

The elements of journalism

In their book *The Elements of Journalism*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel identify the essential principles and practices of journalism.

Here are 10 elements common to good journalism, drawn from the book.

Journalism's first obligation is to the truth

Good decision-making depends on people having reliable, accurate facts put in a meaningful context. Journalism does not pursue truth in an absolute or philosophical sense, but in a capacity that is more down to earth.

“All truths – even the laws of science – are subject to revision, but we operate by them in the meantime because they are necessary and they work,” Kovach and Rosenstiel write in the book. Journalism, they continue, thus seeks “a practical and functional form of truth.” It is not the truth in the absolute or philosophical or scientific sense but rather a pursuit of “the truths by which we can operate on a day-to-day basis.”

This “journalistic truth” is a process that begins with the professional discipline of assembling and verifying facts. Then journalists try to convey a fair and reliable account of their meaning, subject to further investigation.

Journalists should be as transparent as possible about sources and methods so audiences can make their own assessment of the information. Even in a world of expanding voices, “getting it right” is the foundation upon which everything else is built – context, interpretation, comment, criticism, analysis and debate. The larger truth, over time, emerges from this forum.

As citizens encounter an ever-greater flow of data, they have more need – not less – for suppliers of information dedicated to finding and verifying the news and putting it in context.

Its first loyalty is to citizens

The publisher of journalism – whether a media corporation answering to advertisers and shareholders or a blogger with his own personal beliefs and priorities – must

show an ultimate allegiance to citizens. They must strive to put the public interest – and the truth – above their own self-interest or assumptions.

A commitment to citizens is an implied covenant with the audience and a foundation of the journalistic business model – journalism provided “without fear or favor” is perceived to be more valuable than content from other information sources.

Commitment to citizens also means journalism should seek to present a representative picture of constituent groups in society. Ignoring certain citizens has the effect of disenfranchising them.

The theory underlying the modern news industry has been the belief that credibility builds a broad and loyal audience and that economic success follows in turn. In that regard, the business people in a news organization also must nurture – not exploit – their allegiance to the audience ahead of other considerations.

Technology may change but trust – when earned and nurtured – will endure.

Its essence is a discipline of verification

Journalists rely on a professional discipline for verifying information.

While there is no standardized code as such, every journalist uses certain methods to assess and test information to “get it right.”

Being impartial or neutral *is not* a core principal of journalism. Because the journalist must make decisions, he or she is not and cannot be objective. But journalistic *methods* are objective.

When the concept of objectivity originally evolved, it did not imply that journalists were free of bias. It called, rather, for a consistent method of testing information – a transparent approach to evidence – precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of the work. The method is objective, not the journalist.

Seeking out multiple witnesses, disclosing as much as possible about sources, or asking various sides for comment, all signal such standards. This discipline of verification is what separates journalism from other forms of communication such as propaganda, advertising, fiction, or entertainment.

Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover

Independence is a cornerstone of reliability.

On one level, it means not becoming seduced by sources, intimidated by power, or compromised by self-interest. On a deeper level it speaks to an independence of spirit and an open-mindedness and intellectual curiosity that helps the journalist see beyond his or her own class or economic status, race, ethnicity, religion, gender or ego.

Journalistic independence, write Kovach and Rosenstiel, is not neutrality. While editorialists and commentators are not neutral, the source of their credibility is still their accuracy, intellectual fairness and ability to inform – not their devotion to a certain group or outcome. In our independence, however, journalists must avoid straying into arrogance, elitism, isolation or nihilism.

It must serve as an independent monitor of power

Journalism has an unusual capacity to serve as watchdog over those whose power and position most affect citizens. It may also offer voice to the voiceless. Being an independent monitor of power means “watching over the powerful few in society on behalf of the many to guard against tyranny,” Kovach and Rosenstiel write.

“

The earliest journalists firmly established as a core principle their responsibility to examine unseen corners of society.

”

The watchdog role is often misunderstood, even by journalists, to mean “afflict the comfortable.” While upsetting the applecart may certainly be a result of watchdog journalism, the concept as introduced in the mid-1600s was far less combative. Rather, it sought to redefine the role of the journalist from a passive stenographer to more a curious observer who would “search out and discover the news.”

The watchdog role also means more than simply monitoring government. “The earliest journalists,” write Kovach and Rosenstiel, “firmly established as a core

principle their responsibility to examine unseen corners of society. The world they chronicled captured the imagination of a largely uninformed society, creating an immediate and enthusiastic popular following.”

Finally, the purpose of the watchdog extends beyond simply making the management and execution of power transparent, to making known and understood the effects of that power. This includes reporting on successes as well as failures.

Journalists have an obligation to protect this watchdog freedom by not demeaning it in frivolous use or exploiting it for commercial gain.

It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise

The news media are common carriers of public discussion, and this responsibility forms a basis for special privileges that news and information providers receive from democratic societies.

These privileges can involve subsidies for distribution or research and development (lower postal rates for print, use of public spectrum by broadcasters, development and management of the Internet) to laws protecting content and free speech (copyright, libel, and shield laws).

These privileges, however, are not pre-ordained or perpetual. Rather, they are conferred because of the need for an abundant supply of information. They are predicated on the assumption that journalism – because of its principles and practices – will supply a steady stream of higher quality content that citizens *and* government will use to make better decisions.

Traditionally, this covenant has been between news organizations and government. The new forms of digital media, however, place a responsibility on everyone who “publishes” content – whether for profit or for personal satisfaction – in the public domain.

The raw material cast into the marketplace of ideas sustains civic dialogue and serves society best when it consists of verified information rather than just prejudice and supposition.

Journalism should also attempt to fairly represent varied viewpoints and interests in society and to place them in context rather than highlight only the conflicting fringes

of debate. Accuracy and truthfulness also require that the public discussion not neglect points of common ground or instances where problems are not just identified but also solved.

Journalism, then, is more than providing an outlet for discussion or adding one's voice to the conversation. Journalism carries with it a responsibility to improve the quality of debate by providing verified information and intellectual rigor. A forum without regard for facts fails to inform and degrades rather than improves the quality and effectiveness of citizen decision-making.

It must strive to keep the significant interesting and relevant

Journalism is storytelling with a purpose. It should do more than gather an audience or catalogue the important. It must balance what readers know they want with what they cannot anticipate but need.

Writing coaches Roy Peter Clark and Chip Scanlan describe effective newswriting as the intersection of civic clarity, the information citizens need to function, and literary grace, which is the reporter's storytelling skill set. In other words, part of the journalist's responsibility is providing information in such a way people will be inclined to listen. Journalists must thus strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.

Quality is measured both by how much a work engages its audience and enlightens it. This means journalists must continually ask what information has the most value to citizens and in what form people are most likely to assimilate it. While journalism should reach beyond such topics as government and public safety, journalism overwhelmed by trivia and false significance trivializes civic dialogue and ultimately public policy.

It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional

Journalism is our modern cartography. It creates a map for citizens to navigate society.

As with any map, its value depends on a completeness and proportionality in which the significant is given greater visibility than the trivial.

Keeping news in proportion is a cornerstone of truthfulness. Inflating events for

sensation, neglecting others, stereotyping, or being disproportionately negative all make a less reliable map. The most comprehensive maps include all affected communities, not just those with attractive demographics. The most complete stories take into diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Though proportion and comprehensiveness are subjective, their ambiguity does not lessen their significance.

Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience

Doing journalism, whether as a professional writing for a news organization or as an online contributor in the public space, involves one's moral compass and demands a personal sense of ethics and responsibility.

Because “news” is important, those who provide news have a responsibility to voice their personal conscience out loud and allow others to do so as well. They must be willing to question their own work and to differ with the work of others if fairness and accuracy demand they do so.

News organizations do well to nurture this independence by encouraging individuals to speak their minds. Conversation and debate stimulate the intellectual diversity of minds and voices necessary to understand and accurately cover an increasingly diverse society. Having a diverse newsroom does little if those different voices are not spoken or heard.

It's also a matter of self-interest. Employees encouraged to raise their hands may “save the boss from himself” or protect the news organization's reputation by pointing out errors, flagging important omissions, questioning misguided assumptions, or even revealing wrongdoing.

Having a sense of ethics is perhaps most important for the individual journalist or online contributor.

Increasingly, those who produce “the news” work in isolation, whether from a newsroom cubicle, the scene of a story, or their home office. They may file directly to the public without the safety net of editing, a second set of eyes, or the collaboration of others. While crowdsourcing by the audience may catch and correct errors or misinformation, the reputation of the author and the quality of public dialogue are nevertheless damaged

Citizens, too, have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news

The average person now, more than ever, works like a journalist.

Writing a blog entry, commenting on a social media site, sending a tweet, or “liking” a picture or post, likely involves a shorthand version of the journalistic process. One comes across information, decides whether or not it’s believable, assesses its strength and weaknesses, determines if it has value to others, decides what to ignore and what to pass on, chooses the best way to share it, and then hits the “send” button.

Though this process may take only a few moments, it’s essentially what reporters do.

Two things, however, separate this journalistic-like process from an end product that is “journalism.” The first is motive and intent. The purpose of journalism is to give people the information they need to make better decisions about their lives and society. The second difference is that journalism involves the conscious, systematic, application of a discipline of verification to produce a “functional truth,” as opposed to something that is merely interesting or informative. Yet while the process is critical, it’s the end product – the “story” – by which journalism is ultimately judged.

Today, when the world is awash in information and news is available any time everywhere, a new relationship is being formed between the suppliers of journalism and the people who consume it.

The new journalist is no longer a gatekeeper who decides what the public should and should not know. The individual is now his or her own circulation manager and editor. To be relevant, journalists must now verify information the consumer already has or is likely to find and then help them make sense of what it means and how they might use it.

Thus, write Kovach and Rosenstiel, “The first task of the new journalist/sense maker is to verify what information is reliable and then order it so people can grasp it efficiently.” A part of this new journalistic responsibility is “to provide citizens with the tools they need to extract knowledge for themselves from the undifferentiated flood of rumor, propaganda, gossip, fact, assertion, and allegation the communications system now produces.”

This guide, like many of the others in API's Journalism Essentials section, is largely based on the research and teachings of the Committee of Concerned Journalists — a consortium of reporters, editors, producers, publishers, owners and academics that for 10 years facilitated a discussion among thousands of journalists about what they did, how they did it, and why it was important. The author, Walter Dean, was CCJ training director and API Executive Director Tom Rosenstiel formerly co-chaired the committee.