



# Training for Professional and Independent Journalists

By

Mark McGee



# What is Journalism?

Let's begin this training session by defining 'journalism.' Then, we'll look at the 4 Principles of Journalism.

Journalism is the activity of gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information. It is also the product of these activities — *American Press Institute*

the collection and editing of news for presentation through the media; the public press — *Merriam-Webster*

The word *journalism* was originally applied to the reportage of current events in printed form, specifically newspapers, but with the advent of radio, television, and the Internet in the 20th century the use of the term broadened to include all printed and electronic communication dealing with current affairs — *Britannica*

the work of collecting, writing, and publishing news stories and articles in newspapers and magazines or broadcasting them on the radio and television — *Cambridge English Dictionary*

**Journalism** is the job of collecting news and writing about it for newspapers, magazines, television, or radio — *Collins English Dictionary*

The American Press Institute also added this in its definition of journalism. I think it will be helpful to our training —

Asking who is a journalist is the wrong question, because journalism can be produced by anyone.

At the same time, merely engaging in journalistic-like activity — snapping a cell-phone picture at the scene of a fire or creating a blog site for news and comment — does not by itself produce a journalistic product. Though it can and sometimes does, there is a distinction between the act of journalism and the end result. API

# The Changing Face of Journalism

The advent of the Internet, social media, smart phones, and other technology has changed the face of journalism. As the API wrote, “journalism can be produced by anyone.” While that may sound interesting, even a little exciting, I find it troubling. Why? Because if anyone can ‘do journalism’ without any training or oversight, how can we trust what we see, hear, and read from them? That’s where the **4 Principles** are important to learn and practice. News managers should hold professional journalists to these standards. Independent journalists should seek accountability partners to hold them to these standards. If news consumers are ever going to trust journalists again, something has to change — and soon.

## Principle # 1 - Curiosity

A curious person is 'interested' in what's happening around them. They are 'inquisitive' and always 'searching.' Curious people make good journalists because they 'want to know' information and share it with others. People who are not curious are 'not interested' in information and sharing it with others. They may do it for a paycheck, or to 'be on TV,' or make their voice heard for some personal reason. That does not lead to good journalism, but I'm afraid it's what makes up a large part of what we know today as both professional and independent journalism.

How can I say that? Well, decades of experience as a journalist and news manager for one. Plus, I watch, read, and listen to lots of local and national news every day. I'm able to watch local newscasts from across the country, along with national and world news, thanks to the technology available to most of us. Unfortunately, much of what I see, read, and hear sounds like the same people produced and wrote the stories for everyone else to read. It's often the same stories, or at least the same types of stories. The stories are often written

the same way with similar (if not identical) key phrases repeated across the journalistic spectrum.

The sad part to me is that I see very little ‘**original reporting.**’ To me that was one of the best parts of being a journalist — coming up with stories that no other journalist in the community had considered or uncovered. Curious journalists, whether professional or independent, will produce *original* stories. Why? Because they’re ‘curious!’

Curiosity means they are ‘thinking’ journalists. They’re not just ‘following the pack.’ They’re not doing it because ‘everyone else is.’ They’re not ‘phoning in’ their stories. They are actually thinking about stories that no one else is considering or telling. Some might call that ‘investigative journalism,’ but I see it as the way journalists should always do their jobs. Be curious!

## Principle # 2 - Skepticism

It amazes me to see how quickly so many local and national news organizations report news stories before they've even checked to see if the stories are true or not. Where's the skepticism in journalism? Being a 'skeptical' journalist simply means you don't believe everything you read or hear. You question everything. You wait to get the facts, and confirm the facts, before reporting a story as true.

Having spent my adult life as a journalist, I am sad to say that the lack of skepticism in journalism is embarrassing. Watching or hearing news anchors report and give their personal opinion about stories before they even have the information confirmed is abhorrent. The same goes for newspapers and online news sources. When did journalists stop doing *real journalism*? Once you've gathered and confirmed factual information, report it. Until then 'be skeptical!' Don't believe things just because someone else said it was true. Do your job! Be a real journalist.



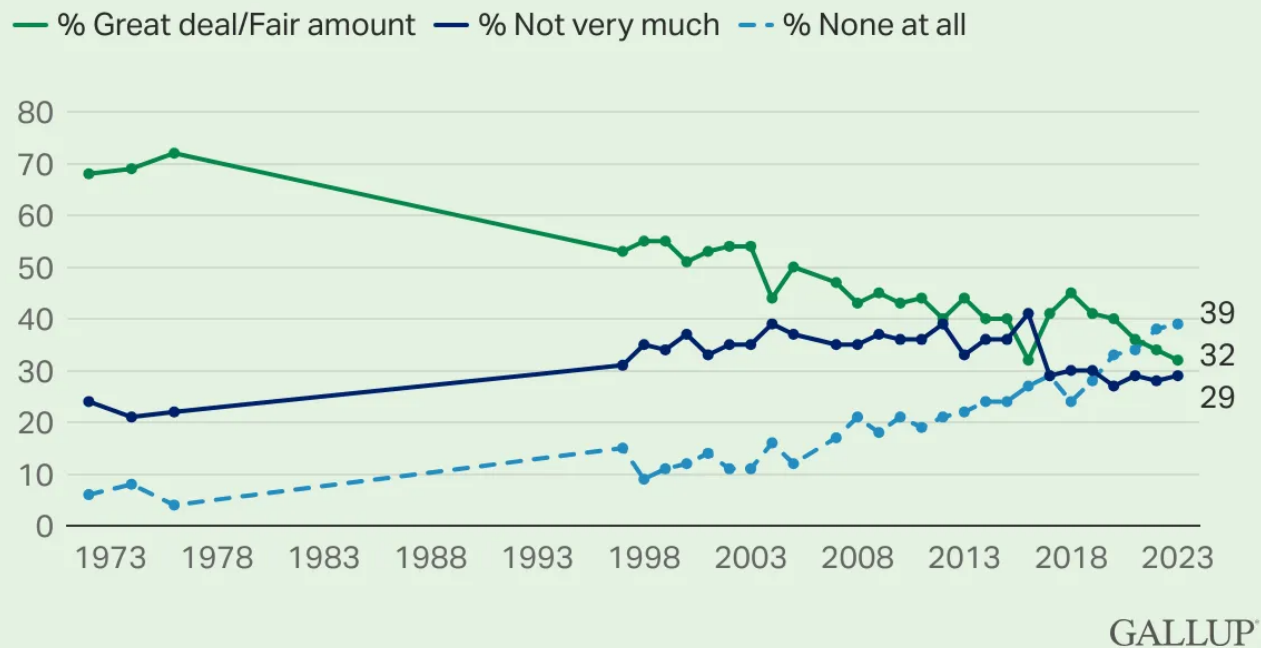
## Principle # 3 - Accuracy

This goes back to being 'skeptical.' Don't report a story as accurate until you know it's **accurate**. 'Accuracy' goes to the very core of real journalism. The fact that the majority of Americans don't trust the news media should be a wake-up call for journalists and their managers. When I started as a journalist in the 1960s the vast majority of the American public had a high regard for journalism. They used to trust us. They believed what we reported because they believed we were doing our jobs well. Sorry to say, that regard is now at an extremely low point.

Don't believe me? Here's a recent graphic from *Gallup* that tells the sad story of how the American public has lost trust in the mass media during the last 50 years.

## Americans' Trust in Mass Media, 1972-2023

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media -- such as newspapers, TV and radio -- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?



How far we've fallen! When I started in journalism in 1967 most Americans trusted our reporting. 'None at all' hovered around five percent. Not any more.

Notably, this is the first time that the percentage of Americans with no trust at all in the media is higher than the percentage with a great deal or a fair amount combined. *Gallup*

If you are a professional or independent journalist, this chart should cause you great concern. Why are you even in journalism if it isn't to serve the purpose of gathering, confirming, and reporting the truth for your audience? More people 'dis-trust' the news than 'trust' the news. How does that make you feel? I hope it inspires you to do the best job you can at telling truthful stories and earning back the trust of your viewers, readers, or listeners. Otherwise, why does the media even exist?

## Principle # 4 - Objectivity

Oh, boy. Don't get me started. When did 'objectivity' leave the newsroom? I fought that battle every day as a news manager. Journalists are human beings. As human beings journalists often have personal beliefs and even strong feelings about the stories they cover. I get that. That's why real journalism has **principles** - to make sure that journalists' personal beliefs and feelings don't become part of a news story.

Your audience is not interested in what you 'believe' or 'feel' about a story. They want to know that the news they see, hear, or read is accurate and reported fairly. If you want to be an 'activist,' go be an activist somewhere else. However, if you want to be an honest journalist leave your personal beliefs and feelings out of your reporting. Keep it to yourself. That includes the way you 'gather' and 'confirm' information for a story as much as the way you 'report' the story.

Please. Can't we get back to doing real journalism again? Let's bring 'trust' in the mass media back to journalism. Wouldn't it be nice to be proud of what we do?





1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee

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