

Broadcast News at 101

By

Mark McGee

Happy Birthday! Broadcast news is 101 years old today.

The first news program was broadcast in Detroit, Michigan on amateur radio station 8MK, now known as WWJ Radio. The U.S. government had made it illegal for private citizens to own a radio receiver during World War I, but lifted the ban when the war ended. The Detroit News newspaper got an amateur radio license and began broadcasting from the paper's headquarters in August of 1920. They started a radio news program a year later and changed the call letters to WBL in October 1921 and to WWJ in March 1922. ([Detroit Historical Society](#))

The News Biz

The radio “news business” was pretty simple in the early days.



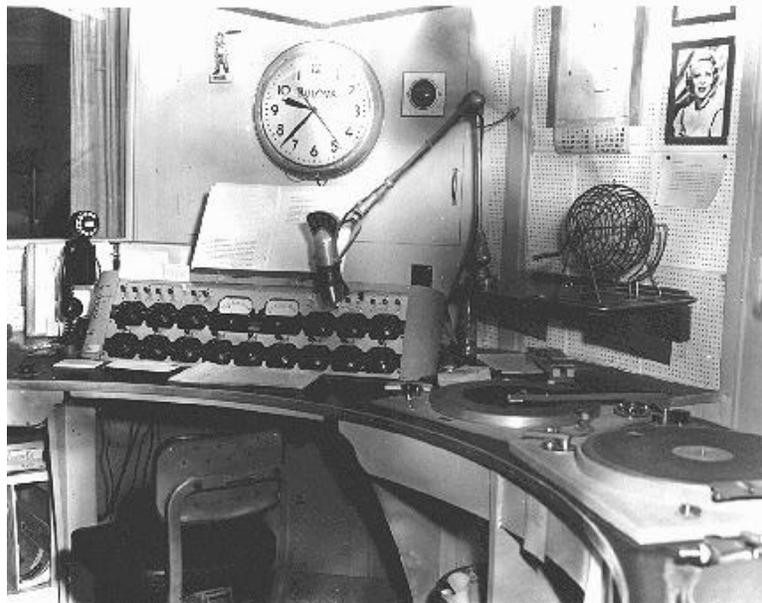
Courtesy: Detroit News

You can see some of the photos of the news and programming department at this [Detroit News website](#).

It didn't take a large staff to put on a newscast then and it still didn't when I started in radio 45 years later. I remember signing on the radio station alone at 5am. News was part of what I did every half hour along with playing records and commercials and reading public service announcements (PSAs). I also did some live reporting and filled in on the daily talk show when the host

was off. It was a good training ground to learn my way around the radio biz.

After several months at a small city radio station, I was hired to work in a large city nearby and got my first taste of the full-time “news biz.” We had an AM station and television station, so that afforded me the opportunity to learn more about both. I was fortunate to learn from a news director who had many years of experience in broadcast news. He helped me hone news gathering and reporting skills I had started to develop in college and at the small city radio station.



Courtesy: [Old Radio.com](http://OldRadio.com)

That was about 55 years ago. How much has changed since then? Technically, radio and television have changed tremendously. I started my career working with a 5,000 watt transmitter that sat ten feet behind my chair in the control room. We used large turntables that could play records of different sizes (e.g. 78 rpm, 45 rpm, 33 rpm). We also used large reel-to-reel machines to play special programming and cart machines to play commercials and news “soundbites.” The control room photo above looks similar to what I used.

I spent most of my career in television news and saw news gathering technology go from a film camera to an extremely heavy camera and separate video tape recorder to small, lightweight digital cameras. Live reporting grew from using a landline or pay phone to handheld radio to microwave to satellite to Internet connectivity and smart phone apps. The station I worked at when I retired was all-digital and had a staff of more than one-hundred people. Quite a change from the early days.

News Coverage Basics

What didn't change were the **principles** of news coverage. The basics of covering news include gathering the news and reporting the news. Gathering news is everything a reporter does to get the story. That includes talking with trusted news sources, asking questions and getting answers to those questions on camera, searching documents, confirming information, recording *standups*, etc. Reporting news is everything a reporter does to tell their story to an audience. That includes writing the story, editing the story, and possibly talking live with the TV anchors to help make the story clear and complete.

So, what are the basics for each?

News Gathering — Be Curious, Be Skeptical

News Reporting — Be Objective, Be Accurate

Here are some thoughts on each from an article I wrote in May 2020 about [covering the pandemic](#). Nothing about the basics of news coverage have changed since then, nor should they.

Be Curious

A journalist should be curious about everything. Most journalists are NOT experts on any particular subject, so curiosity is vital to finding all angles to a story. I can tell a lot about a journalist's curiosity by the questions they ask in news conferences and on the street and how they report what they see and hear.

Journalists should be filled with wonder about the world and every story they cover. They should appreciate the great responsibility they have constitutionally. The First Amendment to the Constitution actually protects the rights of journalists to do their jobs freely and without interference from powerful people with biased agendas.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

That always humbled me as both a citizen and member of the ‘press’ that the founders of our nation thought enough of the importance of what I did as a journalist to protect that right against Congress and the Government.

Be Skeptical

A journalist should be skeptical. That means having “an attitude of doubt or a disposition to incredulity either in general or toward a particular object” (Merriam-Webster). Being skeptical in the original sense of the word (from the Greek *skeptikos*) means being “an inquirer.” That’s someone who is “unsatisfied and still looking for truth” (Encyclopedia Britannica). It doesn’t mean that we are still skeptical when we find the truth. Skepticism ends when truth is told. It means not

being *satisfied* until truth is found. Truth should satisfy the skeptic. Truth is the goal.

I was skeptical of what people in power said and how they answered my questions. Just because someone in power says something does not make it true. Powerful people at every level of government, military, business, education and religion may or may not be telling the truth at any given time. So, our job as journalists is to be *skeptical* of what they tell us until we find the truth. Once truth is found, we can report the truth and be satisfied truth has been told. Then we move on to the next story with the same skepticism and drive to find truth again. It's a wonderful process that will get you up in the morning and keep you awake at night.

Be Objective

Objectivity simply means a “lack of favoritism toward one side or another: freedom from bias” (Merriam-Webster). Fortunately, I had an old-school professor who drilled into me and other students the importance of being fair and objective. We had

many interesting conversations in the classroom about the world we were about to cover as journalists and two things were of utmost importance to the professor: objectivity and accuracy. I agreed and determined to be that kind of journalist.

My early news managers also insisted that we reporters be objective in all of our coverage. We were to be unbiased in every aspect of our reporting – from asking questions, to researching the answers we received, to writing stories, to selecting the soundbites from interviews to insert into the story-telling process, and how we presented the stories visually and audibly on air to ensure objectivity.

We were not to take any side in any story. We were not even allowed to take a position politically in our community. That included having campaign bumper stickers on our cars and campaign signs in our yards. I remember news directors asking us how people would ever trust us if they knew our political leanings. I started my career as a political independent and am still an independent to this day. If a news manager even heard a hint of bias in something we said to someone in the newsroom

or to a contact on the phone or in a live report or in our writing and reporting, we would be called into the manager's office and our job would be in jeopardy.

Why were those older news managers so tough on us young reporters? Many of them were reporters ten or twenty years earlier and had helped fight for a strengthening of journalistic principles. Many journalists in the 40s and 50s were little more than stenographers, note takers. They simply wrote down what powerful people said and regurgitated the same words in their news reports without any research, challenge or context. Those older news managers had fought hard to get journalism back to being fair and objective and they weren't about to let a bunch of young reporters take the craft backward. I'm so glad for that kind of tough conditioning as a young reporter. That early training was the foundation for my career as a journalist.

Be Accurate

To be accurate is to be right about a story. Accuracy and Objectivity are tied for #1 in journalism. We can't have one without the other. That's still true today, even though we don't see it often enough in actual reporting. Here are some of the top examples from a variety of journalism organizations. I was a member of some of these groups years ago and am pleased they still have Truth and Accuracy at the top of the list for ethical journalism. Reporters and editors who belong to these groups should take note and ask themselves if they are living up to these expectations.

Ethical Journalism Network's **Five Principles of Ethical Journalism**

1. Truth and Accuracy
2. Independence
3. Fairness and Impartiality
4. Humanity
5. Accountability

American Press Association Principles of Journalism

1. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification
4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover
5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power

Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics

1. Seek Truth and Report It
2. Minimize Harm
3. Act Independently (serve the public)
4. Be Accountable and Transparent

Committee of Concerned Journalists **Principles of Journalism**

1. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification
4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover
5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power

RTNDA Code of Ethics**

1. Truth and accuracy above all
2. Independence and transparency
3. Accountability for consequences

** The Radio Television Digital News Association (RTNDA) was called the Radio and Television News Directors Association when I was a member years ago.

Hoping



I hope this is a helpful reminder to today's broadcast journalists. Though much has changed in the world around us, nothing has changed about what makes the best news coverage.

Happy 101st birthday, Broadcast News!

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