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Once Bitten: Newsweek Abandons Journalism for Stenography

Kevin Carson

May 26, 2005

Sam Smith's commentary at *Progressive Review*:

RELIABLE SOURCES inform us that Newsweek will no longer be using reliable sources. Instead it will be relying on such unreliable sources as professional message manipulators, bureaucrats with their asses in hock, political appointees on their way up, legislators funded by corporate payola and such demonstrable masters of prevarication as our current president

Newsweek reporters will still be allowed to talk to reliable sources, they just won't be able to quote or cite them unless the editor approves, which considerably diminishes their utility.

This is not a journalistic decision. It is a corporate, bureaucratic, and legalistic response to the deliberate

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abuse of a story by professional message manipulators, bureaucrats with their asses in hock, political appointees on their way up, legislators funded by corporate payola and such demonstrable masters of prevarication as our current president...

If the sniveling, timorous corporate hacks running places such as Newseek these days had been around in an earlier time, there would have been no Pentagon Papers, no Watergate, no countless other stories that essentially pitted the honesty of journalists and government whistleblowers against the manifold mendacities of agents of the state.

The justified conceit of a free press is that, on average, Michael Isikoff is going to tell you the truth more often than a Pentagon or White House press secretary. Finding this truth requires far more than documents and statements or the faithful stenography of faithless officials. It requires finding people who, rightfully in fear of their jobs, are at least willing to share a bit of the truth with a reporter whose confidence they trust. It requires judgment, perception, and inductive reasoning on the part of the scribe and it requires considerable courage on the part of the whistleblower. Once you believe the journalist no more trustworthy than an official source you no longer need a free press.

What Newsweek has done is to resign from the free press. Its defection should be regarded with far more contempt than any occasional misinformed story or deceitful writer. Such problems come and go, but a massive capitulation to the government and officials sources will change the nature of journalism forever and, with it, the public's ability to find the truth.

record, or I can spend money to buy a newspaper and read a repetition of selected quotes from that said material. What should I do?

If that's all newspapers are good for, what are newspapers good for?

So what's the alternative? Personally, I prefer the party press of the nineteenth century, in which truth was promoted, not by any phony idea of "objectivity," but by the adversarial process. It's the same process used when attorneys cross-examine each other's witnesses. A newspaper should openly avow its ideological orientation, make the best possible case it can for its interpretation of the facts, and go over its adversaries' factual claims with a fine-tooth comb. Truth comes not from pretended "objectivity," but from vigorously competing truth-claims in the marketplace of ideas. This older and better model of journalism can be found mainly in the alternative press of far left and right, and in the blogs. The best news digest blogs, which draw from a wide variety of public documents and newspapers to present a case, hold the promise of a return to real journalism.

This is nothing new. It's a virtual replay of the backlash against investigative journalism after the so-called "Memogate." There is a mountain of evidence against Bush at the AWOL Project, much of it far more damning than the anemic claims in the forged memo that burned Dan Rather. But the ensuing fiasco put an end to CBS News' feeble and belated venture in actually investigating the facts of Bush's National Guard record, instead of merely regurgitating the official pronouncements of "both sides." After that, the corporate media was inoculated against any further attempts at investigative reporting.

But mainstream journalism has had a bias against independently digging into the facts ever since it fell under the spell of Walter Lippmann's cult of "professional objectivity." Justin Lewis has done a better job than anybody else, I think, in describing just what's wrong with that ethos:

The norms of "objective reporting" thus involve presenting "both sides" of an issue with very little in the way of independent forms of verification... [A] journalist who systematically attempts to verify facts—to say which set of facts is more accurate—runs the risk of being accused of abandoning their objectivity by favoring one side over another...

...[J]ournalists who try to be faithful to an objective model of reporting are simultaneously distancing themselves from the notion of independently verifiable truth...

The "two sides" model of journalistic objectivity makes news reporting a great deal easier since it requires no recourse to a factual realm. There are no facts to check, no archives of unspoken information to sort through... If Tweedledum fails to challenge a point made by Tweedledee, the point remains unchallenged.

[Justin Lewis “Objectivity and the Limits of Press Freedom” *Project Censored Yearbook 2000*, pp. 173–74]

As Sam Smith observed, this spurious cult of pseudo-objectivity is reflected in a bias against the written word. Recourse to written sources requires independent digging by the journalist himself, instead of simply presenting a pair of quotes from the public statements of the two respective “sides.”

...I find myself increasingly covering Washington’s most ignored beat: the written word. The culture of deceit is primarily an oral one. The soundbite, the spin, and the political product placement depend on no one spending too much time on the matter under consideration.

Over and over again, however, I find that the real story still lies barely hidden and may be reached by nothing more complicated than turning the page, checking the small type in the appendix, charging into the typographical jungle beyond the executive summary, doing a Web search, and, for the bravest, actually looking at the figures on the charts.

[Sam Smith. *Project Censored Yearbook 2000*, p. 60]

This is not hyperbole. Journalists who do independent digging, instead of limiting themselves to press conference stenography, often provoke howls of outrage about “bias” from the rich and powerful. One recent example is the case of Tom Ricks, a *Washington Post* Pentagon reporter.

In his more than two decades covering the military, Ricks has developed many sources, from brass to grunts. This, according to the current Pentagon, is a problem.

The Pentagon’s letter of complaint to Post executive editor Leonard Downie had language charging that Ricks casts his net as widely as possible and e-mails many people.

Details of the complaints were hard to come by. One Pentagon official said in private that Ricks did not give enough credence to official, on-the-record comments that ran counter to the angle of his stories.

Here’s how the “he said, she said” standard of “objective reporting” was lampooned on the Daily Show:

CORDDRY: I’m sorry, my *opinion*? No, I don’t have ‘o-pin-i-ons’. I’m a reporter, Jon, and my job is to spend half the time repeating what one side says, and half the time repeating the other. Little thing called ‘objectivity’ — might wanna look it up some day.

STEWART: Doesn’t objectivity mean objectively weighing the evidence, and calling out what’s credible and what isn’t?

CORDDRY: Whoa-ho! Well, well, well — sounds like someone wants the media to act as a filter! [high-pitched, effeminate] ‘Ooh, this allegation is spurious! Upon investigation this claim lacks any basis in reality! Mmm, mmm, mmm.’ Listen buddy: not my job to stand between the people talking to me and the people listening to me.

Of course, this stenographic model of journalism sort of makes you wonder what the point of having newspapers in the first place. As Avedon Carol commented a while back,

Hm, let’s see... I can go to whitehouse.gov and read everything administration officials have to say on the