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**MAKING THE COMMITMENT TO QUALITY JOURNALISM**

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## **MAKING THE COMMITMENT TO QUALITY JOURNALISM**

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Good journalism – whether it is in a newspaper, magazine, radio, on television or the internet – enriches the public by giving them both useful information for their daily lives and a sense of participation in the wider world. Good journalism makes possible the cooperation among citizens that we believe is critical to a civilized society. Citizens cannot function together as a community unless they share a common body of information about their surroundings, their neighbors, their local, city, state and national governing bodies, their sports teams and even their weather. These all make up the news – the best journalism digs into it – makes sense of it – and makes it accessible to everyone.

Bad journalism is failing to report important news, or reporting news shallowly, inaccurately or unfairly. Bad journalism can leave people uninformed... even dangerously uninformed.

Bad journalism can misinform. Television newscasts and many newspapers routinely overemphasize crime news – so Americans continue to fear that crime is getting worse when it has actually been decreasing steadily for years.

Glowing, uncritical coverage of new technology and internet companies in the late 1990s encouraged many Americans to invest their savings into “hot” – speculative stocks and mutual funds that soon crashed – collectively costing them billions of dollars and some people the money they were going to live on in retirement.

Much bad journalism is just lazy and superficial. Local television stations fill their newscasts with dramatic video fragments of relatively inconsequential but sensational fires and auto accidents. Broadcast and cable networks devote news time to mindless chat and debate.

Bad news judgment is commonplace. “if it bleeds, it leads” is a self-mocking slogan among local television journalists, but it is also an accurate description of the reflex of television news directors to make gruesome or violent crime stories the first news items on the 10 or 11 o’clock evening news. The police raid on a massage parlor, the celebrity divorce, the opening of a county fair – all too often – it doesn’t have to be new, factual, or interesting, or important to be labeled “news.”

Although Americans are more “globally” connected than ever, most news media steadily and substantially reduced their coverage of foreign news during the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - depriving Americans of the opportunity to follow the world around them. This fact was widely discussed after the terrorist attack of September 2001, when foreign stories suddenly became “fashionable” again.

But, let’s concentrate on the *better* journalism in America.

Journalists have a special role in preserving one of America’s greatest assets – our culture of accountability. Americans expect their leaders to behave responsibly – and usually take corrective action when they don’t. This is an important reason why we believe American society works better than many others. Accountability is a crucial aspect of our national ideology, which was based on the rejection of tyranny – defined by our founders as an unjust use of power.

Americans in positions of power generally assume that someday they may have to account for how and why they have used their power. This is especially true for those who hold power in our government “of the people, by the people and for the people” as stated in America’s constitution... the foundation and principals of our country. But this also includes others as well – corporate officers hold power over companies and their customers. Foundation officers hold power over the distribution of large sums of money. Those with power in film studios, book publishers, recording companies and television networks shape our popular culture.

American society is diverse and decentralized; countless citizens exercise some form of power over the lives of other citizens.

Accountability is an important check on that power. Our politicians know that informed voters can throw them out of office – corporate CEO’s or company executive officers recognize the authority of their boards of directors and the influence of their stockholders. A policeman taking money or bribes knows he doesn’t want to get caught.

Good journalism is a principal source of the information necessary to make such accountability meaningful. Anyone tempted to abuse power looks over his or her shoulder to see if someone is watching. Ideally, there should be a reporter watching them.

The journalist’s ability to connect readers or viewers to comedy and tragedy that surrounds us all – makes life richer and more rewarding. One of the rewards of being alive is watching the world change. During our nearly four decades in journalism we’ve seen some amazing changes – changes that have redefined the American experience; the creation of a middle-class majority in the United States; economic and cultural globalization; the celebrification or celebrity of just about everything or everyone - such as “American idol;” America’s youth culture; the emergence of women, African Americans and gay people; the great

migrations from Latin America and Asia; the long and frustrating struggle with terrorism.

Journalism described all of this, though not always as quickly or thoroughly as it could have. Any American who pays attention could keep up with this changing world by following the news. Good journalism gives every one of us the opportunity to be real citizens of our own time.

And good journalism holds communities together in times of crisis, providing the information and the images that constitute shared experience. When disaster strikes, the news media give readers and viewers something to hold onto – facts... but also explanation and discussion that can help people deal with the unexpected.

### *NPPA video – tornado*

So on September 11, 2001, and for some time after, Americans remained glued to their televisions, turned in record numbers to online news sites and bought millions of extra copies of their newspapers to help absorb and cope with the horrors of a shocking terrorist attack on the United States. In the weeks that followed, good reporting allowed Americans to participate vicariously in the investigations of the terrorists and the government's planning for retaliation. Journalists could educate Americans about Islamic extremists, the history of Afghanistan, the difficulty of defending the United States against resourceful and suicidal terrorists and much more. Journalism defined the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and their aftermath. In those circumstances the importance of journalism was obvious, and much discussed. Whether widely noticed or not, good journalism makes a difference somewhere every day.

Communities are improved by aggressive, thorough coverage of important, if everyday, subjects like education, transportation, housing, work and recreation, government services and public safety.

Exposure of incompetence and corruption in government can change misbegotten policies, save taxpayers money and end the careers of wrong-doing public officials. Revelations of unethical business practices can save consumers money or their health.

Exploration of the growing reach of computer databases can protect privacy. Disclosure of environmental, health, food and product dangers can save lives. Examination of the ways society cares for the poor, homeless, imprisoned, abused, mentally ill and retarded can give *voice to the voiceless*.

### News matters.

A Houston, Texas television station began reporting in February 2000 that Ford Explorer trucks equipped with certain kinds of tires manufactured by Firestone Rubber had been involved in dozens of fatal highway accidents. Its reports led to nationwide news coverage, federal investigations and the recall of millions of tires, undoubtedly saving many lives.

The Oregonian newspaper in Portland, Oregon, found that many of the 140,954 holders of disabled parking permits in the state of Oregon were not disabled at all but had obtained their permits fraudulently. By using a computer to compare the state's permit records with the government's social security administration data, the newspaper discovered that holders of 13,412 disabled parking permits were dead; able-bodied relatives were renewing and using the dead people's permits to park free at meters. State officials promised a crackdown on abusers and changes in procedures for issuing and renewing permits.

In 1999 the Chicago Tribune documented the experiences of scores of men sentenced to death in Illinois who had been beaten by police into confessing crimes, had been represented at trial by incompetent attorneys or had been convicted on questionable evidence. Soon after the newspaper published its findings, the governor of Illinois suspended all

executions. In two cases of inmates residing on death row – students in a northwestern university class taught by my colleague, Professor David Protes, found new evidence which freed these men from prison. Without this investigative journalism - which led to the suspension of executions – these men may have been wrongfully put to death.

It can reasonably be said that a society, like America or Papua New Guinea, is no stronger or better than our reporters. Because we believe democracy depends on an informed public, those who inform us form the **foundation** of our very system. If these individuals are dishonest, misleading or even sloppy then we lack vital information to make an educated decision or choice. If they are more concerned with their self-interests than with finding and reporting the news, we all suffer. If they are afraid of reporting stories, we lose. Human nature is delicate and temptations are great – temptations to help a friend, to make a few extra dollars, to write the story without being absolutely certain of the facts... to ignore facts and look the other way.

If character is what we are when no one is looking, we hope that our reporters operate as if they are the subject of a hidden-camera investigation. However, ethical decisions are not always clear – and even those with the best of intentions sometimes make serious mistakes in judgment. Reporters can find some assurance by using existing guidelines for making ethical decisions, such as those offered in the US by the *society for professional journalists* (or SPJ), or the *radio television news directors association* or **RTNDA**. The RTNDA code of ethics and professional conduct for reporters are stated as follows: to foster the highest professional standards of electronic journalism, promote public understanding of and confidence in electronic journalism,, and strengthen principles of journalistic freedom and to gather and disseminate information. The code further states that professional electronic journalists should operate as trustees of the public, seek the truth, report it fairly and with integrity and independence, and stand accountable for their actions.



1. **Public trust:** professional electronic journalists should recognize that their first obligation is to the public.
  
2. **Truth:** professional journalists should pursue truth aggressively and present news accurately, in context, and as completely as possible. Professional journalists should not report anything known to be false – they should not manipulate images or sounds in any way that is misleading – they should not plagiarize, copy or steal material used in reporting – and they should not present images or sounds that are reenacted without informing the public.
  
3. **Fairness:** professional journalists should present the news fairly and impartially, placing primary value on significance and relevance. Journalists should treat all subjects of news coverage with respect and dignity... showing particular compassion to victims of tragedy. Exercise... exercise special care when children are involved in a story and give children greater privacy than adults... seek to understand the diversity of their community... and present a diversity of expressions, opinions, and ideas in proper context.
  
4. **Integrity:** professional journalists should present the news with integrity and decency, avoiding real or perceived conflicts of interest – and should respect the dignity and intelligence of the audience as well as the subjects of news. Journalists should identify sources whenever possible. Journalists should keep all commitments to protect a confidential source - use technological tools with skill and thoughtfulness avoiding techniques that skew the facts, distort reality, or sensationalize events – use covert or secret newsgathering techniques, including hidden cameras or microphones, only if there is no other way to obtain stories of significant importance – and only if the technique is explained to the audience.

5. ***Independence***: professional journalists should defend the independence of all journalists from those seeking influence or control over news content. Journalists should determine news content solely through editorial judgment and not as a result of outside influence.

6. ***Accountability***: professional journalists should recognize that they are accountable for their actions to the public, the profession and themselves.

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