

In Search of Authenticity: Public Trust and the News Media

BY RICHARD C. HARWOOD

Throughout my work over the past twenty years, I have heard a clear call in America for leaders and institutions to act with greater authenticity. People want leaders and institutions to demonstrate a deep understanding of how they live their lives, what is important to them, and the challenges they and their communities face. But what does this mean for journalism?

Some observers might suggest that journalists and their news organizations should show they care about communities by offering up more feel-good news, creating marketing slogans (“We’re on your side!”) or by having journalists volunteer in the community. But authenticity is not generated by journalists undertaking extracurricular activity or by trying to make their institutions feel kinder and gentler. It comes from the care journalists bring to everyday journalism.

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Authenticity has consistently emerged in my work as a fundamental issue driving a wedge between the public and news media. This was true in 1991 when my organization published the study *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*. Authenticity emerged again in a series of studies undertaken for our New Patriotism Project throughout the second half of the 1990s. Public desire for authenticity could be heard yet again in our 2003 report, *Restoring the Public Trust*, which was based on a review of community forums that used a public discussion book we produced called *News Media*

and Society: How to Restore the Public Trust. The forums were part of the National Issues Forums network, made up of local groups across the country.

It is the voices of these forum participants that I examine in this essay, specifically those from six forums made up of “typical” citizens, politically active (or “concerned”) citizens, and elected officials. The article explores how people think about the news media and their views on several ideas to restore public trust. It concludes with a look at the challenge of authenticity for news organizations and journalists.

What might differ most today from the studies of the early 1990s is the level of pessimism people expressed about the state of journalism. People taking part in the National Issues Forums struggled to find any action or policy that they believed would bring about the type of journalism they seek. Indeed, many people left the forums, having deliberated on this challenge, expressing sentiments similar to what this Arlington, Virginia, man said: “I am more pessimistic now than when I walked in.”

It’s About Personal Context

What people said they want from the news media—and how they judge the news media—comes through the lens of their personal context. Indeed, the connection of news to people’s personal context was a far more significant factor in these forums than their desire to obtain information about society. It is the relevance and relationship of news to people’s personal context that creates meaning for them. This finding held true across all of the forums.

Parents taking part in the National Issues Forums said, for instance, that they want news they could read, watch, and discuss with their children. They asserted

they wanted news that would help them teach their children to be good citizens. These parents expressed concern about the negative effect they believe the news media, especially television, have on children.

A Salisbury, Maryland, woman expressed these concerns while describing the effect of the Elizabeth Smart kidnapping stories on her granddaughter. “My youngest grandchild has a huge amount of problems watching the news,” she said. “It has been traumatic for her and made her a much more frightened child than she used to be.”

Forum participants who described themselves as “concerned citizens” explained that their motive for seeking out news is primarily to *understand* issues that are important to them. But these participants said they are often frustrated by what they receive from local and regional news sources. They perceive that the news media unnecessarily oversimplify issues and focus on conflict. One woman from Rockville, Maryland, described her frustration with the news media this way: “[They] run back and forth getting sound bites from people. The complexity of issues isn’t addressed.” She and other citizens told us that they seek multiple viewpoints and a reflection of life’s genuine complexity. When complexity is missing, according to this woman, “there are excluded voices.” She went on to ask, “Who isn’t heard from? What isn’t addressed? [There are] people who are invisible.”

Elected officials judge news media from their own personal context too. The officials taking part in a forum in Akron, Ohio, expressed a strong desire for what they described as more responsible news coverage. Why? These officials said that news coverage affects them personally in their role as officials; it affects how the public views issues and thus has an impact on their work and how they go about it; and it affects people’s perceptions of them.

Officials in the Akron forum said that the news media have “an obligation” to cover “real” news,

stories such as “what’s going on with education in the state of Ohio, how it’s impacting children, [and] where is our state going,” in the words of one official. These officials wanted the news media to give the public a better handle on the issues they themselves must grapple with as public decision makers. Officials feel that too often news media failed in meeting this obligation.

Standards Won’t Work

One idea put forward over the years to restore public trust in the news media is to develop clear and universal journalism standards, similar to standards for accounting and other professions.

Many participants in our forums rejected this idea. They said that a lack of journalistic standards is not at the core of the problem with journalism today. Sure, there have been well-publicized scandals in recent times involving plagiarism and fabrication, most notably Jayson Blair at the *New York Times* and Jack Kelley at *USA Today*. People are aware of these incidents. But from the public’s perspective, the problems with news media are about the nature and purpose of journalism, not about *individual* journalists and their ethics.

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The enemy of authentic journalism, people suggest, is a marketplace culture that drives news media and leads to sensational and simplistic journalism. As a woman in Columbus, Ohio, explained, “The trust in journalism and the adequacy of information, which I think trust is based on, is not going to be affected by journalists’ conduct.” She and others taking part in the forums did not believe that standards would address such issues, especially within the larger structure of the media.

A Profit Motive Run Amuck

People believe the marketplace culture that now dominates the news media negatively affects journalism—but not for all the reasons that one might expect. Some forum participants shared the view of a Salisbury man who said, “When you are providing information to the general public, it is not a good thing when one group or philosophy controls too much.”

But most people who took part in these forums were far less troubled by the concentrated ownership of news organizations. Most said that it is too late and too difficult to impose ownership limits. “The horse has already left the barn, the barn has rotted to the ground, and [the horse] is galloping across the field,” said another man in the Salisbury discussion.

Perhaps more to the point, many people do not equate diverse ownership of news media outlets with improving the quality of journalism. After some deliberation, many forum participants concluded that limiting ownership would not solve the larger problems they see. Many news organizations—whether large or small, local, regional, or national—simply do not supply the type of news they want.

Many people believe the problem is about a culture of “greed.” It is about a marketplace culture obsessed with profit more than it is about consolidated ownership. If covering conflict brings the biggest audience, people said, then that is the story the news media run. Many forum participants were concerned that the profit motive interferes with the news media’s willingness to investigate sensitive stories, and they worry that the drive for profit, especially through entertainment, prevents the media from taking on their public responsibility.

Held Hostage

The Harwood Institute has conducted literally hundreds of hours of in-depth conversation with people about the news media over the years. People have consistently said that they want the news media to

pay more attention to their concerns, their hopes, and how they live their lives. But people are deeply frustrated because they see no genuine response.

In the National Issues Forums, people were so angry that they would often say they wanted to fight back against the news media by using the Off switch when it comes to television, boycotting certain news sources, or taking some other specific action to put pressure on the news media to respond to their desires. But even many participants who favored such punitive action quickly said that they depended on the news media too much to turn away.

People in these forums, and in countless other Harwood Institute conversations over the years, expressed a feeling of being “held hostage” by the news media. A man from Frederick, Maryland, who had considered boycotting advertising in the newspaper, said, “I would like to tell you we have choices, but we don’t.” People around the table nodded their head in agreement.

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Indeed, it is striking the extent to which many citizens express a sense of powerlessness over the news media. As a Rockville woman said, “I feel far less powerful as a human being [on this issue]. I feel like I can’t impact market forces and I can’t impact public policy.” Many people are resigned to the idea that news media are permanently and completely captured by the drive for profits, a hunger for sensationalism, and lack of connection to how people live their lives and the challenges they and their communities face.

A Question for Journalists

My experience in working with journalists is that most would likely say the critique of the news media described in these pages is nothing new. “We’ve heard

it all before,” might be a common response. Many journalists believe that people are reflexively cynical about the news media, questioning journalists’ motives with little understanding of journalism itself.

But my time spent with journalists also has revealed deep frustrations even among them. Journalists often express with great passion why they chose their craft and why they feel so deeply committed to making a difference in society. They often describe being “called” to journalism; it is a noble profession. But many journalists believe that their efforts to serve the public are seldom appreciated. What’s more, the type of journalism people most vehemently criticize—including the criticisms from the National Issues Forum participants—also draws the biggest audience. This further fuels the very marketplace the public cries out against.

Perhaps some expectations of journalists are unreasonable, and maybe some of the criticisms are unfair. But the choice still remains for individual journalists and news organizations: Will they strive for authenticity?

Authentic Journalism

Accuracy is often used as a gold standard for judging the basic quality of journalism. The Harwood Institute helped to design and direct an initiative called the Journalism Values Institute in the mid-1990s for the American Society of Newspaper Editors. As part of that long-term deliberation, the newspaper editors who participated said the notion of accuracy by itself was an insufficient gauge of the quality of journalism. They agreed that it is vitally important to “get the basic facts right” (names, addresses, time, place), but they said it is just as important to “get the right facts.”

The editors asserted that news organizations must provide the background, context, and perspective required to give the “whole story” for people. This includes reflecting the tone, language, experiences, and emotions of the public—coverage that “rings

true” to readers. The idea of accuracy, then, expanded to include a notion of authenticity.

When the Harwood Institute works with journalists, we emphasize that authenticity is fundamentally about news judgments and reporting. It begins in the news meeting when a choice is made about which stories to cover, why, and how. It develops with the sources chosen for stories and the questions asked in interviews. It depends on how deeply a reporter listens to what people are saying and how those insights lend themselves to framing and writing stories. Authenticity must be a primary objective from the beginning of the journalistic endeavor; otherwise it doesn’t show up at the end.

Making the Commitment

I have learned that making a commitment to strive for authenticity is a choice. It is a choice every news organization and journalist must make. It is a choice that must be renewed regularly. It is a discipline that must be drawn on for every story.

I have worked with news organizations that make this commitment, in places such as Tampa, Florida, and Orange County, California. I have worked with scores of additional news organizations and journalists through the Harwood Institute’s Tapping Civic Life seminars. I have witnessed firsthand many journalists discovering the power of authenticity and then saying that such experiences changed their career and their outlook on journalism.

One journalist who took part in our Tapping Civic Life seminars explained her newspaper’s pursuit of authenticity in this way: “The paper should embody the aspirations of readers as well as their everyday struggles to realize those aspirations in their lives. [If we succeed at this], readers will be able to read about themselves as *a community*.” An executive editor with whom I have worked explained that a push for authenticity would enable reporters and the newspaper, in effect, to “have a conversation with the people of our community on our news pages.”

When a news organization makes the commitment to authenticity, it affects every aspect of the news organization. Resources are committed for training and education so that reporters and editors can evaluate their journalistic habits and practices. News meetings are guided with a new set of questions. Reporting practices are reexamined and augmented with new types of questions and expanded sources. Story editing is done with keen awareness about what leads to an authentic news package.

Without strong organizational and individual commitments, authentic journalism can be elusive. The prevailing culture in our society of advertising, pub-

lic relations, and consulting firms recommending a message, a look, and a positioning strategy can often be overwhelming. These strategies can seem like a readymade fix. It takes courage to choose an alternative path of authenticity—one that reflects the aspirations I believe most journalists and the public share.

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