

Good journalism requires fairness and accountability

Two principles lie at the foundation of good journalism: fairness and accountability.

Fairness means that journalists in reporting the news try as hard as possible to present different sides of an issue, lay out important facts, and enable readers to draw their own conclusions.

Accountability has to do not only with identifying the names of reporters but, with regard to opinion columns, also identifying the authors' backgrounds, interests, and potential influences.

Although fairness and accountability were the ideals by which I was trained as a journalist, they were the predominant ethic of journalism for less than a century.

Hardly had the United States been founded before political partisans were using newspapers to attack opponents. Insults, lies, and defamations of character were the norm. Thomas Jefferson wrote, and secretly arranged to have published, reports distorting and defaming the record of John Adams for whom Jefferson served as Secretary of State.

Traditions of attack, smears, and extreme partisanship continued through the 19th and into the 20th century. Joseph Pulitzer is associated today with Prizes for excellence in journalism, but he and William Randolph Hearst made their turn-of-the-century fortunes out of Yellow Journalism – the use of scandal-mongering, sensationalism, and hyper-patriotism to sell newspapers.

Fortunately, as Andrew Carnegie turned his fortune to building libraries across his adopted country, Hungarian-born Pulitzer funded the world's first school of journalism, in 1902 at Columbia University. By this act, Pulitzer helped create a new tradition of fairness and accountability.

A product of the Progressive Era's belief in the goodness and rationality of ordinary people, the new journalism trusted in the idea that giving people the facts and letting them make their own decisions best promoted a good society. It was a heyday of educational and social reform, science, the referendum and direct election of Senators, and "muckraking."

"Muckrakers" was the name given to journalists who exposed corruption in government and industry. Ida Tarbell exposed the Standard Oil "Trust." Lincoln Steffans exposed big city "machines" and "bosses."

Muckraking was the non-partisan complement to the new ideal of "news" separate from "opinion." News was fairly reported with sources clearly indicated. Opinion was expressed in "editorials" and "columns" by the editors or individual writers.

Although “tabloids” have always been around and quality journalism still exists even in television and on the internet, what I would call “the century of journalistic integrity” is now over, destroyed by an explosion of malicious attack and partisanship reminiscent of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The *East Oregonian* belongs proudly, and I hope enduringly, to the tradition of fairness and accountability. That is why it explains that “unsigned editorials are the opinion of the *East Oregonian* editorial board.” That is why letters in “Your Views” must “be signed by the author.”

That is why the *EO* explains that “other columns, letters and cartoons” -- like mine in “Other Views” – “express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the *East Oregonian*.” That is why the *EO* requires a short biography to provide readers some opportunity to assess the validity and potential partialities of the authors.

Thus, when Bob Davies’ bio for a recent column identified him as President of Eastern Oregon University, we would be right to presume that he spoke on behalf of EOU. When Harriet Isom’s bio describes her as a retired diplomat, we would be right to assume significant knowledge of foreign policy but not that she speaks for the United States government. We expect Professor Paul Krugman knows economics but not that he represents Princeton University.

In consultation with the *EO*, I myself have changed my bio to make these distinctions more clear. That I am Elder Coordinator for Blue Mountain Mediation is important to who I am, but unless I say otherwise, I do not speak for BMM. Although an Elder of Pendleton’s First Christian Church, I am but one among many; when I write this column, I am just a member of the church speaking entirely for himself.

Good journalism sets a high standard for fairness and accountability, and neither the *EO* nor I will always meet it, but the standard should never be lowered and we never exempted from it.