

# **How The Media Went From Watchdog to Lapdog**

By

NataLee Q. Callahan



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Mike Kohler

### **How the Media Went from Watchdog to Lapdog**

An old German philosopher once said, “Journalists are like dogs, when ever anything moves they begin to bark.” Journalists are supposed to be watchdogs for the people. They are not only there to inform and educate the public, but to keep individuals, organizations, and government in check. Journalists are supposed to adhere to a strict code of Ethics which “strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity (SPJ).” They are supposed to be accurate, fair, and vigilant in fact checking. They are to be a voice to the voiceless, including viewpoints they personally find repugnant. It is their duty to provide context and be very careful to not misrepresent the facts. Every journalists is supposed to adhere to a pretty strict Code of Ethics.

The problem of trustworthiness and credibility of the media started to become more noticeable about a decade ago or so, but the recent election brought this issue into full crisis mode, making it even more apparent that the media as a whole has gone from watchdog to lapdog... from hero to zero. If something doesn't give soon, journalism as it was intended to be will be dead and some in the media are now realizing it.

### **Background**

#### **Lies**

As of a few years ago, Brian Williams might have been considered one of the most trusted and prestigious journalists of all time, that is until his decade of lies came back to bite him. It turns out that good old Brian was lyin'. He lied about several things, but the one that

brought the truth about Brian Williams' honesty to light was his story about him being on a helicopter that came under fire. It did not happen. He was called out by one of the men who were actually on the helicopter in question (Wemple, E. ). In addition to the helicopter story, more and more stories claiming he lied in his reporting came to light, including his many stories on Hurricane Katrina (Nolte, J.). It seems that many at NBC News knew about Williams' pattern of lying and stretching the truth, but never really attempted to correct him, but were happy to throw him under the bus once he was discovered. Steve Burke, NBC Universal's chief executive made the following statement upon their decision to place him on suspension, "By his actions Brian has jeopardized the trust millions of Americans place in NBC News. His actions are inexcusable and this suspension is severe and appropriate. (Carroll, R.)" After many years of detailed description of the false story, Brian claimed he "misremembered", but it was too little, too late, he had no credibility and he was ultimately replaced as NBC Nightly News anchor. Not too long before William's lost his own news desk, Dan Rather was also lost his seat for reporting on a false story about President George W. Bush based off forged documents that were never authenticated. From Jayson Blair to Jack Kelley to Carl Cameron, from plagiarism to complete fabrication (some going as far as creating a phony crime scene), lies in the media abound contributing to the crisis that is today.

### **Misrepresentations**

Katie Couric came under fire this year for her documentary entitled *Under the Gun* where her and her team used creative editing to misrepresent the facts. The documentary was aimed at promoting tighter gun laws and Couric while interviewing a group that supports individual gun

rights asked them, “If there are no background checks for gun purchasers, how do you prevent felons or terrorists from walking into, say, a licensed gun dealer and purchasing a gun?” In an attempt to discredit the group and their stance and make the group look shamed and speechless, they added an eight second pause as well as video from a different part of the interview where heads were hanging down and looked like they didn’t know how to defend their stance. It was claimed it was added for dramatic effect. The reality was that people immediately spoke up with thoughtful answers and responses to her question (Golberg, J.). They used deceptive editing in an attempt to sway the viewing audience to personal viewpoint of those creating the documentary. Deceptive editing has also been used by Sean Hannity (Michele Bachmann Story; who on a side note, claims not to be a journalist, but an entertainer, but his daily show appears on Fox News Channel), NBC News (Congressmen Sessions Food Stamps story), and recently CNN (Trump Muslim Registry Story). The only reason for intentional misrepresentation of facts would be from the standpoint of agenda setting, which should not be taking place in the news media and is against the Code of Ethics.

## **Activism**

The media had to eat their Thanksgiving pie a little early this year, Humble Pie to be precise. Nobody would really argue that members of the media tend to lean left in their political views, a general consensus wouldn’t be out there if all journalists were doing their jobs correctly, but this past Presidential Election season partisanship in the media got to a whole new level. Thanks to Wikileaks.org (which is a whole other topic in and of itself), we know that members of the news elite attended a private dinner with Hillary Clinton’s campaign at the outset of the

campaign season. A fact that has not been denied. From then on it was a Hillary lovefest. It's hard to deny the majority of the media has become a liberal lapdog.

NBC's Lester Holt has been accused of tipping the debate in favor of Hillary by going soft on Hillary and hard on Trump, and prior to that CNN's Donna Brazile gave Hillary debate questions in advance and is *not* sorry at all, "My conscience — as an activist, a strategist — is very clear," She said and added that "if I had to do it all over again, I would know a hell of a lot more about cybersecurity (Wemple, E. 2016)." It's worth noting that in her statement she doesn't refer to herself as a journalist, but activist.

Several journalists were even fired for criticizing Hillary Clinton. Additionally, the media called Hillary's victory long before the actual election happened. Newsweek even going as far as printing the infamous, *Madam President* issues and even shipping them ahead of the election because they were certain of her victory. MSNBC's Rachel Maddow cried when they reopened the Clinton investigation and had a meltdown on election night, even swearing on TV. Martha Raddatz of ABC also broke down to tears as Hillary lost the election. CNN's Van Jones angrily accused Trump supporters, and by default essentially half of the country, of being racist in his now famous "White-lashing" comments. Even the usually reliable pollsters that the media uses had everything completely wrong election night. The list goes on and on.

Objectivity used to be the keystone of journalism and the media faced a rude awakening the morning of November 9, 2016. Journalists and news organizations faced humiliation due to the blatant bias in their reporting that blinded them to the true reality of the situation and even had a few outlets promising change, but many others still are in denial. But the presidential election of 2016 whether admitted or not certainly brought the crisis of trustworthiness in the

media to a feverpitch. Were American voters not only pushing back at the government as well as the news media in the voting booth?

### **Other Bias**

We also haven't even really touched the ideas of transactional journalism where a journalist is given the scoop on a story in exchange for a favorably written article on behalf of the politician or organization, as mentioned in the Washington Post's article, *Is Gawker slowly exposing the ugly underbelly of D.C.'s 'transactional' journalism* (Borchers, C.)?

Another area where journalism has put something above the duty to be truthseekers, putting profit over the public is sponsored news stories. In an article entitled, *Operation Trustworthiness*, Matt DeRienzo criticizes the media saying they are now in the business of intentionally deceiving its customers, "we move to a 'sponsored content' advertising model whose very success is based on the fact that most readers don't know it's advertising (DeRienzo, M.)."

In a day and age of blogs, with websites like Wikileaks and even traditional news organizations hiring bloggers who the news organizations allow more latitude in the way they write stories and maybe are not necessarily held to the same journalistic standards they expect of their traditional reports, this gray area has posed some interesting challenges to credibility and trustworthiness of the media. Ronald D. Coleman speaks heavily to the question of whether a blogger is a journalist and should be treated as such, in his article called *Bloggers, Journalists, Reporting, and Privileges*, he asks, are bloggers journalists?

[T]he entire [journalism] industry was based on content created by people with an ax to grind. Often, they were political activists (like Sam Adams or Tom Paine) or surrogates for office-holders (like James Callender). The idea that a journalist should be defined as a

full-time, professional fact-gatherer who has no political allegiances is not only unrealistic, but it is already a historical artifact....Clearly, however, certain elites continue to resist an understanding of the genuine journalistic value of nontraditional media while displaying what actually is a counterintuitive fetish for ascribing higher journalistic value to people who profit financially. Thus, Senator Lindsey Graham asks: "[I]f classified information is leaked out on a personal website or [by] some blogger, do they have the same First Amendments rights as somebody who gets paid [in] traditional journalism?" In fact, Senator Schumer's new shield law bill does not make this distinction. Rather, it would apply to anyone who "regularly" gathers and disseminates news (Coleman, R.).

### **Media/Industry's Response**

Due to the fact that this particular crisis is surrounding the media themselves creates an extremely interesting dynamic about the news reporting and criticizing each other and themselves. Do they admit wrong doing and offer apologies like a traditional company? Should they hire a PR Crisis team? The answer should be yes.

In an article in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, written by Kyle Pope, posted the day after the election, calls journalists to the carpet:

Journalism's moment of reckoning has arrived.... Reporters' eagerness first to ridicule Trump and his supporters, then dismiss them, and finally to actively lobby and argue for their defeat have led us to a moment when the entire journalistic enterprise needs to be rethought and rebuilt. In terms of bellwether moments, this is our anti-Watergate.

It goes on to point out that Conservatives' viewpoints were too often overlooked, dismissed as irrelevant and out of fashion, and even went as far as belittling that way of thinking.

Pope goes on to say,

Now a new era needs to begin, a period in which reporting takes precedent over opinion, when journalists are willing to seek out and understand people with whom they may have profound personal and philosophical differences. For decades, centuries even, that has been the definition of journalism (Pope, K.).

Shortly after the 2016 U.S. Election, the New York Times, one of President-Elect Trump's biggest critics, issued a statement acknowledging a rededication to honesty and fairness:

As we reflect on the momentous result, and the months of reporting and polling that preceded it, we aim to rededicate ourselves to the fundamental mission of Times journalism. That is to report America and the world honestly, without fear or favor, striving always to understand and reflect all political perspectives and life experiences in the stories that we bring to you. It is also to hold power to account, impartially and unflinchingly. You can rely on The New York Times to bring the same fairness, the same level of scrutiny, the same independence to our coverage of the new president and his team (Sulzberger, A.; Baquet, D.).

From CBS News, in an article entitled, *The Unbearable Smugness of the Press*, reporter Will Rahn tried to give the journalism industry a reality check,

That the explainers and data journalists so frequently get things hilariously wrong never invites the soul-searching you'd think it would. Instead, it all just somehow leads us to more smugness, more meanness, more certainty from the reporters and pundits. Faced with defeat, we retreat further into our bubble, assumptions left unchecked. No, it's the voters who are wrong.

As a direct result, we get it wrong with greater frequency. Out on the road, we forget to ask the right questions. We can't even imagine the right question. We go into assignments too certain that what we find will serve to justify our biases. The public's estimation of the press declines even further -- fewer than one-in-three Americans trust the press, per Gallup -- which starts the cycle anew (Rahn, W.).

Story after story continues to pop up, so it does appear the media, whether vocalizing it or not, is waking up to the reality that left, right, conservative, or liberal, the majority of America does not trust them. They are in fact in crisis and they are realizing.

## **Crisis Response Proposal**

Crisis resolution is going to be a challenge, because rather than it just being a singular organization, it is an industry on a whole and the corruption is broad and deep. It would be good for all media outlets to take a good hard look at whether or not they have been guilty of poor journalism standards or outright unethical behavior. Apologies to the public will need to continue to come forth.

Because almost an about face needs to happen, the changes need to be dramatic and apparent. Kyle Pope, Editor in Chief and Publisher of the Columbia Journalism Review says,

Now a new era needs to begin, a period in which reporting takes precedent over opinion, when journalists are willing to seek out and understand people with whom they may have profound personal and philosophical differences. For decades, centuries even, that has been the definition of journalism (Pope, K.).

He makes a critical recommendation of diversifying newsrooms that more accurately represents the views of the people, which are clearly more diverse than the industry has wanted to recognize. In addition to shaking up all the newsrooms, a much needed return to objectivity would be an imperative to change to the industry. Michael Oreskes of NPR says,

....The highest function of journalism: To witness and report.... That's our job. We give citizens the information the need to make the choices a democracy asks them to make. We should not be telling you how to think. We should give you the information to decide what you think....But if you present the facts calmly and without a tone of editorializing you substantially increase the chance that people will hear you out and weigh the facts. That is why the tone of journalism matters so much. We need potential listeners and readers to believe we are presenting the facts honestly, and not to confirm our opinions.... The more we inflame our tone, the less people will listen (Oreskes, M.).

It seems almost embarrassing to point out that journalists should just start telling the truth, not elaborating details or outright fabricating stories. There is enough interesting news going on in the world that making up stories or embellishing seems to be unnecessary and

destroys credibility. Lies and fabrications by journalists should not be overlooked and should be dealt with harshly as to discourage this sort of behavior. Any journalist should be terminated that engages in this behavior.

The news industry is still a business that is profit driven, so transparency would also be critical of any crisis response just as it would be with any other business. Matt DeRienzo says, “How a company treats its customers is the biggest indication, and much has been written about how engagement and transparency are not only essential to today’s journalism, but running any kind of sustainable business for that matter. (DeRienzo, M.)” Being transparent in all of your efforts to change would be an important thing to continually make the public aware of. This builds trust.

### **Conclusion**

This crisis being resolved is pretty critical for the Public Relations industry as a whole, as PR professionals rely on the media to communicate messages. If that platform is not a trusted or reliable, then that sphere’s ability to influence and shape public opinion of an organization is seriously hindered. The very industry that Public Relations relies, need to follow the principles of that Public Relations employs. It’s an interesting paradox.

So in conclusion, if the news media wants to get out of the doghouse, they need to employ the following plan of action:

1. Admit wrongdoing and apologize accordingly.

2. Make clear change that includes: diversifying their newsrooms to better reflect a more wide ranging political and social viewpoint, restore objectivity in the way they report the news, and finally be absolutely truthful in their reporting.
3. Be transparent in their efforts to change and rebuild trust in their industry.

Finally, it's just going to take time as it always does to rebuild trust. The media will need to be a bulldog in their own industry: tenacious to the vision of bringing trustworthiness of the media to fruition again, and like a dog, maybe can become the public's loyal companion once again.

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