



Journalists Are Also Citizens

When Activism Is Appropriate and How To Do It

By

Mark McGee

I told you in [a previous eBook](#) that journalists should not be activists first. They should be journalists first, then allow their reporting of the truth to impact their audience to determine what they as citizens want to do with the information you've shared with them. However, that doesn't mean journalists cannot be citizens who care about what is happening in their community.

Every journalist is also a citizen of the country in which they live and work. The best thing a journalist can do, in my opinion, is to cover stories of importance to their fellow citizens until the story is done. I used to tell reporters that stories they covered were not finished *until they were finished*. What I meant by that was the importance of 'following up' every story they covered. That means staying on top of stories until there's nothing else to report about it.

How We Used To Do It

I used to keep files in desk drawers and boxes (before the days of computers) for every story I had covered or was planning to cover. Each story file contained my reporter notes, script copies, and newspaper articles about the same story. I also had a ‘tickler’ file that would remind me when it was time to check up on some aspect of a story. I had a big desk-size calendar where I wrote the next time (date) I should check on a particular aspect of a story.

It’s easier now with online calendars, and reminders on phones and computers. There is no reason that today’s reporter should miss a followup to one of their stories. Those follow-up stories are how journalists can ensure they are keeping important information in front of their audience. I believed that following up on stories was one of the best ways I could help my community stay informed and get involved.

I also believed that asking tough questions of powerful people was another way to help fellow citizens know the truth and determine what they wanted to do about it. Most people don't have the time or access that reporters have to follow up on stories. Journalists are paid to do that, so they should do it — fairly and accurately.

I always thought of asking tough questions of powerful people as a type of 'advocacy' journalism. While many reporters thought of news coverage as 'covering' a story, I viewed it as an opportunity to 'uncover' things powerful people didn't want citizens to know. Reporters can advocate for the right of the people to know what the powerful are doing with the power the people give them. Government is supposed to work for the people, and journalists are an important part of holding elected officials and government employees accountable for how they are acting in the best interests of the population.

Citizen Rights

Even as citizens of the United States have the constitutional right to free speech, citizens also have the right to a free press. Though only a small percentage of citizens become members of the press, they have the right to both free speech and free reporting of facts in stories of interest to all citizens.

Those rights take us in a lot of challenging directions. While journalists are citizens with rights to free speech, they also have the responsibility of being members of a free press. I was taught as a young journalist in the 1960s that I should not take sides on any story, not join or promote any particular political party, and not join any protest movement. I was taught that to do any of those things would jeopardize my ability to report stories objectively and accurately. It could also jeopardize my career. Discipline for breaking those rules could quickly lead to a suspension or firing.

That's not true in many news organizations today. I shared about that in the last newsletter, so please read that for some background on what's happening now. Many younger journalists, news managers, and journalism professors believe in the importance of journalists using their positions as activists on a variety of social issues.

In addition to asking tough questions of powerful people, and thoroughly following up on every story, is there anything else a journalist can do as a citizen to influence change they believe is important in their community? I believe there is, but there's a catch.

If a journalist feels strongly about a particular story, they can use their free speech rights in a variety of ways. They can do as I suggested and cover the story until the story is covered thoroughly — all while being fair and honest in their reporting the truth they cover and uncover.

They can recuse themselves from covering stories in which they become personally involved (example in a minute). They can also resign from journalism and become a full-time activist if they wish. It must be clear to the reading, listening, and viewing audience that journalists are being both accurate and objective. At this time, the majority of news consumers don't trust the news media —

"Large numbers of people see the media as subject to undue political influence, and only a small minority believe most news organisations put what's best for society ahead of their own commercial interest," wrote Reuters Institute Director Rasmus Kleis Nielsen in the report, which is based on an online survey of 93,432 people, conducted in 46 markets. [Reuters](#)

- Only 26% of Americans have a favorable opinion of the news media, the lowest level Gallup and Knight have recorded in the past five years, while 53% hold an unfavorable view.
- Across all political affiliations, more Americans say they hold an unfavorable opinion of the news media

compared to a survey conducted in late 2019-early 2020. This rise is especially pronounced among independents but is also apparent among Democrats — who typically hold more favorable views of the media.

- Perceptions of political bias in news coverage have also increased, with independents driving the trend, followed by Republicans, then Democrats.
- Young people continue to hold more negative perceptions of the news media than older generations, confirming previous findings. [Knight Foundation](#)

An Example

Okay, as promised, here's an example that comes from being a parent. Many journalists have children who attend school. If there is a sensitive or challenging story at the school where your child attends and you plan to be involved in some way in that sensitive story as a parent (e.g. speaking as a parent before the school board, joining in a protest across the street from the school, holding up a sign, etc.), recuse yourself from being the reporter who covers the story. Let your news manager know about the conflict so they can assign another reporter to the story. If the position you plan on taking is of such a nature that it could jeopardize the public's view of you as an unbiased reporter for the station or paper, you can request a leave of absence until such time that the public can trust your coverage again. If the issue is of such overwhelming importance to you that you cannot return to work as an unbiased journalist, you can resign and become involved as an activist.

I believe that as citizens of the United States we have a responsibility to uphold our Constitution. That includes freedom of religion, speech, press, and the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. Because journalists are members of the press, you have chosen to ensure that all constitutional rights are upheld. If you're going to use your rights to take particular stands on issues that some may consider sensitive or controversial, then you should also apply the purposes of the freedom of the press to ensure that all citizens know you are being truthful in what you say and do.

Be Honest

Be honest with your news managers, your fellow journalists, and your audience. Don't pretend that you are objective about a particular story you're covering when you aren't objective. Don't pretend that accuracy is your primary concern about a story when your real concern is to push a particular viewpoint or agenda. Just be honest.

I think people, speaking now about the audience that watches you on television, listens to you on radio, or reads what you write in a newspaper or online, will understand that you have a strong position on stories **if you're honest about having them**. Just don't lie about not having a position when you do. Admit it. Hand the story over to another reporter, producer, or editor. Take that leave of absence, if necessary. Find another occupation if your desire to be an activist is stronger than your desire to be an honest, objective journalist.

Journalists often talk about how people in government need to be transparent and held accountable for their decisions and actions. How about journalists? Shouldn't your audience have the same right of transparency and accountability from you? I believe they should. I hope you do, too.



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee