



# HOW JOURNALISTS AND THE PUBLIC SHAPE OUR DEMOCRACY



**From Social Media and “Fake News”  
to Reporting Just the Facts**

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## FOREWORD

What is your source for news? That answer can vary according to your age. Generally, millennials rely on social media like Twitter and Instagram, blogs and podcasts. Many baby boomers still have the newspaper delivered to their homes or online subscriptions. Others, such as Gen-Xers, fall in between and may prefer as their news source all-news radio, talk radio, local news or national news programs on cable and network TV.

Social media, blogs and traditional news sources all provide information and news but determining what is fact and what is fake has become a major concern. Journalism's old "Five 'W's" of providing the "Who," "What," "When," "Where" and "Why" of a story is not enough anymore; add an "F" for fact or fiction.

Because of the many news sources available these days, people tend not to sample them all, but listen to, watch and read those sources that feed into and support their point of view. When what is reported rubs the wrong way, some people question the validity of the story and others go to the extreme and question the place of a free press in a democracy.

That's why this media literacy guidebook is so important. It is a window to the ever-changing world of news, including how news is created, the legalities involved in online content and how social media empowers citizen journalists, whose stories sometimes end up in mainstream media and lead to social movements.

Most important, I hope this guidebook will help you to view, listen to and read news in a way that allows you to analyze the information you receive. Interpret it clearly and logically. Then evaluate it before you share it or take action.



Hopefully, what is learned from this guidebook will help you understand and support freedom of the press and its role in maintaining our democracy.

It is perfectly clear to me that without freedom of the press, there can be an abuse of power and an abuse of people. What you don't know can hurt you. That is the lesson I've learned over my 49 years as a reporter in radio, newspaper and television.

The role and responsibility of reporters and news organizations is to be where citizens can't always be and to tell stories that inform, entertain and educate. We uncover stories about corruption, crime, malfeasance, pain and suffering. We should always tell the story through the voice and eyes of the people who are affected, showing humanity. Done correctly, news stories can lead and have led to changes in laws, policies and lives.

The primary role of media is to provide information to help people make decisions about their lives and the lives of others. This requires freedom to do our job, but we must do it professionally and correctly, as outlined in the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists. It states, "Public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy." There are four principles to be followed: "Seek truth and report it; minimize harm; act independently and be accountable and transparent."

I'll sum it up another way, using the slogans from local TV stations. It is media's responsibility to be "dedicated, determined and dependable; holding the powerful accountable; giving you coverage you can count on." We must be fair, balanced and accurate; proactive and less reactive; thorough and persistent and always keep in mind the needs of the reader, listener and viewer.

That's our job, but your job is just as important. We need you to care and be involved. Reading and then using what you'll learn from *How Journalists and the Public Shape Our Democracy* is a beginning.

**Monica Kaufman Pearson**

Retired WSB-TV Atlanta news anchor

June 8, 2018

# THE IMPORTANCE OF JOURNALISM IN A DEMOCRACY

► In January 1787 Thomas Jefferson, while serving as minister to France in Paris as other Founding Fathers worked to create a new Constitution for the United States of America, wrote an acquaintance back home a letter in which he expressed his thoughts about journalism in a democracy: “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

One hundred and seventy-five years later, President John F. Kennedy was asked by NBC, during a December 1962 interview, whether he was as avid a news reader as he had been before entering the White House. Kennedy replied, “Even though we never like it, and even though we wish they didn’t write it, and even though we disapprove, there isn’t any doubt that we could not do the job at all in a free society without a very, very active press.”

Neither Jefferson nor Kennedy were immune to press criticism in their respective eras. Both men had experience, however, fighting against countries where questioning those in power could lead to dire consequences. As their quotations suggest, each understood the importance of having a public voice to speak truth to power.

The term “Fourth Estate”—often attributed to 18th-century British statesman Edmund Burke, who praised the mission of the press gallery during a parliamentary debate—refers to the press serving as the fourth branch of democratic government, keeping citizens informed and observing the political process as an additional check on government. This role as the watchdog of power is enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which, to paraphrase, says Congress shall make no law abridging freedom of the press.

Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black reaffirmed this principle in *New York Times Co. v. United States*, a 1971 landmark case on the First Amendment. “In the First Amendment, the Founding Fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our democracy,” Black wrote in his decision. “The press was to serve the governed, not the governors.”

Without the freedom to question and report on the actions of government, journalism risks becoming a tool to advance the agenda of those in power. As the American Press Institute (API) notes, journalism—impartial and independent of political and economic interests—is indispensable to democratic societies. Journalism’s first loyalty is to citizens.

The API, a nonprofit educational organization, provides a straightforward definition of journalism: the activity, and product, of gathering, assessing, creating and presenting news and information. Its most important function is to convey information through accuracy, fairness, balance and transparency. In conveying information, journalism provides transparency in a representative democracy. If the people do indeed rule in a democracy, then they should be informed about the decisions made on their behalf.

## **A Journalist’s Role in a Free Society**

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In director Frank Capra’s *The Power of the Press*, a 1928 American silent film starring Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Fairbanks plays an ambitious cub reporter stuck on his newspaper’s weather desk. One day he catches a politician’s daughter leaving the home of the murdered district attorney. Stop the presses! The next day’s headline reads: “Candidate’s Daughter Involved in Murder of District Attorney.”

The tragic story is the type of scoop that can catapult a journalist’s career. But the newsroom’s newest star reporter eventually learns he got the story wrong. He then seeks a retraction of the story, works to restore the woman’s reputation, and in true Hollywood fashion, finds the real killer.

The film’s underlying lesson is a core principle of journalism—journalists must be committed to doing the research and seeking the truth.

It is the foundation upon which all else in the profession is built. In their book *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, first published in 2001, journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel pointed to the truth as the first obligation of journalism. What they termed “journalistic truth” is more than accuracy. It is a “sorting-out process that takes place between the initial story and the interaction among the public, newsmakers, and journalists,” wrote Kovach and Rosenstiel. “This first principle of journalism—its disinterested pursuit of truth—is ultimately what sets journalism apart from other forms of communication.”

In other words, “journalistic truth” is not an all-knowing or absolute truth, but an ongoing process subject to revision as facts are assembled and verified. It is the most fair and reliable account of known facts.

This helps to explain the importance of transparency to journalism. There are limitations to all journalism; and journalists, whenever possible, should share their sources and methods to allow audiences to form their own conclusions. It has been said that a journalist should be a seeker of knowledge, not its guardian.

Thus, Kovach and Rosenstiel explained, journalism’s primary commitment is to citizens; the public must know that it is being served, not exploited.

Transparency allows the public to contribute to the process of finding the truth. As Kovach and Rosenstiel observed, the search for truth is made “more powerful when journalists and the public are knit together in a way that mixes the structure of traditional journalism techniques and authority with the power of the networked community.”

For example, after the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in 2008 published its first story about suspicious test scores in Atlanta schools, some teachers contacted the newspaper to report cheating at their schools. That information proved valuable, as it led journalists to suspect a widespread problem, which led to additional investigative work and stories.

In his 1999 book, *What Are Journalists For?*, Jay Rosen of New York University recounted the efforts of the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer* in Columbus, Georgia, to encourage more residents to get involved in civic activities in the late 1980s. After an impressive series of articles about

the city's challenges and its future were published with little public response, the newspaper decided to do something drastic. Employees hosted town meetings and private gatherings to bring the racially segregated community together. Meanwhile, the newspaper continued to report on the shortcomings of the city's agenda for the future. In turn, residents used the reporting as a springboard for further discussions and action.

Not everyone, especially outside journalists, were comfortable with the direct way in which the newspaper had inserted itself into the city's political affairs. After all, journalists are supposed to cover the news and not become part of the story.

While the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer* case is an atypical example of journalists and citizens working together for the public good, it gets at the heart of a long debate about the extent to which journalists should become involved in the communities they cover. Should they be far-removed observers of news and events or actively engaged community partners?

An advocate of cooperation between journalists and citizens, Rosen gave an empathetic response to this question, if perhaps not an endorsement.

“Behind the *Ledger-Enquirer*'s initiative was also a moral proposition: that it is wrong for communities to drift without direction when the future is closing in on them,” he wrote. “In a democracy, the remedy for this wrong is politics, undertaken by citizens prepared to deliberate and to act. To get this kind of activity going was the cause the newspaper took up.”

## **Changing Expectations of Journalism**

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Around the year 1448, Johann Gutenberg of Germany invented the movable type printing press. This transformative mechanical device allowed more books to be produced at lower cost. No longer would published works—and knowledge by extension—be possessions solely of the rich and powerful.

In the New World, newspapers played a critical role in informing American colonists about life inside and outside their provinces.

Readers of Georgia's first newspaper, the *Georgia Gazette*, could find information in its four pages about the murder of an overseer on statesman John Milledge's Savannah plantation, maritime-related news, a steamy court case in Boston, the king's latest proclamation and plenty of advertising. It was first published in Savannah in 1763 by a Scotsman named James Johnston. In pre-revolutionary America, Johnston also served as royal printer. He somehow managed to be the government's official printer, while printing news viewed as unfavorable to the government, such as opposition to Britain's Stamp Act of 1765.

"The most likely conjecture is that Johnston realized he must print what his readers wanted," wrote Louis Griffith and John Talmadge in their 1951 book, *Georgia Journalism: 1763-1950*. "He saw no inconsistency in attempting both jobs."

Even today, the press is tasked with communicating the policies of the government to inform the public and scrutinizing the government's decisions with informed analysis as part of its job as a watchdog of power.

Journalism scholars David Sloan and Julie Williams made the case in their 1994 book, *The Early American Press, 1690-1783*, that colonial Americans had more sophisticated expectations of the press than what many historians give them credit for. That newspapers might pick a side in a public controversy did not seem to bother them as much as extreme viewpoints, argued Sloan and Williams. This, they proposed, was because Americans understood the written word as an important instrument for persuasion. "One of the fundamental assumptions of early Americans was that the press should be closely involved with the concerns of society, rather than being at a professional distance, as it is today," they wrote.

After around 1765, journalism became highly partisan and mainly featured essays and letters about politics, Michael Schudson of Columbia University said in a 1994 scholarly article in the journal *Media, Culture & Society*. That began to change in the early 1800s. "In the 1820s, as both political combat and commercial competition increased, leading urban dailies began to hire reporters to gather news," wrote Schudson. "With the coming of the commercially minded 'penny papers' of the

1830s, reporters covered local news as never before, especially news from the police and the courts.”

By the late 19th century, many cheap penny newspapers—no longer dependent on political patronage—practiced “yellow journalism,” which emphasized sensationalism over facts to sell newspapers to mass audiences. Target audiences included new immigrants who could more easily understand cartoons and simple English words.

But by the 1920s, political partisanship, sensationalism and yellow journalism had also taken a toll, and the trustworthiness of journalists suffered for it, said Leonard Ray Teel, a Georgia State University media historian, in his 2006 book, *The Public Press, 1900-1945: The History of American Journalism*. The press began to adopt the idea that facts alone were insufficient for an increasingly skeptical public.

Furthermore, the growth of public relations and wartime propaganda (in which journalists participated) around this time convinced many journalists to see that facts can be subjective and do not simply speak for themselves, said Schudson in his 1990 book, *Origins of the Ideal of Objectivity in the Professions: Studies in the History of American Journalism and American Law, 1830-1940*. In response, newspapers added more signed bylines on stories, emphasized explaining the meaning of news, put events in context and created political columnists to help audiences understand complicated issues better, said Schudson.

More important, journalism began the adoption of the concept of objectivity as an ideal. A useful definition of objectivity, provided by Schudson, is the “view that one can and should separate facts from values.” Facts, he proposed, can be understood as assertions that can be independently validated, while values can be viewed as conscious or unconscious preferences for what the world should be.

As in other industries at the time, including professional baseball and the movie industry, journalism began adopting industry-wide professional and ethical codes to raise standards and avoid any government regulation, according to Teel. He said it was believed that public criticism and professional condemnation were deterrents for journalism misconduct.

In 1923 the American Society of Newspaper Editors created an ethics code that addressed nine areas: responsibility; press freedom; independence; sincerity, truthfulness and accuracy; impartiality; fair play and decency. The Society of Professional Journalists adopted the same code three years later. State press associations multiplied, as well as journalism programs at colleges and universities, which numbered 200 by 1930, according to Teel. Journalism had matured from a vocation into a profession.

## **An Adversarial Relationship**

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In the 1980s Martin Linsky and other researchers at Harvard University examined the press's influence on federal policymaking. Through hundreds of surveys and dozens of interviews with government officials and journalists, they found that the press had a significant impact on policy.

In one of six case studies they reviewed President Jimmy Carter's decision to stop production of the neutron bomb after a 1977 *Washington Post* front page story by reporter Walter Pincus described the bomb's capacity to kill humans without destroying the buildings. Other media outlets picked up the story. Following international outrage, Carter scrapped plans for the bomb.

"It may not be possible to prove that the Pincus story killed the neutron bomb, but without his story, there might have been no issue at all," Linsky wrote in his related 1986 book, *Impact: How the Press Affects Federal Policymaking*.

The press and government have distinct roles in society but share a common interest to serve the public. How they do that can create tensions between the two institutions. The push and pull over the disclosure of information between the press and government has led to it being described as an adversarial relationship.

In informing the public, the press regularly exercises its constitutional right to serve as a check on government. In creating policies, the government sometimes relies on the press to communicate ideas. Understandably, officials also want to control the messages being communicated.



In reviewing Linsky's book, journalist Edward Hawley wrote in the *Chicago Tribune* that while this tension suggests the relationship is adversarial, day-to-day interactions between journalists and government officials are not necessarily strained. "Wary respect might be a better generalization," he suggested.

Since the birth of public relations in the early 20th century, journalists have viewed press agents for governments and businesses with suspicion, said Schudson, the Columbia professor. Newspapers that had once "fought against 'the interests' now depended on them for hand-outs," he wrote in *Origins of the Ideal of Objectivity in the Professions*, and added, "The publicity agents played no favorites, protected their employers from direct contact with reporters, and turned news into a policy rather than an event, a constant stream rather than eddies and rapids and whirlpools."

The founder of modern public relations is widely considered to be Ivy Lee, who handled press relations for the Pennsylvania Railroad and oil titan John D. Rockefeller at a time when many corporations didn't feel the need to answer to the public. A native Georgian who was educated at Emory College and Princeton University, and worked for three New York newspapers, Lee opened his own agency around 1904, and remained committed to the ideals of journalistic integrity, according to Michael Turney of Northern Kentucky University. In 1906 Lee issued his influential "Declaration of Principles," in which he alluded to transparency and adherence to facts in supplying the "press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about."

Carolyn Carlson, former director of Kennesaw State University's journalism program, has studied the challenges today's journalists face in obtaining public information and believes the government has strayed far from Lee's original advice. Carlson, a former journalist and political press secretary, has conducted several national surveys of journalists and public information officers (PIOs) that indicate government agencies are dedicated to not only providing information but also ensuring that stories journalists report reflect positively on them.

Since the turn of the century, Carlson said, a convergence of trends has led to concern that government PIOs have gained the upper hand in censoring the messages going to the public to hide the negative and promote the positive. “The news media, charged by our Founding Fathers with being the watchdogs over government with the power of freedom of the press, have been stifled by a sharp downturn in advertising dollars that has decimated reporting ranks and left the few remaining reporters with little time to counter the propaganda campaigns,” she said.

“Meanwhile, the government, which had hardly any press officers 30 years ago, has created a large public relations arm, with every agency at every level having a public information office with multiple PIOs who are hired by the political head of the agency with instructions to make the agency look good, as well as to inform the public.”

The ideal situation, Carlson proposes, would be for reporters to be transparent with the public when they are able to freely report on issues with input from a variety of government sources, and most important, when their stories are hindered by government officials.

The federal government, states and District of Columbia do have laws, commonly called sunshine laws, which require public agencies to respond to records requests and hold certain meetings in public. These laws are meant to ensure government accountability. Without these regulations, many news stories would not have been possible.

Following reports by the *Savannah Morning News*, Georgia’s attorney general in 2011 determined the Savannah City Council had violated the state’s sunshine laws by holding closed-door meetings with job candidates during its city manager search. The person the city eventually hired later resigned after 18 months, following a series of reports by the newspaper that utilized sunshine laws to unearth numerous violations and costly failures.

In 2015 the *Macon Telegraph* newspaper in Macon, Georgia, published a list of stories it would not have been able to report without sunshine laws. Story topics included the public school system’s purchase of technology equipment and services without competitive bids, an abandoned house that racked up 150 pages of code violations thus

illustrating government red tape problems and the circumstances surrounding the deaths of three Robins Air Force Base airmen in Okinawa, Japan.

So, what does this mean for the public? It means news consumers must be as skeptical as ever of stories about government that appear to be based only on statements from agency news releases and spokespersons, Carlson said. She advises news consumers to look for investigative stories that go beyond press releases and inform the public about what is really going on. And demand more from your elected officials, Carlson added.

## **Press Criticism in a Democracy**

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In his seminal 1922 book, *Public Opinion*, which provides a critical look at democracy, Walter Lippmann wrote, “All the reporters in the world working all the hours of the day could not witness all the happenings in the world.” Of course, journalists are not crystal ball readers. Lippmann’s statement was used to support his assertion that the press is incapable of performing the Fourth Estate role as a watchdog of power and provider of truth. He was skeptical that journalists could distinguish between what was news and what was the truth. He was also concerned that the press was being manipulated by government and corporations.

Lippmann was an editor and what is now known as a media critic. Media criticism is essential to defending the integrity of journalism against the claims Lippmann raised nearly a hundred years ago, which are still relevant. Press criticism holds the press accountable. It acts as a shield against censorship and what media critic James W. Carey once called “media’s own power and illusions.”

There is, however, a difference between press criticism and attacks on media, Juliette De Maeyer, a University of Montreal media scholar, warned in a 2017 article for Harvard’s Nieman Journalism Lab. Responsible press criticism, she wrote, speaks to “concerns about the role of media in public life, misinformation, and the interplay between media, politics, and business—but also understands that recrimination

and denunciation are not enough.” In other words, De Maeyer said that press criticism tries to “hold the press accountable—just like any form of power—while being more than merely adversarial, vitriolic, or admonitory.”

Some news organizations employ internal critics to hold themselves accountable. The job of a public editor, also called ombudsman, is to serve as a representative or advocate on behalf of a news organization’s readership or audience.

Since first appearing in 1967 at Louisville’s *Courier-Journal* and the *Louisville Times*, said Mike Ananny of the University of Southern California, these positions have gradually been cut. Media executives argue that the internet allows readers and audiences to express concerns directly to management at news organizations.

The *Washington Post* media columnist Margaret Sullivan, a former *New York Times* public editor, disagreed. “That’s not the same thing as having an experienced journalist able to go to the top people and get some answers,” she said in a 2018 interview with Harvard.

Adam Ragusea, a journalist in residence and visiting assistant professor at Mercer University’s Center for Collaborative Journalism in Macon, is himself an internal critic of public radio. Media criticism, Ragusea argues, is needed to combat the growing distrust of journalism to which De Maeyer alluded. Much of that distrust, he suggests, is fomented by those who would profit from public ignorance and misapprehension. But he adds that journalists have earned some of that distrust through their own bad habits.

“At this moment in history, constructive media criticism is more valuable than ever, both to guide journalists through the journey of critical self-reflection they must brave to win back the public’s confidence,” Ragusea said, “and also to help the public distinguish between legitimate complaints about journalism and nefarious attacks on the press that are designed to obscure the truth.”

Ragusea said the internet has empowered people to scrutinize journalism like never before and much journalism—including work by reputable news organizations—is not holding up to that scrutiny as well as it should. For example, he pointed to a *New York Times* article

published on May 25, 2018, which reported that a senior White House official said if a peace talk between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un were to be held, holding it on June 12 would be impossible. But a transcript of the official's remarks published by other news outlets showed that while the official expressed concerns, he did not say holding the meeting would be impossible. This error opened the door to criticism and other allegations from the White House.

Jill Abramson, a former *New York Times* executive editor, has taken issue with the current tone of journalism, especially that of her former colleagues when they appear on social media or cable TV, which she fears borders on personal opinion. "What worries me is that in adopting all the conventions of the internet, some of the traditional rules that have served the paper well will be overlooked," Abramson wrote in a 2017 *Columbia Journalism Review* article.

"This doesn't mean holding back stories, mincing words, or publishing bland journalism that equates both sides or makes false equivalencies. It means not taking cheap shots, not publishing biased headlines (I've been keeping a collection of them), and not overreaching, which undermines the *Times's* authority and makes people dismiss its coverage."

News consumers might wonder why journalists would need to hear critiques from professional media critics, rather than from their audience, said Ragusea. His answer is that working journalists cannot be expected to sift through all the arguments, noise and harassment they are apt to receive. Instead, they should rely on trusted experts to point them in the right direction.

"Good media critics call out bad reporting wherever they see it, regardless of ideological backdrop," said Ragusea. "They work to empower all audiences to be savvier consumers of all news. Most importantly, they offer their criticism as a means to help journalists improve, not as a means to discredit and destroy journalism."

# THE HISTORY OF “FAKE NEWS”

► On July 27, 1996, during the Summer Olympics in Atlanta, a pipe bomb exploded in Centennial Olympic Park, killing two people and injuring 111 others. Richard Jewell, a security guard, had spotted a suspicious backpack and managed to help evacuate the area as the explosion occurred. Initially hailed as a hero, Jewell was identified days later by media as the focus of the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) probe of the bombing. Jewell was never charged for the bombing, however, and the FBI later cleared him as a suspect.

Before Jewell was cleared, the hero-turned-villain story was covered intensely by the throng of media from around the world who were in town for the international games, and especially by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and CNN, both based in Atlanta, and NBC, which had exclusive broadcast rights to the Olympics. Was this a case of so-called fake news? The short answer is no.

The media coverage all but certainly influenced public perceptions of Jewell as a possible criminal, even though he was only discussed internally by authorities as one of several people of interest and never charged in the case. Although the journalists who reported the story may have gone to print without thoroughly verifying their sources and the facts, they did not intentionally get the story wrong.

In 2005 Eric Rudolph pleaded guilty to the attack.

Ronald Ostrow, a journalist and educator, wrote a 2000 Columbia University case study of the story’s coverage in which he claimed there is no excuse for misreporting facts. “Maintaining high standards of accuracy, fairness and balance under pressure is the essential of professional journalism, just as life-and-death situations are the daily norm for surgeons,” Ostrow wrote.

Bob Steele, a journalism ethics scholar, was more direct in his 2002 assessment for the Poynter Institute, a nonprofit research organization. “The watchdog was wearing blinders,” he wrote. Exercising transparency about what was verifiably known and unknown may have gone far in mitigating the press’s assumptions and speculations.

## **What Is “Fake News”?**

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A larger issue the Olympic bombing case raised is trustworthiness. It’s important as a critical consumer of news to recognize that the journalists who covered the story did not fabricate information, however imprecise it was. Reporting mistakes are not the same as lies. Those journalists in Atlanta did not engage in “fake news.” We must not forget that journalists are humans who are prone to make mistakes. When that occurs, journalists have a professional duty to admit errors and correct the record as soon as possible. At stake is not only the reputation of those involved but also the confidence of the public.

As Ostrow indicated, there is a lot of pressure for media to “own” a story, that is, to be the first to report breaking news and new developments. Undoubtedly, the Atlanta-based media outlets felt more pressure because the Olympic bombing incident occurred in their backyard, so to speak.

While some journalists erred in their initial reporting, they did so while making good-faith attempts to find out the truth about a significant and dangerous matter, which the public had a right to know.

There has been much discussion about “fake news,” a controversial term based on the faulty premise that mainstream journalists report misinformation in order to deceive. The use of the term became politically charged in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, when it was regularly employed to question news reports from traditional news organizations. “Fake news” is a misnomer, because unlike news, it is not information supported by facts. Some communication experts believe the term should not be used at all. Claire Wardle, executive director of First Draft, a nonprofit research group at Harvard University’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy,

argues that specific words should be used instead, such as “misinformation” to describe mistakes, or “disinformation” to refer to deliberately false information.

“It’s being used as a weapon against organizations like CNN and others,” Wardle told CNN in a 2017 interview. “When it’s being used as a weapon against the news industry, and it’s just being co-opted, we have to think much more carefully about the power of language. And it’s damaging the industry. The free press is what we stand for.”

It is critical to understand what “fake news” is and what it is not, because it can mean different things to different people. America’s trust in news media peaked at 72 percent in 1976, following important investigative journalism about Watergate, a political scandal that resulted from a break-in at the Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C., and the Vietnam War, according to Gallup polling. Those stories inspired a generation of journalists who wanted to be the next Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the renowned investigative journalists who covered the Watergate story.

Public trust in news media began steadily falling after the early 2000s when it was in the low- to mid-50 percent range, Gallup reported. Since 2007, most Americans have shown little to no trust in news media. Attitudes about news media are now deeply divided along partisan lines, a 2017 Pew Research Center poll found. Only one-fifth (20 percent) of American adults say they trust information from national news organizations “a lot.” Slightly more people (25 percent) say the same about local news organizations.

So exactly what is “fake news”? Researchers Hunt Allcott of New York University and Matthew Gentzkow of Stanford University proposed a workable definition of “fake news” in a 2017 *Journal of Economic Perspectives* article: “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers.” This definition speaks to a deliberate attempt to mislead by spreading false information known to be untrue.

Allcott and Gentzkow excluded what they call close cousins of “fake news,” such as unintentional mistakes; rumors; conspiracy theories; satire like Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*, a news satire program;



false statements or spin by politicians and biased reporting that might be slanted or misleading, but is not outright false.

Instead, “fake news” includes fabricated news reports and news reported from satirical sources that do not disclose that they are not factual, they said. One example of the former changed journalism.

On September 28, 1980, the *Washington Post* published “Jimmy’s World,” a story about the struggles of a local 8-year-old heroin addict. The heart-wrenching, front-page story raised public concerns. It went on to win one of journalism’s most prestigious awards, the Pulitzer Prize. The author, Janet Cooke, was a young news reporter who had arrived at the *Post* about nine months earlier. But soon, questions arose about Cooke’s résumé, and editors began to suspect the story was not true. When they pushed Cooke to locate the boy, she was unable to find him. Eventually, she admitted she fabricated the story. The *Post* returned its Pulitzer in shame.

The episode and Cooke’s name have since become infamous as symbols of fraudulent journalism. It was a blow to the credibility of the press, and as the *New York Times* put it, prompted doubts about news stories with anonymous sources and spurred media outlets to strengthen their procedures to prevent similar occurrences.

In his autobiography, *A Good Life: Newspapering and Other Adventures*, Ben Bradlee, executive editor of the *Post*, said one of the biggest lessons he learned from the Cooke scandal was to encourage his staff to express reservations about stories. For big national security stories, he made it a point to assign a staff member to play devil’s advocate.

“The credibility of a newspaper is its most precious asset, and it depends almost entirely on the integrity of its reporters,” Bradlee said in a 1981 *Post* report about the Pulitzer Prize board’s withdrawal of its award. “When that integrity is questioned and found wanting, the wounds are grievous, and there is nothing to do but come clean with our readers, apologize to the Advisory Board of the Pulitzer Prizes, and begin immediately on the uphill task of regaining our credibility.”

Cooke’s fabricated story sowed confusion and cast doubt on the credibility of legitimate news stories. It accomplished the opposite of the intent of journalism, which is to inform.

The scandal “signaled the beginning of a radical change in the role of the media in American life,” said a 2016 *Columbia Journalism Review* article. “We live now in an age when no one fully trusts the media.” Fortunately, such incidents are rare in journalism.

Neither “fake news,” misinformation, disinformation nor propaganda are recent phenomena. What is new is the low cost of publishing information online, which means anyone can disseminate lies. It also means there is no need to build trust with readers and audiences when the cost of producing such material is so low. This had led some observers to believe “yellow journalism” is back.

## Yellow Journalism

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“A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes,” is an old saying often and erroneously attributed to the author and humorist Mark Twain. Research shows it more than likely originated from the works of another satirist named Jonathan Swift, perhaps best remembered as the author of *Gulliver’s Travels*, first published in 1726.

Truth, like the saying and its history suggests, is not always revered or free from untidiness. The press’s relationship with the truth was a concern long before the United States was created. During the American Revolution, fake propaganda stories were spread about King George III sending thousands of British soldiers to slaughter colonists. There also were “fake news” reports about crimes and uprisings by slaves, according to Jacob Soll, a University of Southern California historian.

“It has been around since news became a concept 500 years ago with the invention of print—a lot longer, in fact, than verified, ‘objective’ news, which emerged in force a little more than a century ago,” Soll wrote in a 2016 *Politico Magazine* article about “fake news.”

Before objective reporting became a model in journalism, “yellow journalism,” which emphasized sensationalism over facts to sell newspapers, became a popular style of reporting in the late 19th century. Yellow journalism, like the penny press—newspapers that sold for just one cent to make news more obtainable for all citizens—was meant to appeal to mass audiences. Not unlike its modern offspring,

supermarket tabloids, it was characterized by its obsession with crime, sex, gossip, pseudoscience and tragedy. The truth became a casualty in the war for the public's attention.

David Spencer, a journalism scholar and author of *The Yellow Journalism: The Press and America's Emergence as a World Power*, wrote: "With the concept of commerce comes competition, and just as we see today, advertising rates and readership were intertwined in the late Gilded Age. It was not enough to report the facts of the day's events; those facts had to be interpreted and placed in a setting where readership could be attracted and retained."

Perhaps the biggest purveyors of yellow journalism were the publishers William Randolph Hearst of the *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer of the *New York World*. They vied aggressively for circulation supremacy. Some historians cite their sensationalism of the sinking of an American battleship in Spain's Caribbean colony, Cuba, with instigating the Spanish-American War in 1898.

Not only did sensationalism sell papers, but an explosion in advertising, following post-Civil War manufacturing growth, helped yellow journalism become a profitable enterprise, argued media scholar Ted Smythe, author of *The Gilded Age Press, 1865-1900*. By 1880 nearly 50 percent of the revenue of daily newspapers came from advertising.

Though sensationalized news was popular, not everyone enjoyed it. In 1896, when Adolph Ochs purchased the *New York Times*, he added the paper's slogan "All the News That's Fit to Print." It was a subtle dig at his rivals. In prioritizing objective journalism, Ochs tapped into the changing mood about journalism at the turn of the century, said Soll.

"For the first time, American papers hired reporters to cover local beats and statehouses, building a chain of trust between local, state and national reporters and the public," Soll wrote in *Politico Magazine*. The transition, however, was not without its hiccups, he said.

## **Propaganda**

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Like misinformation and disinformation, propaganda differs from news in that it's not necessarily concerned with facts. It uses a systematic process to encourage a particular response from the spread of information,

ideas or rumors. Americans have often viewed propaganda as something that happens in other countries. But history offers plenty of examples whereby the government engaged in propaganda campaigns. Unfortunately, the press has not always resisted these attempts.

During World War I, President Woodrow Wilson created a federal agency called the Committee on Public Information (CPI). It sought to curtail press freedom by manipulating journalists and censoring news coverage, as Christopher Daly of Boston University explained in a 2017 article for *The Conversation*, a nonprofit news site. Daly said the agency blanketed journalists with press releases, starved them of information only to satisfy their hunger with official stories packaged as news, pressured editors who failed to abide by its voluntary newspaper guidelines and published the government's own newspaper called the *Official Bulletin*.

"The CPI was, in short, a vast effort in propaganda," wrote Daly. "The committee built upon the pioneering efforts of public relations man Ivy Lee and others, developing the young field of public relations to new heights."

After the war, Edward Bernays, an Austrian-American public relations pioneer and nephew of psychologist Sigmund Freud, published his 1928 book, *Propaganda*, in which he described propagandists as an "invisible government" who truly run the country.

"The media through which a political campaign may be brought home to the public are numerous and fairly well defined," wrote Bernays. "Events and activities must be created in order to put ideas into circulation, in these channels, which are as varied as the means of human communication." In Bernays's eyes, writes Mark Crispin Miller of New York University, propagandists were a "benign elite of rational manipulators."

Decades after World War I, the press was accused with being lulled by government propaganda into uncritical coverage of President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq in 2003. Howard Kurtz, a media critic, called it the press's "greatest failure in modern times." Indeed, the government's primary claim for war, that Iraq dictator Saddam Hussein harbored weapons of mass destruction (WMD), was later proved incorrect.

In the tense aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks, did journalists hold the government accountable by aggressively questioning and rigorously investigating that claim and other rationales for war? Not by a long shot, answered Ray Hiebert, former dean of the University of Maryland College of Journalism, in a 2003 academic article titled “Public Relations and Propaganda in Framing the Iraq War: A Preliminary Review.”

In its one-sided framing of issues, embedding of nearly 600 journalists with troops, showy press briefings, and emphasis on visual and online media, the government waged a successful propaganda campaign for war with little media pushback, Hiebert argued.

“The Weapons of Mass Destruction story line, nuclear, chemical, and biological, probably worked in the U.S. because mainstream mass media raised few questions about it, even though media in most of the rest of the world remained highly skeptical,” he wrote. “Adrienne Aron, a Berkeley psychologist, points out that the ultimate success of propaganda techniques depends on whether the information target has other sources that counter the propaganda.”

Deepa Kumar of Rutgers University came to a similar conclusion in a 2006 scholarly article in the journal *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*. The year after the invasion of Iraq, she pointed out, politically left-wing blogs saw a significant increase in traffic, and filmmaker Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* set a box-office record for documentaries, as people sought alternative sources of information.

“In democratic societies, the media have to maintain a semblance of independence so as not to appear to be obviously subservient to elite interests,” Kumar wrote. “In the months following the war when the reality blatantly contradicted war propaganda, such as when WMDs were not discovered, the media were forced to acknowledge this discrepancy.”

## **Tips for Consuming News and Getting Facts**

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All messages have an agenda. Some messages are intended to convey useful information, while others are meant to mislead. Knowing who to trust, especially when the internet has made publishing accessible

to anyone, has become more difficult. Reputation builds credibility, which in turn leads to trust. Journalists and the news organizations who employ them spend years building their reputations to gain credibility with the public. As expressed by Ben Bradlee of the *Washington Post*, mainstream news outlets take their credibility seriously by working hard to report facts and being forthcoming about errors.

In encountering any information, it is important to be skeptical and check the source to validate its credibility. Ask yourself, is this a widely trusted source? This is especially true concerning alternative or non-established media organizations. Here are a few best practices when reading news online that Alexios Mantzarlis of the Poynter Institute and Melissa Zimdars of Merrimack College provided to National Public Radio:

► **Pay attention to the domain and web address (URL)**

Established news organizations have standard web addresses that are likely familiar, such as “.com” or “.org” (e.g., [wsbtv.com](http://wsbtv.com)). Untrustworthy sites often create misleading web addresses that are similar to those of established news outlets but with unusual endings like “.com.co” (e.g., the former website [ABCnews.com.co](http://ABCnews.com.co)), which is a warning to dig around more to see if they can be trusted.

► **Read the “About Us” section**

Most websites share information about the news outlet and its leadership. If the description of itself is unrealistic or seems overblown, be skeptical. Also, you should be able to find out more information about the news outlet’s leaders in places other than that site.

► **Look for the quotes in a story**

Or rather, look for the lack of quotes. Most news outlets rely on multiple sources in each story who are professionals and have expertise in the fields they talk about. If it’s a serious or controversial issue, there are more likely lots of quotes. Look for professors or other academics who can speak to their research, which should be searchable.

► **Examine the source**

Is the quote from a reputable source with a title that you can verify through a quick Google search? If an article claims the president said

he wants to take everyone's guns away, read the quote carefully. Since the president is an official who has almost everything he says recorded and archived, search online for that quote. Find out what the speech was about, who he was addressing and when it happened. The same quote will likely be referenced by other mainstream news outlets.

► **Check the comments**

A lot of fake and misleading stories are shared on social media platforms. Headlines are meant to get the reader's attention, but they are also supposed to accurately reflect what the story is about. But sometimes headlines containing exaggerated language that is meant to mislead will be attached to stories about a completely different topic or to stories that are just not true. Such stories usually generate comments on Facebook or Twitter. Although some comments posted on social media sites may be unrelated to the article topic or not factual, many good citizens will use the comments section to call out fake or misleading details, quotes or arguments.

► **Reverse image search**

A picture should be accurate in illustrating what a story is about, but this often does not happen. It is unlikely that people who write "fake news" stories leave their homes or interview anyone for their stories, let alone take their own pictures. Do a little detective work and conduct an online reverse search for the image using Google Images. If the image appears on a lot of stories about many different topics, there is a good chance it is not actually an image of what it says it was on the first story.

# HOW “FAKE NEWS” IS LEGALLY ALLOWED

► In 1960 a civil rights group placed a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* criticizing the treatment of black protestors in a “wave of terror” by police in Montgomery, Alabama. It was designed to raise money for the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King Jr.’s legal defense. Though he was not named, L. B. Sullivan, the public safety commissioner, took offense to the ad and filed a libel suit against the newspaper for spreading false claims he said defamed him. The ad did contain some errors. And the Alabama Supreme Court upheld a jury’s \$500,000 judgement in favor of Sullivan.

But upon appeal by the *Times*, Supreme Court justices unanimously held that public officials need to prove actual malice on the part of the press. That is, they must prove that a newspaper knew information it published was false or that it demonstrated reckless disregard for the truth.

The *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* (1964) case has since become a cornerstone of First Amendment jurisprudence. The decision increased the burden of proof for public officials and public figures who pursue libel or slander cases against media. In addition, it freed up news organizations to pursue hard-hitting stories, according to Ken Paulson, dean of the College of Media and Entertainment at Middle Tennessee State University.

“The large media companies always had high-paid attorneys, but *Times v. Sullivan* gave weeklies and small newspapers the confidence to report things they might otherwise not have,” Paulson told the *American Bar Association Journal* in 2014.

This brings us to the legality of “fake news.” Courts have been hesitant to encroach upon First Amendment protections and have given



the media and others much leeway in making publishing and broadcasting decisions. When President Richard Nixon's administration tried to prevent the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* from publishing the top-secret Pentagon Papers, which detailed America's involvement in Vietnam, the court held in 1971 that the government could not censor stories before publication.

Sticking to our definition of "fake news," if information is allowed to be published or broadcast that is intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers, then what can be done legally about it, after it is published or broadcast? Not much, according to Eric Robinson, a University of South Carolina law professor, in a 2017 article for the South Carolina Press Association.

Most "fake news" involves public figures, he said, which means plaintiffs must meet the burden of actual malice. Additionally, it is challenging to prove a false statement was meant to be true if it was presented as satire. Likewise, Robinson said, a statement offered as an opinion is tough to demonstrably prove as true or false. "In short, it would be difficult to stem the proliferation and distribution of 'fake news' under the law, and would be similarly difficult to use the law to stem charges that particular information is 'fake news,'" Robinson wrote. "Under [First Amendment] principles, the way to combat false or misleading speech is with more speech, offering rational, factual information," Robinson added. "The idea—the hope?—is that from this Tower of Babble, accuracy and truth will win out."

## **A Legal Perspective of "Fake News"**

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If "fake news" is used by public officials as a term to describe critical news coverage about themselves, then the legal status of such reports is clear, according to Sonja West, a University of Georgia law professor. "It enjoys full First Amendment protection," said West, a constitutional and media law scholar. "In fact, the U.S. Supreme Court has stated repeatedly that the discussion of government officials and government policies is at the heart of our First Amendment rights. The Constitution, moreover, specifically recognizes the important role of the press in scrutinizing the government."

“Fake news,” as previously mentioned, also can refer to deliberately made-up news accounts that are created with the goal of fooling readers, often for political or economic gain. This type of disinformation is also mostly protected by the Constitution, West said, but there can be some instances where it might cross a legal line. “The First Amendment protects a great deal of speech that is of questionable value or is actually harmful,” said West. “This includes speech that is knowingly false, immoral or hateful. The Constitution instead asks us to make our own determinations of the merit of the speaker’s assertions and, if we disagree, to respond with our own speech.”

In some cases, however, it might be possible for someone who is the subject of a fabricated news report to sue for defamation. “Defamation” is an untrue statement that damages the reputation of another person. But even defamatory statements enjoy some First Amendment protection, said West. She said to win a defamation case, the Supreme Court has held that public officials and public figures must show that the defendant made the false statement with actual malice, the aforementioned concept of making false statements knowingly and with reckless disregard for truth.

Private figures have it a little easier, said West, but states like Georgia require them to establish that the defendant was negligent about whether the statement was true. The plaintiff also must prove the story was about him or her individually. Therefore, more generalized fabricated news stories about groups or policies would not be legally defamatory, West said.

The practicalities of suing for defamation the creators of fabricated news, like web bloggers or social media content creators, for example, also can be difficult, said West. To bring a suit, she said, the plaintiff needs to be able to identify the right person to sue and could face problems if the story was posted anonymously online or if the author lives in another country.

“Furthermore, defamation lawsuits are expensive and time-consuming to litigate whereas fabricated news stories are inexpensive and easy to publish,” West said. “Thus, even if a defamation plaintiff wins in court and is able to have a defamatory story or website taken down, another could immediately pop up to take its place.” Finally, said West,

defamation lawsuits can often bring more unwanted attention to the very fabricated news story the plaintiff wants to disappear.

## How “Fake News” Spreads

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On January 7, 2016, an article was posted online with the following headline: “80% of black men in Atlanta are Homosexuals, study says.” According to this article, a group of Georgia State University students conducted a study to assess the sexuality of Atlanta’s male population. Using such categories as “black,” “white,” “Asian” and “oreo” to divide the population, the study supposedly found that 80 percent of Atlanta’s black males are gay. The statistic, the article said, was expected only to increase “due to the large amount of men unwilling to openly admit to being anything other than straight in our society.”

As can be expected with any supposed scientific study that uses “oreo” as a racial category, the article was fake. Yet, its false claim has circulated for years on websites that share disinformation. In a review, PolitiFact Georgia, a fact-checking website, gave the article’s claim a “Pants on Fire” rating, its most untrustworthy. It essentially labeled the website that published the article, [Viralactions.com](#), as a “fake news” site. “Viralactions.com’s website doesn’t feature a page describing its mission or who’s behind it, and to anyone visiting the site, there’s no easy way to tell if its stories are real or not,” wrote Miriam Valverde, a PolitiFact staff writer. She pointed to [Viralactions.com](#)’s social media accounts as evidence. For example, its Twitter page, listed under the username [@FolksRtalking](#), states: “Folks don’t want to be INFORMED they want to be ENTERTAINED. #InfoTainment News at its Finest! #NYC.”

A 2017 report that originated from a Yale Law School workshop on “fake news,” featuring leading national experts, confirmed that social media plays a key role in the spread of misinformation and disinformation. People often interpret retweets and shares as a proxy for credibility, especially when those with whom they most often interact share similar viewpoints, according to the report. Programmed algorithms, called “bots,” are often used to promote inaccurate information and

create the false sense of a grassroots movement. The many shares and retweets are automatically treated by platforms like trending news, lending inaccurate stories credibility.

“People retweet or share an article based on its headline and without ever having clicked on—and therefore without ever having actually read—it,” the report stated. “This allows misinformation to be seen, accepted, and promoted just as much, if not more, than higher quality information.”

A 2018 study published in the journal *Science* analyzed every verified true and false news story on Twitter since the social media platform was created in 2006 (about 126,000 stories tweeted by 3 million people) and found “fake news” spreads farther, faster, deeper and more broadly than true stories. “It seems to be pretty clear [from our study] that false information outperforms true information,” Soroush Vosoughi, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology data scientist who led the study, told the *Atlantic* magazine. “And that is not just because of bots. It might have something to do with human nature.”

## **Can the Government Prevent “Fake News”?**

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The term “fake news” may be used to describe truthful stories that a person simply dislikes, as well as fabricated stories dressed up to look like truthful ones, often with the intent and effect of being shared virally on social media, said Jonathan Peters, a University of Georgia media law professor. Peters said, “The latter is the correct way to think about ‘fake news,’ seen by many policymakers and commentators as a problem urgently in need of a solution. The well-founded concern is that ‘fake news’ makes people less informed and therefore less capable of effective self-governance.”

That said, there is little the government can do to regulate “fake news,” he said. “The First Amendment offers expansive protection to socio-political speech, and, perhaps surprisingly, it offers some protection to false speech,” Peters said.

For example, said Peters, in *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* (1964), the court held that public officials could not sue for libel over damaging

and factually false statements about them unless they could prove the statements were made maliciously or recklessly. The court later extended that rule to public figures.

In the 2012 case *United States v. Alvarez*, the court struck down a federal law that made it a crime to represent falsely that you received a military decoration or medal, said Peters. “Notably, the Alvarez opinion observed that findings in other cases, mostly dealing with libel and fraud, supported government regulation of factually false statements if they caused cognizable harm to people, or were likely to do so,” said Peters. “But the court ruled that there was no categorical rule that false statements lack First Amendment protection.”

As the court put it: “Permitting the government to decree [false] speech to be a criminal offense, whether shouted from the rooftops or made in a barely audible whisper, would endorse government authority to compile a list of subjects about which false statements are punishable. That governmental power has no clear limiting principle. Our constitutional tradition stands against the idea that we need Oceania’s Ministry of Truth.”

That does not mean false statements may never be regulated. Again, it just means they are not categorically unprotected, said Peters. He explained that if the government wants to regulate such statements, it must have a strong rationale to do so and a regulation narrowly tailored to its ends. But that, he added, is a heavy burden the government rarely can carry, which is by design. “There is a general interest in keeping the government out of the business of prescribing the truth. That is consistent with various American theories of free speech, among them the marketplace of ideas, in which falsehoods are to compete with truth until the truth prevails,” Peters said.

“That applies today to ‘fake news’ and its many hosts, because, as a federal court once remarked, the internet is ‘the most participatory marketplace of mass speech that this country. . .has yet seen.’” All of which is to say there is little the government can do more broadly to regulate “fake news,” said Peters. “The most suitable sources of reform, then, are internet service providers, especially social media companies that host content,” he said. “They have a long way to go and are

struggling in this respect, but they are starting to take greater and more serious efforts to police their platforms and ensure that they are not incubators for false and harmful information. It is now up to us, as the users, to hold them accountable.”

## **Do Victims of “Fake News” Have any Legal Recourse?**

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Shortly after the 2016 presidential election, a North Carolina man went to a popular pizzeria in Washington, D.C., and opened fire with a military-style assault rifle. Edgar Maddison Welch, who was later sentenced to four years in prison, wrongly believed online stories about there being children trapped at the pizzeria in a sex-slave ring led by Democratic Party nominee Hillary Clinton. The conspiracy theory was known as “Pizzagate.”

James Alefantis, the owner of Comet Ping Pong, wrote in a 2017 *Washington Post* op-ed that rumors about a child-slavery ring in the basement of his pizzeria began in October 2016, when WikiLeaks, a website that publishes information from anonymous sources, released hacked emails from a Democratic official in which the official and his brother invited him to cook for a Clinton fundraiser. Anti-Clinton conspiracy theorists and online trolls, he said, decided the words “pizza” and “cheese” that appeared in the email were code for pedophilia, a lie which was then spread by media provocateurs to their large audiences.

“I was inundated with death threats, sometimes many a day. Comet’s Facebook and Yelp pages were flooded with obscene ‘reviews.’ The restaurant’s phone rang off the hook, with people calling and screaming at the hosts. First, we answered only local area codes, then unplugged the phones,” wrote Alefantis. “Online, we were labeled as criminals—or worse. They posted our pictures, links to personal social media, even our home addresses. Our community of food runners, hosts, bussers, waiters, customers, artists we display, bands that performed, my godchildren, surrounding businesses and my mother all were harassed by self-proclaimed ‘investigators.’” Unfortunately, once a story is published, there is no way to unpublish it.

But victims of “fake news,” such as Alefantis, who are willing to hire an attorney and go to court may have grounds for a civil lawsuit, under defamation law, against those responsible for such stories, said Derigan Silver of the University of Denver. “Fake news sites are clearly a situation where they’re engaging in a defamatory statement, a false statement about another that damages that person’s reputation,” he told National Public Radio in 2016. “In that situation, that is certainly actionable.” Silver went on to say that anybody who has communicated the defamatory statement to someone else can be held accountable, including the individual who originated the defamatory statement as well as those who repeat it under what is called the republication rule. “Now simply retweeting a defamatory statement is probably not going to be enough to qualify for republication, but passing on information that you heard from somebody else certainly is republication,” said Silver.

A traditional rationale for freedom of speech is something called the marketplace of ideas, which holds that left to their own devices, rational people will believe truth over falsity. The rise in “fake news,” however, has challenged this thinking, Silver said. “And that’s kind of making us rethink these kinds of basic premises behind freedom of expression,” he said. “Are we in a situation now where truth no longer matters, and people are not able to sort these things out?”

## OPINION, BIAS AND LEAKS

► On October 13, 1958, Ralph McGill opened his daily newspaper column for the *Atlanta Constitution* by grieving the bombings of a Jewish temple in Atlanta and a racially integrated high school in Clinton, Tennessee, both of which occurred that month. He then quickly turned his grief to anger at the environment that produced such hatred and violence. He described it as a “harvest,” sown with bigotry, inflammatory rhetoric, defiance of court orders and passiveness by leaders and fellow journalists. “You do not preach and encourage hatred for the Negro and hope to restrict it to that field,” he wrote. “It is an old, old story. It is one repeated over and over again in history. When the wolves of hate are loose on one people, then no one is safe.”

In 1959, the Pulitzer Prize Committee singled out the column, titled “A Church, a School,” when it awarded 61-year-old McGill with its 1958 prize for editorial writing. The committee praised his “long, courageous and effective editorial leadership.”

As an opinion columnist, McGill conveyed his personal thoughts about a range of topics, but southern politics was among his favorite subjects. He was a Tennessee native, although his family members were “Abraham Lincoln Republicans” who remained loyal to the Union during the Civil War. Their politics undoubtedly influenced his viewpoints. So too did his experience covering Nazi Germany. From the 1940s to the 1960s, McGill often spoke out against racial injustices and supported the causes of the civil rights struggle, which gained him a reputation as the “conscience of the South.” His positions also drew the ire of white supremacists who burned crosses and fired bullets at his home.

“Throughout his editorial career he saw himself as a mediator rather than a crusader,” wrote Barbara Barksdale Clowse in her 1998 book,



*Ralph McGill: A Biography*. “Asking readers to consider all sides of the race question exposed him to unending attacks.” Despite the attacks from fellow southerners, McGill continued to challenge the region’s social norms as his audience expanded with the national syndication of his column. President John F. Kennedy appointed him as a special envoy to Africa and to two presidential commissions.

“In McGill’s mind, none of his involvements in government posed a journalistic conflict,” wrote journalists Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff in their 2006 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*. “He was, after all, a columnist who took sides on issues. He had the title of publisher of the [Atlanta] *Constitution* but no control over the newsroom or business operations.”

## **Opinion versus News**

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Columnists like McGill are journalists who are given space to freely express their personal opinions about whatever issues they choose to write about. Editorial writers, reviewers and cartoonists also fall into this realm. In that respect, they are different from reporters, who are tasked with providing objective facts with context and analysis. Nonetheless, columnists, editorial writers, reviewers and reporters are bound to the truth, as all journalists are. The best opinion writing and commentary is well researched, balanced, insightful and persuasive while maintaining civility. “A good editorial consists of a clear position that’s strongly and persuasively argued,” said Andrew Rosenthal, a former *New York Times* editorial page editor. “It’s based on principle, but it’s also based in fact.”

Most news organizations are divided into two parts: news and editorial. Most of what the public reads, views or hears is news, those objective reports that traditionally cover local, national and international news. In contrast, editorial is much smaller and focuses on opinion. Editorials are produced by a publication’s publisher and its editorial board, which is largely comprised of editorial writers. They contribute writings only for the editorial page. In a collaborative effort, they meet

regularly to determine the publication's official positions on issues that are expressed through subjective editorials.

Before Joseph Appel became an advertising pioneer, he worked in the 1890s as a young reporter for the *Philadelphia Times* and learned a valuable lesson about the difference between opinion and news from his editor, Alexander McClure. "As he recalled, his first meeting with McClure was not auspicious," wrote Michael Schudson in *Origins of the Ideal of Objectivity in the Professions*. Schudson explained, "McClure waved a newspaper column at Appel and asked, 'Young man, young man, did you write this?' Appel replied that he had. McClure then said, 'Well, I want you to know and I don't want you ever to forget it, that when the *Times* expresses an editorial opinion I will express it and not you—go back to your work.'"

It's a longtime practice in many newsrooms to separate the staffs of news and editorial geographically to reinforce the sense of separation. (The same goes for advertising departments, which will be discussed later.) Whereas an executive editor or editor-in-chief manages a publication's news departments and answers directly to the publisher, an editorial page editor is in charge of a publication's opinion pages and answers to the publisher.

In 1970 the *New York Times* pioneered the op-ed page as a forum for other voices outside the paper. Its name reflected its physical location in the newspaper—opposite the editorial page. Op-eds were designed to counter the arguments of the paper's editorials to provide a balance of perspectives. An op-ed is usually written about an issue by contributors with expertise or experience with that matter. They usually appear alongside the writings of the paper's own columnists. Letters from the public can often be found there as well.

In television and radio, programs sometimes feature pundits who are not necessarily journalists, but individuals knowledgeable about a subject or field who are called upon to give their opinions. They are often given such titles as "commentator," "contributor" or "analyst." Unlike print and digital mediums, which can geographically separate their opinion commentary from their news reports, it can be difficult for viewers to differentiate who on TV and radio is and isn't a pundit.

That was not always so. On-air editorials by station management were once common on television, as a result of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)'s 1949 Fairness Doctrine, which deemed opposing viewpoints on controversial issues to be in the public's interest. The FCC repealed the doctrine in 1987.

Today, broadcasters, especially cable networks, rely on former elected and appointed officials as well as political advisers, who are typically under contract, to share their views about the news, according to a 2018 *Columbia Journal Review* article. "Philip Mudd and Will Hurd aren't reporters. Yet from their perches on CNN or Fox or MSNBC, in the mix of a developing news story, they both certainly look like part of 'the news media,'" observed Paul Farhi, a *Washington Post* media reporter.

In the past, said Farhi, TV producers placed opinion commentary at the end of a program. With the advent of cable news in the early 1980s, however, they found the panel format featuring politicians, authors and other guests made for livelier television, he wrote in a March 2018 article. The 24-hour cable news business model requires a constant flow of programming. In between news coverage from reporters sent into the field, it made financial sense to round up a few pundits in a studio to fill up airtime, Farhi said.

"News reporters bristle when critics tar them as liberal or conservative. They're quick to insist that they have nothing to do with the opinion side of their organizations," he wrote. "And yet panels with multiple talking heads arguably make the situation more fraught for them by lumping them with former politicians, think-tank scholars and opinionated party hacks—a blending of news reporting and commentary that's bound to leave some viewers confused."

Farhi added that he has seen more newspapers put editorials and reviews on their front pages and online homepages. Moreover, in the digital age, he said, stories that appear on social networking platforms, like Twitter and Facebook, make it a challenge to decipher whether they originated from news or editorial.

## Media Bias

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Seventy-two percent of Americans believe news media tend to favor one side in presenting political and social issues, according to a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center. Media bias has long been considered a problem in journalism. With the varied and countless internet sources of information, it is likely this issue will continue to be a point of contention.

But what does media bias mean? Walter Lippmann, the early 20th-century media critic, wrote in his book *Public Opinion* that the world is so vast and complex that people rely on their prejudices to interpret the information they receive to make sense of it all. People, including news consumers, tend to be conflicted, or at least suspicious, about new information that contradicts their point of view.

Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as cognitive dissonance. Former *Newsday* editor Howard Schneider, dean of Stony Brook University's journalism school, said research shows people often distort contradictory information. Schneider advised news consumers and his journalism students to think not emotionally but analytically when they come across information, and to be open to information that challenges their biases and assumptions. Otherwise, he said, they will spend their lives only accepting information that confirms what they want to believe.

The accusation that all mainstream media are biased is both unfounded and too simplistic. Such accusations often reflect the strong ideological biases of the accusers. Most journalists on most days perform their jobs in the journalistic tradition of objectivity, fairness and balance. But even the best of them sometimes fall victim to unconscious personal biases. When that happens, they jeopardize the important responsibility the press has in our democracy to keep Americans informed.

“Bias in the news is important because it speaks to the quality of the informational environment in the United States, and whether Americans are able to form coherent, meaningful opinions regarding the political system,” wrote Anthony DiMaggio in his 2017 book, *The*

*Politics of Persuasion: Economic Policy and Media Bias in the Modern Era.* According to DiMaggio, a political scientist at Lehigh University, media bias is observable in at least two ways: when journalists distort reality and provide an incomplete impression of what is happening in the world, and when journalists systematically favor one viewpoint over another.

Americans seem to have a collective nostalgia for the golden age of network news, when serious-looking men on black-and-white TV screens explained what was happening in the world. Geoffrey Baym of Temple University places this era between the 1950s, when most households had a TV, and the 1980s, when cable news was born. Baym, a former TV producer and author of *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*, argues in the book, published in 2010, that there are institutional reasons for why people consider that period to be a time when news was unbiased.

CBS, NBC and ABC had a monopoly over airwaves due to federal protections, like the Communications Act of 1934. The networks used evening news programs to help satisfy public affairs programming mandates. Audiences from all backgrounds were equally exposed to these few channels, and the networks made a clear distinction between their Los Angeles-based entertainment and their New York-based news, which aired at predictable times.

Baym contends this formulaic approach to news had its drawbacks. “Network news produced a singular worldview that limited the range of understandings about the nature of the political domain and the ways in which it could be represented,” he said. “Reproduced each day, this worldview was taken as the self-evident expression of common sense.”

Media face accusations of bias in many ways, from class bias and corporate ownership bias to racial bias and regional bias. But perhaps most of the bias debate revolves around accusations of political bias. The debate about whether media have a liberal bias or conservative bias is never-ending and may never be resolved. Even researchers disagree about how media may be biased. Therefore, it’s perhaps more helpful to examine how journalists should attempt to avoid biases and to report news objectively.

## Objectivity and Fairness

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Since beginning her broadcast reporting career in Atlanta in 1970, Judy Woodruff, *PBS NewsHour* anchor, has covered news and politics for more than four decades. That experience, she said, has taught her that journalists are not objective creatures. “We’re all human beings with the sum total of our experiences—where we grew up, whether we’re male or female, where did we live, where we traveled, our family experiences, our professional experiences,” Woodruff said in a 2018 Georgia Public Broadcasting interview. “None of us comes to what we do with a blank slate. A piece of paper is objective, but a human being isn’t. So the best we can do is try to be fair, open, reflect all sides of a story and that’s what we try to do here at the *NewsHour*.”

Objective journalism, wrote scholar David Spencer in *The Yellow Journalism: The Press and America’s Emergence as a World Power*, has long been thought of as the “reporting of news in which the facts that appeared on the printed page were totally separated in terms of human value from the person who collected those facts.” Readers had the responsibility to decide the truth, he said.

Though objectivity has become a relatively stable tenet of journalism since the early 20th century, Woodruff is not alone in her belief that complete objectivity is an untenable goal for a journalist or any person. After all, reporters are not stenographers who merely transcribe what is happening in the world around them. Not everything is news, and thus, they must make some subjective decisions about what to report and not report. We should not, said Brent Cunningham, expect them as humans to be as detached as the “aura of objectivity” implies.

Cunningham, the former managing editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review* (CJR), suggested in a 2003 CJR article that the common misperception of the concept of “objectivity” as synonymous with “neutrality” can affect journalists’ ability to uncover the truth.

The aim of journalists is to present fairly both sides of a story, but this aim may prevent them from properly scrutinizing powerful sources, such as the CEO of a company or an elected official, and may

dissuade them from getting to the truth of the story. It may even lead to hesitancy in the reporting of rarely covered issues.

In a 2013 debate about objectivity with former *New York Times* executive editor Bill Keller in Keller's *Times* op-ed column, Glenn Greenwald, a journalist for *The Intercept*, said the only real metric of journalism should be its accuracy and reliability. Objectivity, he argued, has weakened the profession. Greenwald—who went on to share a 2014 Pulitzer Prize for reporting the leaks of classified information by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden—took offense to the decision by the *Times* (which was not alone) not to use the word “torture” to describe interrogation techniques during President George W. Bush’s administration.

“A failure to call torture ‘torture’ because government officials demand that a more pleasant euphemism be used, or lazily equating a demonstrably true assertion with a demonstrably false one, drains journalism of its passion, vibrancy, vitality and soul,” Greenwald wrote.

In *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel noted that the original concept of objectivity has been misunderstood since journalism first borrowed it from social science. It was not meant to imply that journalists were free of bias, they said. “The call for objectivity was an appeal for journalists to develop a consistent method of testing information—a transparent approach to evidence—precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work,” wrote Kovach and Rosenstiel.

Objectivity, they said, is not the absence of a point of view. The voice of neutrality that defines much of newswriting and speaking, they argue, should be considered a tool instead of fundamental principle. Rather, objectivity means journalists should be fully conscious of their biases and strive to report information with thoroughness, accuracy, fairness and transparency.

Given this understanding, what should objective reporting look like in practice? Many people, including some journalists, confuse objectivity with the concept of equivalence that suggests all points of view are inherently equal, according to Andrew Seaman, chair of the Society of Professional Journalists’ (SPJ) ethics committee.

Following the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, which involved a clash between white nationalist demonstrators and counterprotestors, Seaman contended that journalists should not shy away from calling out discrimination, opposition of which is a mainstream value.

That said, journalists should be professional and treat their sources and subjects as human beings deserving of respect. But a “neither side is right or wrong” approach to news does not serve to inform the public, Seaman suggested in *Code Words*, the SPJ ethics committee’s blog. “The answer is that we objectively know that discrimination based on sex, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability and other inherited traits is wrong,” wrote Seaman. “Journalists should feel free to say so and forcefully challenge people who believe otherwise.”

## **The Press and Government Leaks**

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In April 2018 Jay Carney, who served as President Barack Obama’s press secretary, addressed the issue of government leaks during a talk at Yale University, where he is a Poynter Institute Fellow in journalism. A news “leak” happens when secret information (or information meant to be released at a later point in time) is shared with a journalist.

Carney, a *Time* magazine journalist before entering public service, denounced the practice of government officials sharing confidential information with the press, even though he admitted that he depended on leaks for stories during his journalism career. “The press always wanted more than we could tell them,” recalled Carney, according to a Yale communications report. “It was a frustration that we were running a tight ship...” Leaks, he claimed, confront all presidential administrations and risk damaging national security.

More than 4 million people have various U.S. government security clearances, which includes nearly 1.4 million individuals who have the highest level of security clearance, “top secret,” according to data from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence cited by *USA Today*. Leaks to the press reflect a fundamental tension in American democracy between secrecy and transparency. The Constitution gives



government the dual responsibilities to protect the nation and preserve civil liberties.

This tension has recently played out in the prominent leak cases of Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning, each of whom disclosed classified government information. Some view them as heroes who exposed wrongdoing, while others see them as traitors who broke the law. Regardless, an important question to consider as a news consumer is what gives media, which are unelected and privately owned entities, the right to decide whether government secrets should be published?

Certainly, there is institutionalized leaking, which regularly occurs between officials and journalists. This is reflected in stories that mention such sources as a “high-ranking official” or a “person close to the investigation.” There remains no sure way for news organizations to know if a story they publish, based on secret information, will not cause harm.

Journalists counter that leaks help them get around bureaucracy to hold government accountable. They argue that they take precautions such as confirming the accuracy of leaks and are careful not to publish information that may compromise the safety of individuals. “I’ve come to believe that unless lives are explicitly in danger. . .almost all of these stories should be brought out in public,” said Jill Abramson, former *New York Times* executive editor, during a 2014 speech at Columbia Journalism School. She said she regretted holding two secrets about Iran’s nuclear program and the National Security Agency’s warrantless eavesdropping on American citizens. The latter story won a Pulitzer Prize after its eventual publication.

For their part, courts have indicated that the government has expansive legal authority to prosecute its employees who leak, but minimal authority to stop journalists who publish leaks, David Pozen, a Columbia law professor, wrote in a 2013 *Harvard Law Review* article about leaks. Based on only a dozen or so leak cases the government has ever prosecuted since passage of the Espionage Act in 1917, it seems courts require the government to prove a journalist’s actions threatened grave, immediate harm to national security interests, according to Pozen.

His central argument is that the rare enforcement of laws against leaking, coupled with the government's selective authorization of leaks to serve its self-interests, have contributed to a gray area where journalists are concerned. Regularly criminalizing leaks would only further muddy the waters, let alone raise First Amendment issues, he said. "Even though particular leaks may cause real damage, an accommodating approach to enforcement has in the aggregate supported, rather than subverted, the government's general policymaking capacity as well as many different policymakers' discrete agendas," Pozen wrote.

When the Obama administration increased criminal investigations into leaks, which included going after journalists, the Committee to Protect Journalists, a nonprofit that promotes press freedom, petitioned for a federal shield law to protect the newsgathering process. Journalists and press freedom advocates contend that forcing media to disclose confidential sources or unpublished materials disrupts the free flow of information and obstructs the public's right to know.

A slight majority of states have statutes, called shield laws, to protect journalists from disclosing or testifying about confidential sources or their reporting. Their protections vary from state to state. Georgia's shield law has some qualifications or exceptions, according to the nonprofit Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. There is, however, no federal shield law.

In the end, the tensions surrounding leaks in American democracy should not be about resolving them, but balancing them, said the editors of *Whistleblowers, Leaks, and the Media: The First Amendment and National Security*, a 2014 book examining leaks. "It's about managing them, living with them, and accommodating the competing values to the maximum extent practicable," they wrote.

# NATIVE ADVERTISING

► Although the term “native advertising” may be unfamiliar, chances are good that you have been exposed to this type of advertising by reading or viewing news in print or online. Native advertising is any paid advertising designed to resemble news content, and can take many forms, such as an article, video or infographic. Also called sponsored or branded content, native advertising has become an alternative to traditional advertising in journalism.

Native ads appear on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms. Traditional media such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and Time Inc. also run native ads, as do new media companies like BuzzFeed.

Advertising is the primary source of revenue for news organizations, but revenue from traditional print ads and even online display ads has steadily declined. Advertisers have found that today people pay less attention to online ads, compared with an earlier era, when print media had a virtual monopoly on readership.

Native ads were developed to break through to readers who ignore ads. Because native ads have been shown to be effective, news organizations typically charge advertisers more for them, which has grown into a multi-billion dollar industry. They are not just popular among national media companies, some of which employ their own in-house content agencies. More than half of local online news sites publish native ads, according to a 2016 report from the City University of New York’s Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism.

Native ads are designed to blend in with news content, with the exception of accompanying disclosure labels that may say “sponsored

content” or “presented by.” Otherwise, it can be challenging to distinguish between editorial content and paid content.

Researchers at the University of Georgia found this to be true when they conducted two experiments involving eye-tracking to examine whether news consumers could tell the difference between news stories and native ads. They published their findings in a 2015 academic article in the *Journal of Advertising*.

In one experiment only 17 percent of participants could distinguish between news stories and native ads, and in another experiment just 7 percent of participants could do so. Researchers found that ads designed with straightforward disclosure labels like “sponsored” and “advertising,” placed in the middle, improved participants’ ability to distinguish them from news.

## **How Native Advertising Threatens Journalism**

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The experiments’ findings, as well as results from other studies, suggest native ads can be deceptive to news consumers who are not made aware of their purpose. Thus the use of native ads has the potential to erode consumer trust or compromise journalism’s long-standing wall between editorial and advertising, referred to in the industry as the “wall between church and state.” As previously discussed, the press is supposed to be independent from outside influences. Dressing up paid advertisement to appear as journalism raises serious, ethical questions about that independence.

“In my opinion, the biggest challenge native advertising poses to journalism is the erosion of trust,” said Nathaniel Evans, an advertising scholar, who co-authored the University of Georgia study. He pointed to another study on which he worked, published in 2018 in the *Journal of Interactive Marketing*. This study found that people who are able to identify article-style native ads as advertisement are likely to question the credibility of and hold negative attitudes toward the news organization that published them.

“Another challenge posed to journalism is the finding that as consumers better recognize native advertising, they exhibit reductions in

advertising-related outcomes such as attitudes toward the brand or company and sharing intention,” Evans said.

One of the biggest ethical concerns associated with native ads, Evans said, is the growing reliance on so-called influencer marketing, which uses celebrities and other popular figures to sell products. What makes it problematic is that native ads leverage the trust their followers place in such opinion leaders, he said.

“In turn, these followers might perceive Instagram testimonials or YouTube video reviews about—insert brand here—as objective and trustworthy, when in reality such influencers were paid to create oftentimes favorable content,” said Evans.

In 2016 members of the Kardashian family, some of America’s most popular reality TV stars, were reported to federal regulators by Truth in Advertising, a consumer watchdog group, for using more than 100 social media posts as paid product placements without clearly disclosing them as endorsements.

In 2015 the Federal Trade Commission released guidelines for native ads, which includes clear and understandable disclosing endorsements. However, they are largely ignored because there is little enforcement, said Jake Batsell of Southern Methodist University.

“This concept isn’t all that different with respect to legacy publishers whose tangible value rests in consumers’ perceptions of trust, credibility and objectivity,” said Evans. “The use of native advertising/sponsored content, in both journalistic and newer influencer contexts, obfuscates what is and isn’t editorial content.”

Affording consumers the opportunity to recognize or understand content before they begin reading or viewing it is important, and many academic researchers and regulators would probably agree, said Evans.

“What is more difficult to agree on, and players in the advertising and publishing arenas would probably attest to this, is we do not have a solid grasp or consensus on the best ways to help consumers recognize or understand native/sponsored content,” he said. “Furthermore, future native advertising or sponsored content executions are bound to appear in new and unforeseen ways.”

## Distinguishing News from Native Advertising

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The best way to spot native ads is to look for disclosure labels, which can vary, but use terms like “sponsor generated content,” “paid post” and “promoted by.” They typically appear under the headline but not always.

Melanie Deziel, a content strategist, said native ads are meant to take on the form and function of the content it is surrounded by. So, for example, if a native ad appears in a newspaper, it would probably look like a news article, with a headline and perhaps byline or photograph. Deziel said in an interview with the Native Advertising Institute, a Denmark-based think tank, that while she advises brands and marketers to take lessons and best practices from journalism, they should not simply impersonate journalists.

“All of this is also contingent upon the fact that there is a necessary separation between those who report and create editorial content and those who report or create branded content,” said Deziel, who has worked for news companies. “Someone trusted by readers to produce unbiased content about an industry should not also be paid to write branded content for that same industry; it would create clear problems for readers’ ability to trust either type of content they create.”

In a 2018 *Nieman Reports* article, Batsell, the SMU professor, offered four ways to bring ethical clarity to native ads. Ground rules for how paid content is reported should be clarified to prevent any confusion, he said. He suggested not only reporters but also production staffers, like page designers, should not work on both editorial and advertising content. News organizations, he said, need to ensure reporting decisions are not made by advertisers. Finally, he said labels need to be understandable and perhaps accompanied with a link or button to describe the content’s purpose.

“As native advertising becomes more journalistic in approach and news outlets beef up their branded content studios, it’s important for the news industry to prioritize trust by creating, disseminating and following best practices in this emerging area,” wrote Batsell.

# THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA

► On December 2, 2015, 14 people were fatally shot and 22 others wounded in the middle of a training session and holiday lunch organized by the county health department in San Bernardino, California. The assailants, Syed Rizwan Farook and his wife, Tashfeen Malik, died hours later in a shootout with police. It was then considered the deadliest terrorist assault in America since the September 11, 2001, attacks.

To investigate why and how it occurred, law-enforcement authorities wanted to analyze the couple's electronic devices, including their computers and phones. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was unable to unlock an Apple iPhone that belonged to Farook. When agents sought help from Apple, the company refused, out of fear that doing so would set an unwanted precedent for its customers. The battle that ensued set off a national conversation about government access to encrypted data. Eventually, the FBI paid a third party to crack the smartphone's security. Still, a larger debate about whether public safety outweighs personal privacy remains to be resolved.

The internet, which can be thought of as computer networks connected across neighborhoods, cities and the world, has become such an integral part of our lives that it's easy to forget how much we rely on it, from emailing co-workers and online dating to posting family pictures to social media and accessing news.

In fact, two-thirds (67 percent) of Americans say they get at least some of their news from social media, according to a 2017 survey by Pew Research Center. Facebook is the most popular social networking site for accessing news, followed by YouTube and Twitter.

An important part of media literacy is understanding how media works. It's especially important to have some understanding of what happens when we use the internet, because it serves as a major source of information—for us and others.

For instance, about half of American smartphone owners say they check their devices several times an hour or more frequently, a 2015 Gallup survey found. But do the messages, pictures, passwords, web browsing history and more that we access through personal devices really belong to us?

One might reason there is an expectation that this data is private and thus for our eyes and ears only. But the government's statement in March 2016 about the San Bernardino iPhone dispute suggests the government might have other ideas.

"It remains a priority for the government to ensure that law enforcement can obtain crucial digital information to protect national security and public safety, either with cooperation from relevant parties, or through the court system when cooperation fails," said U.S. Justice Department spokeswoman Melanie Newman. And the government is not alone in staking a claim to our personal data.

## **The Architecture of the Internet**

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Digital technologies not only make more behavior monitorable but also make more behavior searchable, said Harvard law professor Lawrence Lessig in his 2006 book, *Code: Version 2.0*. "The same technologies that gather data now gather it in a way that makes it searchable," he said. "Thus, increasingly life becomes a village composed of parallel processors, accessible at any time to reconstruct or track behavior."

Everywhere you go on the internet, your computer or mobile device's Internet Protocol address (IP address), a unique numeric identifier, is recorded as having been there. The same, said Lessig, goes for cookies, which allow websites to keep track of their visitors.

"They know you from your mouse droppings," Lessig wrote. "And as businesses and advertisers work more closely together, the span of data that can be aggregated about you becomes endless." This is



allowed because the architecture of the internet, which provides some anonymity, is decentralized and can be accessed around the world.

Nearly 4 billion people, half the world's population, will soon be connected online. But the internet's actual architecture, what it looks like and how it works, is a mystery to most, said Jonathan Peters, a University of Georgia media law professor.

While people often use the words "internet" and "web" (short for world wide web), interchangeably, Peters said it's important to understand that the internet is different from the web.

"The internet links up networks around the world, making it a network of networks. It includes hardware (e.g., cables and servers) and software (e.g., enabling instant messaging)," he explained. "The web is an information system that sits atop the internet and allows people to create, search and retrieve pages featuring text, audio, video and the like. For example, GeorgiaDogs.com is a web page, and Google.com is a web browser. Their data are transmitted across the internet."

In an architectural sense, then, the internet exists on a layered structure of privately owned web pages, servers, routers and backbones, all of which act as intermediaries to transport, host and index billions of pages of content, said Peters.

"Without those intermediaries, the ordinary person would have little or no practical ability to speak or be heard online," he said. As a result, these intermediaries have a large amount of power, he added.

"They can remove or de-prioritize content, block access to servers and suspend or deactivate users," Peters said. "Historically, private actors have always controlled intermediated content (think bookstores and mail carriers), but the internet's deep reliance on them has amplified their role and importance."

That said, according to Peters, the internet and the web were designed to be decentralized so that developers—the people who wanted to use the internet and contribute to the web—would not be required to seek the approval of any single authority.

Tim Berners-Lee, widely acknowledged as the creator of the web, put it this way in 2010: "The primary design principle. . . is universality. When you make a link, you can link to anything. That means people

must be able to put anything on the web, no matter what computer they have, software they use, or human language they speak, and regardless of whether they have a wired or wireless internet connection.”

“That made it possible in the early days for computer scientists and academics to build innovative applications that drew in more users, who created browsers, e-commerce pages and posting boards,” said Peters.

“The internet and web were truly open, free from the control of a single entity. But in time private companies like Comcast, Verizon, Facebook, Google and Amazon have come to monopolize almost everything we do online. They are the internet’s and web’s power players.”

## **Privacy and Ethical Concerns**

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Many of the privacy concerns related to the internet have to do with identity. Each time we use the internet on our personal devices, whether it be to search for a restaurant, purchase a book, send a message to a friend or “like” an article on social media, we leave cyber footprints (or mouse droppings, as Lessig put it). The more cyber footprints we leave behind, the easier it is for third parties to piece together our individual identities and to use that data for targeted commercial or research purposes.

Numerous companies, sometimes called data brokers, collect and analyze this data to make inferences about us. They then sell it to other companies, advertisers, research firms and governments that are eager to learn our habits and other behaviors. This data can be as valuable, if not more valuable, to them as the goods and services they sell.

For decades, information about consumer behavior has been collected through means like questionnaires, purchase tracking and public records. But never has this volume and level of sensitive personal data been collected. This is because the architecture of the internet allows our actions to be tracked.

As Julie Brill, who served on the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), told CBS’s *60 Minutes* program in 2014, all types of data such as our purchases, political affiliation, income, ethnic background, sexual

orientation and medical history are collected and packaged into digital “profiles.”

“I think most people have no idea that it’s being collected, sold and that it is personally identifiable about them and that the information is in basically a profile of them,” said Brill.

In 2014 the FTC released a report about the billion-dollar industry that showed one data broker had 3,000 data “segments” for nearly every American consumer. The information in people’s profiles can be used to place individuals into categories for marketing purposes, such as dog owner or expectant parent, or in more problematic groups, like gambler or cancer patient.

Jeff Chester, a privacy advocate and director of the Center for Digital Democracy, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, told National Public Radio in 2016 that little can be done to stop third parties from obtaining personal data. “Because there are no online privacy laws in the United States, there’s no stop sign, there’s no go-slow sign, there’s no crossing guard,” he said. “The message is anything goes.”

Some mobile applications, or apps, also contain tracking software that collect personal information, as well as location and behavioral data, according to researchers at the Yale Privacy Lab. Much of this data collection occurs by default when one visits a website, which has led to calls for better user privacy options and ways to block use of such data. A primary way to know whether your data is being collected, and to learn about other policies, is to visit a website’s terms of service.

Technology giants Google and Facebook are arguably the biggest data collectors, but their stated policies are generally not to share such information. However, Facebook has come under scrutiny for somehow allowing the personal data of millions of its users to be acquired by Cambridge Analytica, a political data firm.

A good rule of thumb when going online is to assume that any information can be surveilled and even stolen. “Be aware it is a space that is watched,” social psychologist Ilka Gleibs of the London School of Economics told *USA Today* in 2014.

The ethical challenges raised by online social networks tend to center around how we use them and how companies manage the information shared on them. Ironically, a lot of the data collected about us is the

result of our sharing personal information on social media platforms. Users do this for a variety of reasons, including the desire to stay in touch with family and friends. But not everyone has the same intentions.

For example, social movements have adopted social media to spread their messages and recruit members. Recall the unrest following Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 or Arab Spring demonstrations in the Middle East beginning in 2010. Smartphones in the hands of citizens are changing news coverage and the way news is shared.

Ethical issues can arise when content deemed inappropriate or violent is shared online. In 2012 YouTube found itself in hot water when it declined to entirely remove a video, despite a White House request, that some Muslims perceived as anti-Islamic. The company determined the video did not violate its terms of service regarding hate speech. But that didn't stop violent protests across the Arab world.

This leads to many questions, including how much responsibility social media companies have in controlling what is shared on their platforms. It also raises questions about censorship when companies do decide to remove user content, and about how companies define such broad concepts as hate speech, nudity, harassment or violence in order to determine whether their terms of service have been violated. As societies evolve with advances in digital technologies, more questions will surely follow. In a democracy, they force us to rethink age-old concepts like freedom and privacy in new ways. In places where democracy does not exist, it forces repressive regimes to think of ways to curb freedom and gives them tools to further curtail privacy. With that in mind, Peters, the University of Georgia professor, referenced one commentator who observed that now is the time to figure out how to use technology to support the rights and liberties of all the world's internet users.

## **Citizen Journalism**

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In a 2016 article entitled "Standing Rock, Orlando, Aleppo: The Year in Citizen Journalism," *Time* magazine recounted the many stories first reported that year not by professional reporters but by regular citizens with mobile devices in hand.

The deadly mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. The fatal police shootings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and outside St. Paul, Minnesota, respectively. The arrest of actress Shailene Woodley, recorded live on Facebook, while protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline. The daily life of 7-year-old Bana Alabed, tweeted to hundreds of thousands of followers as war was waged on Syria's capital, Aleppo.

“The way we see news today is framed by whoever records it first,” said the *Time* article. “No longer are network TV cameramen or newspaper photographers the only visual sources at crime scenes or in war zones (and anywhere in between). The ubiquity of smartphones around the world has made everyone a potential witness and a potential broadcaster.”

In essence, that is citizen journalism. Ordinary people engaging in journalistic practices, according to Luke Goode's definition. A researcher at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, Goode said citizen journalism can include blogging, photo and video sharing and posting eyewitness commentary of current events. He argued in a 2009 article in *New Media & Society*, an academic journal, that while traditional journalism and citizen journalism are distinct from one another, they should not be viewed as completely separate from each other, either.

Citizen journalists, he said, play an important role in mediating news, just as traditional journalists have done, dating back to when the printer James Johnston published maritime and other news for Savannah colonists in the *Georgia Gazette*, Georgia's first newspaper. Activist bloggers, smartphone photojournalists and meme creators can play the same agenda-setting role for public discourse as reporters. Citizen journalism has the potential to make newsgathering more democratic by transforming news and journalism from something news consumers consume to a conversation in which news consumers can participate, according to Goode.

In 2008 the *Huffington Post* recruited 12,000 citizen journalists for its coverage of the presidential campaign. One of them, Mayhill Fowler, a San Francisco Bay Area-blogger, broke a major story in

reporting President Barack Obama's controversial remark about frustrated working-class Pennsylvanians clinging to guns or religion.

"The production of news routinely implies a complex and multilayered chain of communication and sense-making: events, issues and ideas will be subject to the influence of various 'filters' or 'gatekeepers' (sources, journalists, sub-editors) before reaching their public destination," wrote Goode.

"What blogging, citizen journalism and social news sites yield are new possibilities for citizen participation at various points along those chains of sense-making that shape news—not only new possibilities for citizens to 'break' news."

Still, is what citizen journalists do truly journalism? Can the public trust that the information they report has gone through a careful process of fact-checking and verification, and is not just rumor or speculation?

In 2005 a gathering of journalists, bloggers, news executives, media scholars and librarians discussed that and related questions at a conference titled "Blogging, Journalism & Credibility: Battleground and Common Ground," sponsored by Harvard and the American Library Association. Blogging and journalism are different, though they do intersect, conference attendees collectively concluded, according to a conference report. Much of blogging is not journalism and does not intend to be, some said. But many agreed there was room for both in the emerging media ecosystem. Simon Waldman, then with *The Guardian* newspaper, used the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami as an example of the strengths and weaknesses of citizen journalism. He said the biggest positive was the many vivid first-person accounts of the disaster, but a great downside was the lack of structure, and ultimately, meaning to all those stories.

"The disciplines of traditional media—space, deadlines, the need to have a headline and an intro and a cohesive story rather than random paragraphs, the use of layout or running order to give some sense of shape and priority to the news—aren't just awkward restrictions," said Waldman. "They add meaning. They help understanding. Without them, it is much, much harder to make sense of what is happening in the world."

Conference attendees mostly agreed that following journalistic principles would make it more likely for citizen journalists to gain credibility. They determined that while transparency is vital, credibility also depends on building a relationship of trust with readers and audiences.

In the intervening years since the conference, there have been countless stories about the rise and downfall of citizen journalism. The same year *Time* magazine hailed it, *New York* magazine published a critical story with the headline: “‘Citizen Journalism’ Is a Catastrophe Right Now, and It’ll Only Get Worse.” But citizen journalism doesn’t have to mean the death of traditional journalism, argued Goode. It does, he said, mean that there are new agenda-setters, a term related to a theory by a similar name that claims mass media influences the public by telling people not what to think, but what to think about.

“The citizen journalism movement does not signal the end of agenda-setting by professional or elite media organizations,” Goode wrote. “Such institutions still break and frame a large proportion of the news stories circulating through the online sphere and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. But those institutions must now vie for attention in competition with a diverse range of alternative news sources, from hyperlocal sites to unofficial and untamed celebrity gossip sites.”

# THE ABSENCE OF LOCAL NEWS

► William “Dink” NeSmith Jr., a native of Jesup, Georgia, a University of Georgia graduate and a co-owner of Community Newspapers Inc. (CNI), is not afraid of a fight. Based in Athens, Georgia, CNI publishes small town newspapers in Georgia, Florida and North Carolina. But the *Press-Sentinel* in Jesup, a coastal region town of about 10,000 residents in southeast Georgia, is especially close to NeSmith’s heart.

The twice-weekly published paper traces its roots back to the *Jesup Sentinel*, founded the year the Civil War ended, in 1865. Like many papers across the country that purchased smaller competitors, the *Jesup Sentinel* merged with its rival, *Wayne County Press*, to form the *Press-Sentinel* in 1977. It was NeSmith, initially with the paper as an employee in 1971, who spearheaded the merger, according to the paper’s website. Since then, he along with its small staff, have guided it through the ups and downs of the digital age.

In early January 2016, Derby Waters, a part-time *Press-Sentinel* reporter, learned that a subsidiary of Republic Services, one of the nation’s largest waste management companies, had applied for an Army Corps of Engineers permit to develop 25 acres near its 270-acre landfill in the county.

The purpose was to build a rail yard to accommodate as many as 100 railcars that could dump up to 10,000 tons of coal ash and other non-hazardous waste into the landfill—per day. Soon after, the paper ran a story with the headline “Company Plans to Bring Coal Ash, Other Waste Here,” which warned of the project’s potential environmental and health dangers, although under federal law, coal ash is permitted to be stored in lined landfills.



NeSmith joined Waters and other staffers in wall-to-wall coverage of the issue. They devoted numerous news articles, columns and editorials to reporting the company's plans and how they might affect the community. One story reported that the county commission in 2005 had self-imposed restrictions to regulate Republic.

Concerned citizens wrote letters to the editor and packed commission meetings. Protests were organized. A Facebook group was created. Even second-graders wrote essays in school about the project, the *Columbia Journalism Review* (CJR) reported.

Republic told the CJR it believed the paper's coverage was misleading, described NeSmith's columns as one-sided and questioned the ethics of his letter-writing campaign appealing to Microsoft's Bill Gates, a company board member, for help.

Nevertheless, the permit application was withdrawn more than a year later, in April 2017. For its efforts, the *Press-Sentinel* received an Environmental Championship Award by GreenLaw, a nonprofit law firm in Atlanta. NeSmith, who owns property in the Jesup area, said it was the job of his paper to defend the interests of the community it serves.

"I've got cypress in my swamp tract that were growing when Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane," NeSmith told the CJR. "I'm going to leave that land to my children and grandchildren. I don't want my great-grandchildren to say, 'It was real nice of grandpa to do this for us, but why didn't he stand up? Why did he let coal ash get dumped here?'"

## **The Importance of Local News**

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Local news serves as an important source for information about matters that affect us on a personal level, like teacher layoffs, a local team's tournament win, a hike in property taxes, a chemical spill in a nearby river, a new downtown restaurant or car wreck along our daily commute route.

In an age where information about nearly any topic in the world is at our fingertips, it is easy to forget that someone has to gather and report

that information, including information about local government and social services, public safety, housing, schools, jobs and community events.

In some small communities, the weekly community newspaper run by a dedicated, if small, team of journalists is the only source of local information for residents. And communities with an absence of local news sources do suffer consequences.

In 2011 Pew Research Center asked Americans, “If your local newspaper no longer existed, would that have a major impact, a minor impact or no impact on your ability to keep up with information and news about your local community?” Most (69 percent) said it would have no impact or a minor impact.

“Losing local sources of information would be detrimental to their communities,” said Christina Smith, a Georgia College professor who studies community journalism. “Local newspapers are the eyes and ears of the communities they serve. In fact, in most communities in Georgia, the local newspapers are the only information sources available because larger daily newspapers and television stations tend not to cover routine news in rural communities.”

Smith said research has consistently shown local newspapers are vital to their communities in the digital age, despite larger newspapers closing their doors due to decreasing circulation and falling ad revenue.

Georgia, with nearly 10.5 million residents, has about 125 newspapers, 101 of which are considered community papers that publish weekly news about local government, crime, schools, events, sports and people. Most are in small, rural towns and have circulations of less than 5,000, according to Smith. They “matter because local newspapers and their journalists have the potential to impact, at the grassroots level, the everyday normal lives of residents across the state,” said Smith.

But why do local newspapers seem to be doing better than their larger brethren? The answer, Smith said, lies in understanding the community newspaper approach to journalism. For example, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* serves as the newspaper of record in Georgia. Like other large daily newspapers, its primary role is to serve

as the fourth estate, the watchdog of public officials and other people in power, Smith said.

Most journalists at large daily papers trained at a journalism school and follow journalistic principles like accuracy, fairness and independence from sources and advertisers, said Smith. She said content produced at large dailies traditionally require a certain level of detachment and in-depth investigation.

But the community journalism approach is somewhat different, which is not to say there is no room for in-depth reporting at community papers or that their journalists are biased and do not understand news, according to Smith.

“Community newspapers tend to reflect their communities rather than actively criticize them, and most news produced by small, rural newspapers would never be reported on by journalists at larger daily newspapers,” said Smith.

“However, those stories—new roof being installed on a bank, the summer library reading program set to begin, a civic club’s student of the month, the recently crowned fair queens, a parking lot closing for repairs, a hiring of a new band teacher—matter most in small towns.”

Local journalists understand these are the stories that matter most because they inform residents in the community about their neighbors, family and friends, as well as help shape the community’s identity, Smith said.

“The relationship between the local press and its audience is ultimately what distinguishes these media sources from larger daily newspapers,” said Smith. “Simply put, community newspapers remain vital because they know what their purposes are and who their audiences are. After all, the journalists who do community journalism actively live among the people they write about, which creates an intimate relationship with the audience.”

## **What’s Driving the Absence of Local News**

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In today’s changing media landscape, jolted by the explosion in new digital technologies, like the internet, along with cheaper online ads, traditional local news sources have faced increased competition from

new media, including social media, online news sites and blogs that often offer free content.

These and other changes have uprooted traditional media business models. Newspaper and magazine advertising has continued to decline as many readers migrate to digital media. Meanwhile, Google's ad revenue grew from around \$1.4 billion to more than \$95 billion between 2003 and 2017, according to Statista, a Germany-based research company. As a result, print media circulation has dropped dramatically.

"In drawing readers and viewers from a relatively small pond, local news outlets struggle to attract enough traffic to generate ad dollars sufficient to support the cost of gathering the news in the first place," Paul Farhi of the *Washington Post* reported in 2014.

One result: A steady, years-long decline in local-news reporting, as newspapers—the largest source of local news—have gradually cut back their reporting staffs. Across all media, including print, digital, television and radio, newsroom employment from 2008 to 2017 dropped by 23 percent, or about 27,000 jobs. In 2008 there were 114,000 newsroom jobs but by 2017 there were just 88,000, according to Pew.

The biggest driver causing the drop in newsroom employment is newspapers, where most news originates. Between 2008 and 2017, newspaper newsrooms in cities and towns across America have shed more than 32,000 jobs, a 45 percent decline, according to Pew.

In 2017 there were about 39,000 newspaper journalists, according to the data. Whereas newspaper journalists used to make up 62 percent of all news media jobs in 2008, they accounted for 45 percent in 2017.

Comparably, employment in television and radio has been more stable. Meanwhile, digital-only news outlets during the same period have increased their employment by about 6,000 jobs, or 79 percent, which was not enough to offset the loss in newspaper jobs.

In Georgia, the number of journalists declined by more than 28 percent from 1,260 in 2014 to 900 in 2017, said Keith Herndon of the University of Georgia, citing the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"In Georgia, 520 of the 900 remaining reporters and correspondents are employed in metro Atlanta, which leaves only 380 deployed on the frontlines of newsgathering for the remainder of the state," said Herndon. "That's a small number considering the size of a state that

stretches from Valdosta to the Tennessee border and Columbus to Savannah and encompasses hundreds of small towns and communities in between.”

Charles Davis, a former journalist and now dean of the University of Georgia’s Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, said the declining numbers of reporters on the front lines of local news is cause for concern.

“When we lose reporters at the rate we’re losing them, democracy suffers as there simply is less news about local governments and that translates into less transparency in how our elected leaders carry out their responsibilities on behalf of the citizens who elected them,” he said.

Many observers had hoped the industry’s move to digital would result in local digital news sites filling the void left by print, but that has not been the case, according to Danny Hayes of George Washington University and Jennifer Lawless of American University, authors of a 2018 study in the *Journal of Politics* about the decline of local news.

“Indeed, there are virtually no alternative online sources of local public affairs reporting in the top 100 media markets across the country,” Hayes and Lawless wrote. “This increasingly fallow news environment—part of what some describe as a crisis in American journalism—raises the concern that without sufficient information about community affairs, citizen engagement in local politics will wither.”

It used to be that big national news outlets routinely reviewed and absorbed the work of journalists at local newspapers, especially regional newspapers that excelled at statewide coverage, said Joyce Dehli, a former news executive. “Today, less local journalism—and less meaningful journalism—moves through a diminished network,” she wrote in *Nieman Reports*, a journalism journal.

Some observers see digital start-up sites as potential game changers. But not all invest in accountability journalism like those previously discussed. Moreover, most successful online operations like *BuzzFeed*, *Politico* and *Huffington Post*, whose reporters are concentrated on the East Coast and West Coast, tend to overlook local news in favor of national and international stories.

“The impact can be seen in the reduced coverage of political corruption and corporate malpractice, environmental degradation and social

displacement,” writer Michael Massing said in his 2018 story, “How Not to Cover America,” in the *American Prospect* magazine.

When national media do decide to cover local news, they do not always get the whole story. With few, if any, local sources, little knowledge of the area and a tight deadline, journalists who parachute down from places like New York or California to cover breaking news or an election in Middle America are at a disadvantage.

“You go in for a few days, take the temperature, write a story and then you move on to the next,” Massing told C-SPAN. “I feel that is just not a way to really get at the deep stories.”

## **The Implications of Fewer Local News Sources**

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In 2011 the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) released a report called “The Information Needs of Communities,” which examined the effects of the changes in media. The alarming decline in local news led the commission to question whether the press was upholding its end of the adversarial relationship.

“The independent watchdog function that the Founding Fathers envisioned for journalism—going so far as to call it crucial to a healthy democracy—is in some cases at risk at the local level,” the reported stated.

There is evidence that suggests government spending increases when local newspapers close, according to researchers Paul Gao of the University of Notre Dame, and Chang Lee and Dermot Murphy of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

“We found that local government borrowing costs significantly increased for counties that have experienced a newspaper closure compared to geographically adjacent counties with similar demographic and economic characteristics without newspaper closures,” Gao wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. “Our evidence indicates that a lack of local newspaper coverage has serious financial consequences for local governments, and that alternative news sources are not necessarily filling the gaps.”

Hayes and Lawless, the aforementioned researchers, also conducted a study, published in 2015 in the *Journal of Politics*, which found that citizens become less politically engaged and vote less when there is less

coverage of local elections. “The fact that we find effects for everyone—not just the least attentive—illustrates a critical theoretical point about the relationship between the changing media environment and citizen engagement in contemporary American politics,” Hayes and Lawless concluded.

There is another downside to the absence of local news that does not get talked about as much, according to media columnist Margaret Sullivan of the *Washington Post*. “In our terribly divided nation, we need the local newspaper to give us common information—an agreed-upon set of facts to argue about,” she wrote in a 2018 column.

She told a story about visiting a community near Scranton, Pennsylvania, and talking to residents about their media habits. To her surprise, she said, many of the people maintained an allegiance to competing local newspapers and local TV stations.

“The most reasonable people I talked to, no matter whom they had voted for, were regular readers of the local papers and regular watchers of the local news. (The county was one of those critical places that had voted for President Obama in 2008 and 2012, and flipped red to Trump in 2016),” Sullivan wrote. “By contrast, those residents who got news only from Facebook or from cable news were deep in their own echo chambers and couldn’t seem to hear anything else.”

## **How News Consumers Can Help Revitalize Local News**

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The Macon–Bibb County area is home to around 175,000 residents in five counties who live in a largely rural region about 80 miles south of Atlanta. In a 2015 study, Pew researchers identified 16 local news sources in the area.

In addition to *The Telegraph* daily newspaper, there were four local TV stations, two radio stations, four community weekly newspapers, four specialty and ethnic news outlets and Mercer University’s *The Cluster* student paper, dedicated to original content. Most have a website and social media presence. The analysis did not identify a digital-only news outlet that regularly reported local news.

In Pew’s case study, “Local News in a Digital Age,” which compared Macon’s media ecosystem with that of Denver, Colorado, and

Sioux City, Iowa, Macon stood out in how many residents (25 percent) closely followed news about local schools, the local economy, local government and politics, and local jobs and unemployment.

But a major finding of the study was that Denver, a much larger city than Macon and Sioux City, has a more diverse media landscape that includes blogs, nonprofit organizations and ethnic media and specialty publications that provide alternative news coverage of issues traditional media sometimes overlook for various reasons.

“A larger ecosystem, in other words, is not simply a super-sized version of its smaller brethren,” the report stated. “It is also a more diverse one when it comes to who is providing coverage and how.”

When it comes to news, citizens benefit from having a variety of sources of information. That goes not just for nation-states like the United States, where an independent and free press is valued, but for local communities as well. That’s why it is important to not just consume local journalism but financially support it as well.

By subscribing to local papers, citizens can demand more coverage. In donating to local public television or radio, citizens contribute more resources to cover the issues they care about. That new nonprofit or digital-only news start-up that appears in our community needs our financial investment to remain independent and answerable only to the public.

More collaborations and partnerships among journalists from different platforms have begun to emerge. Macon is home to one such innovation in Mercer University’s Center for Collaborative Journalism, a collaboration between the university’s journalism and media studies department, *The Telegraph* newspaper and Georgia Public Broadcasting. The city’s CBS affiliate, 13WMAZ, recently became a partner.

Backed by nonprofit funding, veteran journalists, students and faculty work in a joint newsroom to provide in-depth coverage of local issues. Their award-winning reporting includes a seven-part series on residential blight and a series on pedestrian safety that have led to \$14 million in local government funding and the formation of a community task force, respectively, to remedy the problems.



# THE PUBLIC'S RESPONSIBILITY IN AN INFORMED DEMOCRACY

► Each year, Reporters Without Borders, an international press watchdog group, compiles a ranking of countries based on the freedom that exists for their citizens, journalists and news organizations.

On the 2018 World Press Freedom Index, the United States dropped to number 45 among 180 countries, a recent trend, landing in the second-best category, where press freedom is described as “fairly good.”

European nations make up most of the countries in the top category that have the most press freedom. Norway ranked number 1, followed by Sweden and the Netherlands. However, the report warned of growing “verbal violence” against media in Western democracies, which had four of the five largest ranking declines from the previous year. North Korea, Eritrea and Turkmenistan were ranked at the bottom of the index.

“More and more democratically-elected leaders no longer see the media as part of democracy’s essential underpinning, but as an adversary to which they openly display their aversion,” Reporters Without Borders stated.

America’s Founding Fathers worked to create a society in which power derived from citizens, not from a monarchy. Citizens would be equipped with the ability to vote unresponsive leaders out of office. Thomas Jefferson and his fellow patriots understood that to exercise such power properly, citizens needed to be informed, hence the creation of a free press.

That the world’s oldest democracy finds itself in a “fairly good” category on a fundamental freedom enshrined in its Constitution is in some ways alarming, and in other ways, not surprising. In guaranteeing

freedom of the press, said Nicholas Lemann, former dean of the Columbia Journalism School, the Founding Fathers gave a pass to “fake news,” because the early American press mainly reported on its opinions, not on what we today would call news.

“They felt protected against a government that came to power through misinformation, because the country wasn’t very democratic, and because they assumed most people would simply vote their economic interests, Lemann wrote in a 2016 article in the *New Yorker* magazine.

We must remember that democracy is something new, not old, said Peter Hoffer, an early American historian at the University of Georgia. The Founding Fathers did not believe in direct democracy, but rather in republican governance, that is, representative government. It was a revolutionary idea. Unfortunately, women, Catholics, Native Americans, blacks and poor whites were excluded from participation. Bit by bit, said Hoffer, Georgia and the nation have abandoned this restricted notion of self-government in favor of genuine democracy.

“But the trend now is to return to some of these restrictions, for example, requiring a photo identification card for voting, in effect a driver’s license, and asking for proof of citizenship,” said Hoffer.

Expanding and not shrinking enfranchisement, after all, as Jennifer Hochschild of Harvard University has written, makes a nation more democratic. What is the purpose of citizenship if a citizen cannot vote?

Barriers to citizen participation in democracies can be subtle or obvious. Education is thus critical because citizens must be informed about ways their lives can be improved. They can do this by supporting the work of an independent and free press that provides accurate information and holds government accountable. Once citizens are informed, they must then become engaged in the social, political, economic and cultural development of their communities. Voting, attending government and civic meetings, volunteering for community-based causes and supporting local news, libraries and other institutions are just a few ways to become engaged.

James Madison, considered the father of the Constitution, once wrote: “A popular Government, without popular information, or the

means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or perhaps both. . . . and a people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

Hopefully, this media literacy guidebook will serve as a helpful step in the journey of understanding the importance of media and journalism in our democracy, as well as a foundation for future learning.

## **Other Ways to be a Responsible Consumer of News**

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- ▶ Do your research as suggested in the chapter on “fake news” to be sure the story is true.
- ▶ Don’t just read articles or watch cable news stations with like-minded views. Follow a variety of sources to gain a full perspective of the news.
- ▶ Don’t share news stories if you are not sure of the source.
- ▶ If you see someone sharing something you think may be “fake news,” speak up!

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