

How We Miss You, Mr. Cronkite

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Our window to the current events of the world is a pane of journalism. Whether we are curious about what is happening on the other side of the world, or in a neighboring state, nearly all that we see, read, and hear is given to us through the perception of people who work to bring us the news. Traditionally, the news media has been thought of almost as a machine – unfeeling, without an agenda, and created to serve a purpose. In recent years, however, many journalists have used terms such as “objective” and “impartial” in order to lend credibility to their biases, or for the equally unsavory practice of creating controversy where there need be none. We now no longer take for granted that what we are told by the media represents truth. When journalists report on events and discoveries related to science, a field in which there is often little balance to be found, the pursuit of the almighty dollar frequently leads to a failure to relay important information to the public as a means of creating the illusion of balance.

That is not to say, however, that balance should be necessarily avoided. In the event that an issue truly divides the scientific community, the sensible course is to present both sides of the issue in a truly unbiased manner. Even in cases where there is a consensus among the experts, it would be irresponsible of a journalist to neglect to present dissenting opinions to his/her audience. For example, there are matters of faith that cannot be thoroughly contested by science. Additionally, there are times when the consensus is simply incorrect. There will always be those who, for a number of reasons, disagree with the firmly held beliefs of the majority. These people are necessary for the purpose of keeping the scientific process alive and healthy.

There were times in human history that the great minds of the world were certain that the Earth was flat and at the center of the universe. These ideas were only overturned by the work of certain individuals who took it upon themselves to dissent (often at their own peril) and begin the scientific method from the beginning – with a question. Indeed, science is fundamentally based

on questioning. Without curiosity, and the resulting questions, there would be no experimentation. Without experimentation, there would be little chance of discovery. It would be hypocritical of science to assert that its “truths” should be accepted through blind faith. Even the scientists, and their science, should be questioned. However, this should not result in *carte blanche* for media outlets to give equal time to naysayers simply for the sake of ratings, controversy, or some twisted interpretation of objectivity. Objectivity does not come from equal time. It comes from balance that is supported ethically. The stronger, better supported, argument should be given more weight. Objectivity only demands that we learn that there *are* naysayers. Therefore, to deprive the minority opinion of its voice would be irresponsible. Yet it seems equally irresponsible for a journalist to attempt to create balance where there simply is none. This is often accomplished by adding or removing emphasis, and at other times, by removing information.

This willingness to either downplay or entirely omit facts from the majority’s position, or to over-emphasize facts from the minority opposition for the purposes of artificially creating balance and “buzz,” is morally reprehensible. Moreover, it is ultimately futile. After the staged controversy has begun, in order to cut through the drama and inform ourselves, to whom do we turn? And of what do we ask them? We turn to the experts, and we ask of them the facts, facts that could just as easily have been reported to us by the media in the first place. The complete dispensation of all of the information in no way damages a journalist’s objectivity; on the contrary, a journalist who presents all of the facts in a manner that ignores his/her own personal opinions and does not strive for artificial drama is the most objective and credible reporter.

Many would agree that the best journalist is an unbiased journalist -- that is, one who does not allow his/her personal opinions or agendas to influence the presentation of news. At

first blush, a news story may appear to be delivered in a truly impartial manner. One must bear in mind, however, that biases are not restricted to the subject matter itself, but can run slightly deeper into the motivation behind the report. In other words, is the story being told in order to inform the audience, or is the purpose to incite debate and spark controversy?

Consider the 2008 news stories surrounding the Large Hadron Collider at Switzerland's CERN laboratories. Two men filed a lawsuit in Hawaii claiming that the collider could spawn an Earth-eating black hole (New York Times, 2008). The vast majority of scientists who understood the experiments, including astronomers and quantum physicists, associated and unassociated with the project, as well as an independent team of safety assessors, in turn told the press that there was no risk of a cataclysmic event. The idea itself, however, was enough to induce a media frenzy across the globe, with little regard given to the overwhelming consensus of the field experts. Only after the initial scare had begun to subside were the opinions and facts of the experts heard via the mainstream media.

This leads us to ask ourselves why the original sensational reports were given. Surely, the experts did not change their minds about what all of the math, all of their prior related experience, and all of the relevant evidence was telling them about the possible risks (or lack thereof). In the spirit of "balance," the consensus of the scientists was suppressed. What ensued was a drawn-out, unnecessary controversy that could easily have been averted had the journalists simply delivered all of the facts.

Of course, news organizations have a vested interest in drawing as much attention as possible; a wider audience will fetch higher ratings, which allow a broadcast or publication to draw more advertising money. And as we all know, a corporate news outlet with no money would be on the short road to becoming a *former* corporate news outlet. In what way could the

mass media corporations keep their stock prices on the rise? These companies know that people derive enjoyment from drama, so why not suspend some of the truth, and try injecting a little bit of “fun” into the news in exchange for some ratings points?

The news media seems to believe that the experiment has worked. Perhaps as a result, the term “objectivity” was stricken from the ethics code of the Society of Professional Journalists in 1996 (Cunningham, 2003). If journalists no longer expect themselves to be impartial, how can the rest of us hold that expectation? The short answer is that we cannot, and do not. The results of a 2009 poll conducted nationally by the Sacred Heart University Polling Institute revealed that about 86% of respondents agreed that news outlets have their own agendas and attempt to influence public opinion (Sacred Heart University, 2009). Only about one quarter stated that they believe most news reporting (Sacred Heart University, 2009). A plurality of Americans now believes that the most trustworthy news source on television is Comedy Central’s John Stewart (Time Magazine Poll, 2009). Without casting aspersions at Mr. Stewart, with the passing of Walter Cronkite, is this really the best we can do?

The news media corporations routinely report annual earnings in the billions of dollars (NOW Foundation, 2007). Three quarters of American people who watch, read, or listen to the news do so without even believing most of it. Why, then, do we pay any attention at all to the news? The answer is simple: the news organizations have succeeded in injecting fun into the news to the point that now it is now the main reason most of us tune in. We trust less than half of what the media tells us, and the rest has been bastardized into a Springer-esque circus of crying “wolf” -- something about which to stand around the water cooler and chat in order to keep ourselves entertained. While there is nothing wrong with seeing the news being presented

in an entertaining way, what we see happening is a media pursuit of entertainment that results in the detriment (and perhaps invalidation) of the news itself.

The tragedy of the situation is that science and technology are making progress and doing incredible things every day. However, unless there is drama to be found or manufactured, it is unlikely to become known. We can send people off of the planet that has held us since the beginning of our existence to perform experiments on a space shuttle mission and be surprised to see mention of it in third or fourth page news. But if one of the astronauts slips up and behaves in a manner we find inappropriate, the nation is quick to hear about it and discuss it through the media, ad nauseum. Perhaps the public receives too little credit and can plainly see that the line between “real” news and dramatic news has been blurred to the point of irrelevance.

Whatever the reasons, the news media has lost credibility with the vast majority of its audience. In order to gain back some trust, it may behoove them to simply do what our parents told us to do once we were old enough to talk -- tell the truth. They may even find their audience increasing in size once the fat is trimmed and people can trust that the news they are receiving is genuine and complete. Should this ever come to pass, the scientific community will not need to be concerned with debate among the public regarding issues that have only become issues because they were misrepresented by the media in the first place. In the interim, it would likely be best for all involved -- the media, the scientists, and the public at large, to leave the interpretation of science up to the consensus of the experts -- the scientists.

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