

Advocacy Journalism - the Hero We Really Need?

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Anyone who tunes into cable news or flips through the pages of a print newspaper can spot that the current state of the media is bleak. Many ask how could this have happened? The first amendment is held in high esteem, information is abundant, where is the disconnect? Trying to discern which came first for the media, falling revenue or falling standards, will make anyone's head spin. What can be even more dizzying is the fact that this free fall of standards and profit in the media looks to continue in the current political climate. "Fake news", "alternative facts", 'liberal', 'conservative' are all freely used monikers that chip away at the credibility of reporters. Cast aside dropping standards, shrinking profits, political jousting and any other circumstantial issue facing the media. The reality is this, reporters, their industry, and the public they serve are in trouble.

The multitude of issues that are breathing down the neck of the news media have created a void. A void that divides what news outlets can provide and what an engaged public craves. In-depth and investigative reporting is a well-respected and well-received practice from journalists and audiences alike. However, the cost of that practice is high, literally. Investigative reporting often involves assigning one reporter to cover one topic in high detail for days, weeks, months, or even years. This is cost ineffective in two ways. Media companies take on large costs to fund investigative journalism. Additionally, they must pay another reporter to cover the more pertinent, local, or relevant news that the journalist out on assignment will miss. Cutting investigative reporting all together kills these two costly birds with one stone. David Carr a reporter for the *New York Times* writes, "American News Media have pulled back from

international coverage...” This is the trend that has beset the media world as ownership consolidates and revenues decline. News companies can no longer afford to fund investigative reporting - which leads to less interest from the public- which leads to less revenue. Cost cutting, followed by declining quality, followed finally by loss of interest is a vicious cycle that traditional media can't seem to free itself from.

One direction to point a finger of blame in is the news media's inability to keep up with changes in society. Ineffective use of the internet and social media is a certain pitfall of the media. More important however, is the inability of journalists to elevate their aims and sets of ethics to fit the needs of contemporary audiences. Francis Lee and Di Cui speak to this in their piece written for the *Journal of Media Ethics*. They write their piece from the context of Chinese journalism, one that is undergoing its own struggles and evolutions as the media becomes controlled less and less by the state. While the context is different, there is validity in the fact that as a society changes, journalistic practices may need to change with it. They write, “Chinese journalists have begun to stress the flexibility of professional ethics and developed pragmatic ways of moral reasoning...” This is seen in the context of Chinese journalists who are westernizing and finding success with their adoption of flexibility while facing similar issues as American journalists.

Others too believe that journalists have failed to elevate their aims. Stephen Ward argues this in his piece written for the academic journal, *Journalism Studies*. Ward writes, “journalism ethics was developed for a journalism of limited reach” he goes on to say, “Journalists... should see themselves as agents of a global public sphere.” Ward

argues here that journalists in the U.S have failed to keep up with globalization. He believes that their ethical standards are based in a world where they were only writing to their limited local audience. Ward claims that journalists need to become “global journalists” in order to meet the needs of modern society and that they have failed to do so.

Writer Carlos Montaner argues that journalists have failed on yet another front, to uphold their duty as engaged citizens. Montaner shares the sentiment that American journalists must elevate their aims in the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* writing, “The minimum echo generated among American journalists by an organization like Reporters Without Borders is lamentable, to say the least. Popular in Europe, RWB takes a stance and combats tyrannies and assaults on freedom of expression...” His point here is that American journalists in particular have put themselves into a unique and idealized position where they can merely comment on citizenship without having to engage in it themselves. He illustrates that further in saying, “...falling into the superstition that newspapers and journalists should not become actively involved in social struggles - as if being journalists morally sterilized people and exonerated them from the rest of their responsibilities as citizens,” when referring to American journalists.

The shortcomings of the media have hindered not only their viability but their utility in society. A fundamental aim of the practice of journalism is to serve the public. This aim is no longer feasible in the current predicament that the media finds themselves in. The result is that society has a need that journalists and the companies they work for can no longer meet, in-depth reporting. Filling that gap is where a new

field, advocacy journalism, has begun to emerge. According to journalist Phil Vine, advocacy journalism, “is described as journalism where the reporter intentionally and transparently adopts a non-objective point of view for some social or political purpose.” These ideals may seem counterintuitive to traditional reporting, however the practices of traditional reporting have led to the current disastrous media climate. Certain segments of reporting seem to lend themselves to this new journalistic style that has no pretense of objectivity and makes that clear to publisher and reader alike.

For instance, many believe that covering environmental issues is well suited for advocacy journalism. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can afford to pay their journalists to cover these types of topics in-depth and report in a way that advocates for their cause. JoAnn Valenti, a professor of communication at BYU writes:

“environmental communication should be viewed as a discussion between parties with significant but possibly different stakes in the outcome of the conversation. The goal then of ethical environmental communication is not persuasion ‘but rather public debate and discussion that leads to appropriate individual actions and/ or policy outcomes’.”

Valenti argues that certain topics must be covered in a way that breaks from traditional reporting in order to be ethical in today’s globalized world. Advocacy journalists have the time and financial resources that afford them the opportunity to cover a topic, like the environment, with a clear slant, and present that to the public for debate. This is a role that traditionally journalists could take on, but financial and quality concerns facing the media make this venture too great of a burden.

The environment is not the only topic where advocacy journalism can be of use. Writer J.C Derrick illustrates this idea in describing the work of Innocence Projects in his piece for *The News Media and the Law*. Derrick describes Innocence Projects as collaborative efforts among journalists, professors and students that look into past criminal cases and try to dig up any unjust convictions. These journalists certainly aim to serve the public and once again use tools and resources that many publications are no longer willing to expend. Their work is first and foremost as journalists seeking to uncover facts and stories that may have been ignored or overlooked in the criminal proceedings. However, they have a dual aim, clearly they are advocating for some sort of change, perhaps an overturned conviction. This duality not only makes their work valuable to society but it unlocks the door by providing the resources necessary to undertake such rigorous investigative reporting work.

Not only is accepting advocacy journalism crucial for the public in order to have their need for quality content met, it is also important for the journalists themselves. Advocacy journalism has inherent practicality. Journalists working on behalf of groups like NGOs have a unique perspective that qualifies them to report with authority on the field they specialize in. While journalists do have the capability of digging into a story and becoming an expert, that is a costly and lengthy enterprise, and one that is being continually phased out. Advocacy journalists are already positioned to address a topic of their concern with expertise. A writer working for GreenPeace, an organization committed to environmental advocacy, will have more immediate access to the

resources and knowledge necessary to communicate on complex issues such as climate change than a traditional journalist would in media today.

The expertise of advocacy journalists lends credibility to the practical need society has for them, the journalists themselves have a practical need for having journalist in their job title. Journalists have legal protections that ordinary citizens do not. This is of extreme importance for journalists and citizens alike. Vine illustrates this as he points to instances where corporate whistleblowers have gone to GreenPeace to tell their stories. He discusses how major investigative work done by GreenPeace has relied on corporate insiders who put themselves at risk to uncover crimes against the environment. Vine writes, "The Greenpeace UK investigative team mentioned earlier relied heavily on a leaked internal document for the BP story." Having the job title of advocacy journalist would afford reporters the ability to protect the identity of their sources. Laws all over the world protect journalists from having to divulge the identity of their sources, even under oath in court. This protection is huge for journalists and their sources alike. It increases the credibility for journalists both with their sources and with the public. For the public, these laws protect them if they are ever in a position where they have to share a confidential story with a journalist. Protecting the identity of whistleblowers is important to prevent retaliation upon them, and to encourage others that it will be safe for them to come forward with their stories. Legal protection and more can be borrowed from traditional reporting to bolster the credibility of advocacy journalism.

Advocacy journalists are not starting from scratch. A majority of the methods and, more importantly, many of the ethical principles that are crucial to the legitimacy of advocacy journalism come from the traditions of journalism. By deemphasizing the idea of objectivity, the other ethical standards that journalists rely on for credibility become even more important for advocacy journalists. The most important ethical standard advocacy journalists must uphold is transparency. The only way they can be legitimate is if they make their goals and the goals of the sponsors or organizations they represent clear from the very beginning.

Sherry Baker, Associate Dean of the College of Fine Arts and Communication at BYU, argues for the need of transparency in avoiding “covert persuasion.” Baker writes, “Covert persuasion - advocacy disguised as information or as independent opinion - is one of the core ethical issues (for communicators)...,” she continues, “the principles of transparency and honesty... are effective guidelines at preventing this problem.” Transparency protects readers from feeling duped. If they go into a story understanding that the writer has a particular frame they will not feel as if they are being persuaded Trojan Horse style.

Jane Singer, Professor of Journalism at City University London points out that credibility issues that bloggers face are similar to what advocacy journalists are up against, and describes how transparency assisted them. Singer writes, “criticisms related to both impartiality and verification pointed toward the emergence of a norm that, while not new, proved especially well-suited to the zeitgeist of an interactive medium: transparency.” Blogs arose to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society much the

same way that advocacy journalism is currently. While the two forms have different aims, they face similar issues of credibility and criticisms from the established media. Transparency is a key that both must possess in order to legitimize their work in the eyes of audiences and in the media. Advocacy journalism can be of value, but it can also be harmful, if done in secret.

Aiming at the truth is another important standard that will carry over from traditional journalism into advocacy journalism. Singer writes, "Truth-telling has long been viewed as a primary virtue and a central mandate for journalists." Having a goal or an aim does not prohibit advocacy journalists from telling the truth. Coupled with transparency, truth-telling is paramount if advocacy journalism is to succeed. Advocacy journalists can learn valuable lessons of how to act ethically from journalism, and they can also learn from the mistakes of the traditional media in an effort to avoid the same fate of decline.

The media is an essential part of the way democracy operates in the U.S. For having such an enormous task the media has done an excellent job for the most part, until recently. Lack of innovation has driven the media into their current downward spiral revolving endlessly around falling quality and profits. The news media has failed to recognize that the context within which they operate is changing rapidly. This failure has impacted not only the industry and their profits but the people in crisis their reporting is supposed to help. This failure is entirely evident when you look at the connection between humanitarian aid donations and media coverage.

The disastrous events that get the most coverage get the most donations. This forces aid organizations to move away from their core goal of providing relief and prompts them to focus on how they can best solicit media coverage. This point is illustrated by Simon Cottle and David Nolan in their article for the academic journal *Journalism Studies*. They write, “television media and their competitive clamouring for images of high broadcast quality, and *not* the victims of this particular humanitarian disaster.” It is clear here that traditional media has created a vacuum of ineffectiveness, for themselves and for aid organizations. Advocacy journalists can learn from this mistake and cut out the middleman - traditional media, when it comes to covering stories that revolve around topics like humanitarian crises. Perhaps lack of funding for in-depth reporting has left traditional media ill-equipped to report in this arena. This leaves a gap for advocacy journalists to step in and fulfill a societal need of quality in-depth reporting, especially concerning issues where people’s lives are at stake.

The current climate surrounding the media is ugly, and confusing. What is clear, however, is that media quality and credibility is on the decline. As a result, journalism and the public it serves are in dire trouble. Advocacy journalism is equipped to serve the public in a way that the news media simply cannot. The issues facing the current media can be solved in part by the adoption of advocacy journalism as a more accepted practice. Society has a clear need for in-depth reporting especially surrounding issues of natural disasters and climate change. The ethical practices borrowed from journalism coupled with the expertise of advocacy journalists can fill in the gaps as traditional media renegotiates itself in the digital age. In this era where the entertainment media is

hyper focused on mythical and comic heroes perhaps it is time for news media to look for their own hero in an unlikely place- advocacy.