



Vietnam War Protest, 1968

Should Journalists Be Activists?

By

Mark McGee

Journalists, what comes first — journalism or activism? Yes, every journalist is a human being with their own personal thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about life and what's going on around them. However, journalists are supposed to be objective and accurate in their reporting — not subjective and purposely inaccurate.

I started my journalism career as protests against the Vietnam War were growing in size and intensity across the country (late 1960s). Did I have personal opinions about the war? Yes. Did I report about protests against the war in my coverage area? Yes. Did I promote my personal beliefs about the war in my reporting? No. Did I report only the side of the story that I liked? No. Did I march with protestors and take up their cause as my cause? No. Why not? Because that's not real journalism — or at least not what it used to be or should be.

Unfortunately, what we often see today is activism that wears the outer garb of journalism. In other words, people use 'journalism' to promote their personal beliefs and belief systems — even if it means they have to 'bend the truth.'

The Oxford Reference defines it this way —

The use of journalistic skills within *activist media to report on, and inspire political engagement with, one or more issues. Activist journalists are typically activists first and journalists second, with the latter function serving the former. Oxford Reference

Let me repeat that last sentence for emphasis: “Activist journalists are typically activists first and journalists second, with the latter function serving the former.” The latter function, journalism, serving the former, activism. That’s how ‘activist journalism’ works. What’s most important to an activist journalist is ‘activism.’ Journalism, so-called, is just the method used to get the activist message out to the public.

There was a time, not so long ago, when news managers would sternly warn journalists about joining a protest or purposely reporting on a story subjectively and inaccurately. That kind of behavior in a newsroom could get a journalist suspended or fired. Unfortunately, things have changed in many newsrooms across our country —

Laura Wagner, a journalist with *Defector*, has argued that journalism needs to abandon the “unreasonable and hideously stupid expectation that reporters must harbor no strong opinions about the things they care about” (Kafka, 2021). Regardless of their profession, journalists are still citizens with a right to express their views, and institutions that require strict impartiality (including outside of the newsrooms on personal social media accounts) are infringing on individual freedom of speech. By disallowing them from standing up for what they believe in, journalists are put in an unfair position to choose between what they view as right and keeping their jobs. If anything, an argument could be made that journalists being outspoken about their political beliefs only enhances their transparency, rather than pretending to be a blank slate with a press pass. Moreover, concerning the bigger picture of social movements overall, organizations like *BuzzFeed News* have argued that attempting to prioritize objectivity over justice only leads to privileging oppressive views. They state: “We firmly

believe that for a number of issues, including civil rights, women's rights, anti-racism, and LGBT equality, there are not two sides" (Hilton, 2015). Some, like University of Oregon journalist Kiva Hanson, even contend that "Journalism *has been* activism since its inception" (Hanson). Invoking examples like famous journalist Ida B. Wells, co-founder of the NAACP who meticulously documented violence against African Americans, Hanson argues that it is "journalists [who have] continually exposed massive injustices within schools, governments and businesses" (Hanson).

Another view has emerged trying to balance both the ability of reporters to engage in activism with the practical concerns of practicing professional journalism. For example, Axios announced that their writers were allowed to participate in BLM protests under the protection of free speech, but the co-founder Jim VandeHei also indicated "he did not intend his note to *actively* encourage marching in protests... [and] reminded the staff that the company's reporters still need sources to open up to them, and that

appearing to take one side could jeopardize their position” (Lee and Smith, 2020). Furthermore, though Report for America’s McKenzie has personally experienced racism “both on and off the job,” she “urges conflicted journalists to consider” that there are already plenty of citizens on social media advocating for just causes but not enough journalists of color covering them (Thompson, 2020). In this sense, she reasons that it is more important for people like herself to hold onto their institutional positions rather than risk their jobs or their credibility with the public (Thompson, 2020). While these arguments do not attempt to paint journalist activism as inappropriate, they do point to the need to consider pragmatism as well as ethics.

Moody College of Communication

Here's an interesting take on activism in journalism from a journalism major at the University of Oregon —

This form of journalism is on the rise. It's been called solutions journalism, activism journalism, engagement journalism and many other words. Whatever you want to call it, it results in more impactful stories, more invested audiences and better journalism for a better world.

Can I be both a journalist and an activist? Now, in my last year of college, this question feels as daunting as ever, even though I have accepted that I am. What has reassured me the most as I begin searching for post-grad jobs is something Professor of Practice Torsten Kjellstrand told me a few years ago, when I expressed concern about putting my activism on my resume: "If they don't want you because of that, do you really want them?"

Since I've reconciled my identity as both a journalist and an activist, I've embraced the way it impacts my work and the stories I tell. It's one of the first things to appear in any "about me" section I fill out, and it's a part of what makes a thoughtful journalist.

I encourage every journalist — and every activist — to think about the ways we can learn from each other. There is so much to gain from leaving behind the fallacy of objectivity and moving toward the impactful, truth-seeking and world-changing journalists we can become. University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication

Excuse me? The 'fallacy of objectivity'? When did objectivity in reporting become a 'fallacy'?

Here's another take on activist journalism from Poynter's study of 167 journalists a couple of years ago —

Two distinct mindsets emerged: A traditionalist group that favors neutrality and a second group that shows more concern for the impact of journalism on their sources and desires more engagement in political discourse.

The traditionalists said journalists should not be activists, but the second group supported the statement that journalists are citizens first and should be free to sign petitions, protest and join political parties. Members of this group want to be agents of change and protectors of citizens, especially those in marginalized groups.

“I think that journalists have the right to vote and partake in protests that they think are just, as long as they are not letting their emotions and actions interfere with their work,” a student journalist said.

Another journalism student would likely agree with NPR's new policy, which allows its journalists to support causes such as "the freedom and dignity of human beings," a free press and the right to "thrive in society without facing discrimination" on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, disability or religion.

"I don't think you can be objective with the Black Lives Matter movement, and it's simply because it's a movement of talking about the rights of humans," the student told us. Poynter

Journalist First

What do I think? I think my mentors and managers from the 1960s and '70s would spin in their graves if they knew that activist journalism was being promoted in newsrooms across the country. Based on Poynter's findings, I find myself in the 'traditionalist' camp. As I mentioned earlier, I believe that journalists should be curious, skeptical, objective, and accurate. That's a 'tradition' I wholeheartedly endorse. It is at the very core of the best type of journalism.

I recommend, strongly, that journalists be 'solid' journalists first. Any 'activism' should follow naturally from the process of gathering, confirming, and reporting the truth of any story they cover. It is true that journalists are citizens, but to be an activist first and a journalist second is, in my opinion, not to be a real journalist at all.

Why? Because an activist journalist is often not able or willing to follow the important process of reporting all the facts about stories they are invested in personally, even if they don't like what they find. If a journalist is allowed to join groups protesting topics that the journalist is covering, can news consumers trust their reporting? I don't think so, and there was a time when most news managers didn't either.

A recent Gallup and Knight Foundation survey found that — “Fifty percent of Americans feel most national news organizations intend to mislead, misinform or persuade the public.” The survey also found — “While 72% say national news organizations have the resources and opportunity to report the news accurately and fairly to the public, only 35% say most national news organizations can be relied on to deliver the information they need.” Those statistics are not good. What good is journalism if people don't trust your reporting? We've written about that in previous newsletters.

Pushing Facts Aside

If a journalist has a strong personal opinion about a story they're covering, they will often push facts aside that get in the way of their personal beliefs and positions about stories. They may also 'miss' important information that might impact the information they report. They may not interview people with opposing views, or edit the interviews they do get from opposing views to make the person appear to say something they did not say or mean (out of context quotes for example). When that happens, real journalism begins to die. News managers should manage that problem and not allow it to happen in their newsroom.

That leads us to an even bigger problem. Many news managers are activists first, followed distantly by a desire for real journalism. How do I know that's true? I watch, listen to, and read the news every day. If journalism has become activism, it's because news managers have allowed it to happen. Maybe they agree that journalism should be activism rather than real journalism. Maybe they are afraid to go against the tide of activism in their newsrooms. Some may be

hanging on until they can retire with a company pension. Whatever the reason, allowing journalists to be activists first is wrong. News managers - manage your news coverage. Do what's right for the sake of real journalism and your audience.

Hope for Change?

Is there hope for change in journalism? Maybe.

Journalism professors can make a difference by instilling in their students an understanding of what it means to be a real journalist. News directors and editors can make a difference by guiding reporters, photojournalists, producers, and other members of their team to embrace real journalism.

What we need in journalism is a return to the best aspects of being a journalist. Find the truth — all of it. Tell the truth — all of it. If finding and telling the truth leads viewers, listeners, and readers to become active in making changes in their community, then journalists will have done their jobs. Tell the truth and let your audience decide what they will do with the information.

Journalists **MUST** separate their personal feelings about stories they cover and report the facts they uncover honestly and fairly. It is only as journalists return to the basics of good journalism that news consumers will be able to trust the news again.



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee