



Covering the 2026 Campaigns (Part 2)

Grading Journalists on Campaign Coverage

By

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How would you ‘grade’ the coverage of political campaigns across the United States so far this year? That includes local and national journalism. How would you grade your own coverage as a journalist? How would you grade your news team if you’re a news manager?

I watch and read a lot of news coverage, national and local, and my grades are pretty low. I graded national coverage at a ‘**D-**’ and local coverage at a ‘**C-**.’ I based this on watching, listening, and reading lots of coverage.

Some of the national media are so bad that my grade for them would be an ‘**F.**’ However, other national media helped bring the grade up to a **D-**. The same is true with local media. I saw just enough accuracy and fairness to keep them from falling into the ‘**D**’ range. While you may think I’m being too tough on the media, wait until you read the next newsletter where the public grades the media. Some of those grades are brutal.

Here are my main reasons for giving such low scores:

1. Many journalists don't seem to know much about how local, state, and national governments are supposed to operate. I see that in their writing, interviewing, and questioning of candidates. They don't ask the obvious questions that an informed journalist would ask. News managers should hold seminars well before election season to teach all journalists how various levels of government work. [[Here's an article I wrote last year](#) that will give you an overview about covering government news.]
2. Many journalists appear to have done little preparation prior to covering a campaign or doing one-on-one interviews with candidates. Many don't know what to ask or how to spot false statements. They also don't know to counter those false statements with factual information. They also don't know how to deal with candidates who refuse to answer questions. Even the journalists I watched who asked the same question or varied the question a little to try to get candidates to answer finally gave up and moved on to another topic.

That is TERRIBLE journalism. Don't let candidates get away with refusing to answer questions or dancing around your questions. Remember, your job as a journalist is to find, confirm, and report the truth. That includes how you cover political campaigns. [[Here's an article I wrote](#) for the 2022 Mid-Terms that may help.]

3. Many journalists don't ask obvious follow-up questions. They allow candidates to make 'truth claims' without challenging candidates for evidence to support their claims. The few journalists who do ask follow-up questions are often reprimanded by candidates for asking them those questions. Personally, I wouldn't put up with that from any candidate and didn't during my career. Many candidates don't seem to understand what **'Freedom of the Press'** means and why it's in the U.S. Constitution. Giving candidates lessons in the First Amendment live on television or radio would be a refreshing lesson for the public to see or hear. But, you say, candidates won't 'like' me if I ask tough questions or make them look bad? Excuse me? Are you a journalist or a coward? Are you a reporter or a public

relations assistant to the candidate? Candidates for office are not your ‘friends,’ so get over that silly idea — please. I don’t mean you shouldn’t be a friendly person as a journalist, but I do mean you shouldn’t hold back doing your job because you want candidates to like you and be your friend. Being disliked or falling into disfavor by candidates and elected office holders because of tough questioning used to be a badge of honor among journalists. That meant they were doing their job.

4. Many journalists don’t do stories that follow up on candidate claims. They allow a candidate to say that something is true without checking on the claim themselves. That might mean visiting a location and talking with residents about their experience with a particular individual or problem. Yes, I know it’s hot during the summer, cold during the winter, etc. Again, please, get over yourself. Either you want to be a real journalist or you want to be something else. You can’t do both. Make a choice and live up to the standards of the job you choose.

5. Many journalists are obviously ‘biased’ during interviews with candidates and in covering campaigns. It appears that many journalists go into their coverage having already ‘chosen sides’ politically. They seem more ‘[activist](#)’ than ‘journalist.’ The fact that those journalists continue covering campaigns tells me a lot about news management as well. A news manager who understands ‘**real journalism**’ also understands the necessity of ‘[journalistic objectivity and accuracy](#).’ They will pull any offending journalist from covering political campaigns until that journalist is ready to be fair and accurate, resigns, or is fired for refusing to do their job.
6. Many journalists do not cover candidates ‘equally.’ Remember that there are usually two or more candidates running for every office. If one candidate says something about an issue or gets personal about another candidate, be sure to get the other candidate’s response. Be sure to give them a similar amount of time to address the issue. Remember the word ‘fairness?’ I rarely see that done, but when I do it’s often obvious that one candidate is placed in a ‘more favorable light’ than

another candidate running for the same office. It's not a journalist's job to try to get one candidate elected instead of another. That's biased and unprofessional activist preference. That needs to stop - NOW.

7. Many journalists follow the 'path of least resistance' when covering a campaign. They read from a candidate's news release and report the candidate's talking points as if they're 'true.' They attend a candidate's rally and play a couple of statements from the candidate — often without any attempt to confirm the truthfulness of the statements. One thing I'm noticing again this year is a lack of 'originality and creativity' when it comes to how journalists cover campaigns. It's as if many journalists know nothing about 'real journalism.' I would ask if they had ever studied journalism in school, but unfortunately I know they did go to college or university and often 'parrot' their professors' bias. No wonder the public doesn't trust media coverage.
8. Many journalists lack basic '[curiosity](#)' about their campaign coverage. It's obvious in the way they

approach the story, the way they write the story, and the way they present the story. Journalists' live shots rarely show any strong interest in their story. It sometimes looks like they just want to get the story done so they can go do something else. Your audience deserves your very best efforts — not the left-overs of a boring day.

One of the reasons I graded local journalism at a **C-** is because of their affiliation with national networks that tend to be biased in national campaign coverage. The local anchors often toss to network reporters to cover national stories. As I watched or listened to the network reporters, the bias was so obvious. The local anchors did their jobs by reading intros and outros, but I wondered whether they agreed with the bias I had just witnessed. It's not in every network 'package,' but enough to stand out to someone who spent a career in the 'news business.' It makes me wonder why local anchors don't shake their heads in disgust after running these biased national stories. At least the local anchor could say something in the intro or outro about how they don't necessarily agree with the national reporter's bias. That probably wouldn't go down well with station management — which is a whole other story.

Another reason I graded local media as below average is because they did little to develop ‘original reporting’ in their campaign election. Much of what I saw, heard, and read seemed predictable and a bit boring to be honest with you. Time is precious. Don’t waste your public’s time. No wonder so few people depend on local or national news anymore. They have better things to do with their time.

“Attention to local news has declined since 2016, mirroring trends in attention to national news and news in general. In 2025, 21% of Americans say they follow local news very closely, down from 37% in 2016.” [Pew Research](#)

Having worked as a street reporter, assignment editor, managing editor, executive producer, anchor, and news director in local broadcast news for decades, (plus being a state correspondent for two metro newspapers and two wire services), I know what local journalists are capable of doing. I hope to see some of that ‘spark’ reignited in the rest of this year’s campaign coverage.

News managers — I'm speaking to you. Train up your staff. Show them what it means to do 'original' reporting, ask tough questions, and uncover what candidates don't want found. Your viewers will notice and thank you for it by continuing to watch, listen, or read.

Next Time

Speaking of viewers — how does the ‘public’ grade the news media for its coverage of political campaigns? I’ll share some sobering results in the next part of our series, *Covering the 2026 Campaigns*.



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee