What is the Responsibility of a Journalist?

Last week, I was perusing Twitter when I stumbled across a brief but interesting conversation between two nationally-known news figures.

Ron Fournier, National Journal columnist and frequent member of Fox News’ Special Report panel, wrote that he was taping a quote from Marty Kaiser, a newsman from the Pulitzer Prize-winning Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, to his laptop computer.

The quote was:

“We must remember: It is truly a gift to be a journalist. It comes with responsibility. It requires courage to make communities better, to bring people together, to build a bridge across our differences. It is humbling.”

As someone who respects Fournier, and believes him to be an honest and thoughtful news analyst, I was taken back by the quote. Apparently, Fox News’ Brit Hume felt the same way, and was compelled to reply to the Tweet:

“Gee Ron, I thought the job of a newspaperman was simply to report the news fairly and accurately without fear or favor.”

Hume was right of course, and though Fournier tried to argue that the two definitions aren’t mutually exclusive, I’d argue that they absolutely are. There is indeed a lot of responsibility that comes with reporting the news. It’s an
extremely important role in any democracy. That’s why a journalist must instill the discipline it takes to stick to the facts, and avoid shaping narratives that they believe will “make communities better”, “bring people together”, and “build bridges.”

Such goals are admirable pursuits for individuals, but they should remain totally separate from the responsibility of reporting the news. When that doesn’t happen, bias rears its head... and we all know by now how damaging that can be to society.

Though you wouldn’t get many journalists to admit it, I believe far more of them in this country subscribe to Marty Kaiser’s definition of journalism than do Brit Hume’s. That’s a real problem because different people have very different ideas about what makes communities better, what brings people together, and how bridges are built. We see the results of this problem every day in our news environment.

A perfect example was the lack of media scrutiny given to Obamacare before it became law. The number of times Americans were outright lied to about how the law would affect them is absolutely staggering. The media could have exposed those lies early on, but they chose not to fact-check the rhetoric against the realities of the legislation. Government-based healthcare had been a dream of many within the liberal media for years; even decades. They believed it would “make communities better” so to them, it was their job to portray it in a positive light.

I’m sure Sabrina Rubin Erdely’s breathtakingly sloppy reporting for Rolling Stone on the alleged rape at the University of Virginia was done in the interest of “making communities better.” The problem is that Erdely didn’t let facts get in the way of her crusade, and that’s what happens when one’s journalistic priorities are confused.
To many within the media, “bringing people together” and “building bridges” means bringing people around to a certain line of thinking. As is often pointed out, the media portrayed political dissent against George W. Bush as patriotic, while political dissent against President Obama is often described as obstructionist. Obstructionism, of course, is the opposite of bringing people together. Thus, a journalist who believes it is his or her job to marginalize obstructionism will view the extension of their personal biases as an obligation to society. We’ve seen this in the way the media has portrayed the Tea Party as an angry, racist movement, while categorizing Occupy Wall Street and the Ferguson uproar as thoughtful, social protests.

Of course, there is room for commentary in the news, as long as it’s kept separate from news reporting and presented clearly as opinion. The truth is that those of us who provide commentary hope that our words – at least in some small way – will have a positive impact on society. There’s nothing wrong with that. But that’s not the job of a journalist, and it’s not what journalists should aspire for. When they do, they’re actually doing a disservice to society.

Again, discipline is crucial to being a responsible journalist, and disciplined journalists who subscribe to Brit Hume’s definition of their job are what society is in desperate need of right now.

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