to question the objectivity of the reporter. However, that ship seems to have sailed, so I'll just ask that journalists keep their political opinions and affiliations to themselves.

No matter who is the mayor, county commission chairperson, governor, senator, or president, the public has the right to the truth presented fairly and completely without opinion added by reporters, anchors, or editors. In order for that to happen, leaders in journalism classrooms and newsrooms across the country will need to take a hard look at how far they've fallen from real journalism and do the hard work of making major changes in how news is gathered, confirmed, and reported.

Coming Up

Is there any way to stop the downward slide of public trust in journalism? Maybe. I'll explain why I say that in the next part of our special series.



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee