

If It Bleeds It Leads – Especially If It's About the President

Bad news is built into the DNA of journalism. Reporters don't cover the bank that didn't get robbed or the plane that didn't crash. Tornadoes and earthquakes and hurricanes make page one. Sunny days don't.

But we all know that most banks don't get robbed and most planes land safely and most of the time there's nothing special about the weather. So we automatically put the bad news into its proper context.

I thought about this the other day when I had some time off and put the television on and wound up watching news for way too many hours. Trust me: This is not a good idea – unless you like being depressed.

Just about all the news on TV is bad news and after a while you get a distorted view of the world. You think things are far worse than they actually are. In the old days, there were only a couple of times during the day you could watch the news on television – a few hours in the morning and Cronkite and Huntley and Brinkley for 30 minutes (counting commercials) in the evening. Now the bad news is on all the time, 24 hours a day, every day. And if you're a news junkie it's easy to overdose.

The tsunami in Indonesia and the cop killer in California and the death of immigrant children on the southern border are all legitimate news. But there's more – much more – that never gets covered. I guess that at some level we know that, just as we know most banks don't get robbed. Still, too much bad news, I suspect, makes us more pessimistic about the world – and our lives – than is good for any of us.

But you can't blame journalists for covering the dark side no matter how unrepresentative it is of a bigger reality. Dog bites man, after all, isn't news. But what about the times when journalists go out of their way – sometimes, way out of their way –to find something to “expose,” usually about someone they have it in for? Which brings us to the media's relationship with just such a person – Donald Trump.

Mr. Trump visited troops in Iraq the day after Christmas and on TV we saw military men and women schmoozing with the president and enjoying each other's company. There were lots of smiles and a few selfies with the president. There was video of the troops handing Mr. Trump their Make America Great Again hats and the president autographing them.

So far so good.

But it didn't take long for CNN to bring us the *bad* news. We heard CNN contributor Retired Rear Admiral John Kirby – a former Obama administration spokesperson, by the way – say, “It is completely inappropriate” for the troops to ask the president to sign the hat, which Kirby said, “is a campaign item.” And he blamed the president too. “Every time he's around military audiences, he tends to politicize it.”

I'm not sure if Kirby would have preferred the president to tell the soldiers, “I won't sign your hat, it's completely inappropriate.” Imagine if he had done that. Liberal journalists would have slammed him for his “completely inappropriate” heartless behavior toward the troops.

And on its website, CNN politics reporter Eli Watkins wrote a story under the headline: “Troops bringing Trump hats to sign may violate military rule,”

Let's say Kirby and Watkins are right. Let's say the president and the troops engaged in political activity and that such activity is, by the book, inappropriate. Is this really a big deal? Is this worth commenting on? The CNN people come off

as annoying hall monitors, as grumpy scolds, who can't look the other way even when the troops are enjoying a rare break from the daily tension associated with being in Iraq.

And there's the Washington Post lead in the Trump visits Iraq story. "President Trump touched down Wednesday in Iraq in his first visit to a conflict zone as commander in chief, a week after announcing a victory over the Islamic State that his own Pentagon and State Department days earlier said remained incomplete.

"The president's visit to Al Asad Air Base west of Baghdad, which was shrouded in secrecy, follows months of public pressure for him to spend time with troops deployed to conflicts in the Middle East and punctuates the biggest week of turmoil the Pentagon has faced during his presidency."

As an editorial in the Wall Street Journal put it: "These reporters can't even begin a news account of a presidential visit to a military base without working in a compilation of Mr. Trump's controversies, contradictions, and failings.

"The point isn't to feel sorry for Mr. Trump, whose rhetorical attacks on the press have often been contemptible. The point is that such gratuitously negative reporting undermines the credibility of the press without Mr. Trump having to say a word."

Donald Trump is wrong about many things. He's wrong to call journalists, even biased journalists, "The enemy of the American people." He's wrong to throw the words "fake news" around as cavalierly as he does – usually to deflect from legitimate news he doesn't like. But he's right when he says he can't catch a break from much of the press.

Yes, negativity is built into the DNA of journalism. We don't need to know that the First National Bank had a routine day or that the Delta jet made a smooth landing in Atlanta. But the non-stop negativity of almost all the other news gives us a

deceptively gloomy image of what's really going on in the world.

It's true in general and it's especially true when the news media have a president they detest in their crosshairs.