

Journalism and Deception: The Other Side of a Two-Faced Coin

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First, a confession: I am not sure that I have a clear claim to share the stage with my distinguished panelists. And I promise you this is *not* false modesty. The reason is one you may already know: that I have been fortunate enough to be the general editor of historical volumes authored by two of my fellow panel members which focused directly on journalists and their professional construction of truth. In Medill's "Vision of the American Press" series published by Northwestern University Press, these are Tom Goldstein's *Journalism and Truth: Strange Bedfellows* and Brooke Kroeger's forthcoming *Undercover Reporting: The Truth About Deception*. Please forgive the shameless plug.

So, with your permission, I thought that I might take a different tack. Rather than look at the place of deception in the professional *practice* by journalism, I thought it might be interesting to consider the larger question from two other perspectives: one, with journalists *being deceived*, and the other—perhaps more importantly—is journalists' willing *self-deception*.

In the first case, journalists being deceived, there is a long and redolent history reaching back centuries. It is, however, a matter of professional self-definition for journalists to attempt to prevent this from happening. But perhaps a couple of useful points can be made about the instances where they were less than successful.

First, it is clear that in the last few decades, governments, as well as ever-more-concentrated economic entities, have become significantly more adept not only at "telling their side of the story" but also of explicitly hiding the "other side." For example, my Northwestern University colleague Jim Ettema¹ is working on a book about how TV coverage of the Vietnam War served as an inflection point in the relationship between the media and the military. Given the apparent influence of TV images on the American public, the government has in the years since Vietnam adopted an imperative regarding the control of cameras, as well as the press itself, in armed conflict—an imperative from which it is

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unlikely ever to waiver. For examples, please see press controls during the U.S. invasions of Panama and Grenada or the embedding during the Gulf War.

Second, it seems almost quaint today to recall Daniel Bell's *End of Ideology*ⁱⁱ or Francis Fukuyama's *End of History*.ⁱⁱⁱ The rampant return of ideology to the nation's public discourse seems to be one of the touchstones of the 21st century. The result is that even the less powerful sources that journalists have to deal with often approach them with agenda-driven motives and thus do not hesitate to deceive journalists. A redolent recent example is a true believer's passion to discredit George W. Bush's service in the Air National Guard, which led to a deception that, after many twists and turns, resulted in the termination of Dan Rather's career at CBS.^{iv}

A third point to be made about the deception of, not by, journalists concerns the sea change that information technology has brought to the world of journalism. The pre-1995 pond, before the Web and blogs and social media, seems so placid in retrospect. Today, the amount of misinformation—some of it clearly deceptive—in accessible circulation is beyond calculation. Ask yourself: How much of the daily content of the Web do *you* believe is verifiable fact? As a working journalist, what percentage would you assign to the portion you would be willing to a) believe, and b) put your byline on? I will not ask you to reveal your estimate, but I doubt you would be too far off if your answer was in the high single digits. In sum, never has *caveat scriptor* been more in effect.

Beyond journalists being deceived, one could argue that the willful act of *self-deception* is a more interesting phenomenon. Sir Francis Bacon, the 17th-century English philosopher, posited an exceedingly novel and ultimately vastly powerful idea—that the world was knowable.^v Though few would ever claim it, at heart by professional definition, every journalist is a “Baconian.” We strive to know the world.

Why then might journalists *choose* to deceive themselves? To *not* know the world? Every case is, of course, different, but in recent memory a number of examples come quickly to mind.

- The 2003 invasion of Iraq, the first war of choice in our nation's history, has already been shown to be a case study in the suspension of journalism's critical faculties.
- The unreported subsequent use of torture by United States agents and our allies in Iraq and elsewhere, from which America's moral standing in the world will perhaps not recover for generations.
- The conversion of the nation's financial system into what can only be described as a crooked casino, and the resulting economic crisis that we are still living with.

From the journalist's point of view, the common element is that in each case much of the story was available but remained untold. The question then is why? What were the reasons that journalists chose to deceive themselves? Everyone, no doubt, has her or his own explanations. With your permission, I will briefly offer only four here, and they are purely personal choices.

First, what might be called the Myth of Balance is, I would argue, a self-serving excuse to avoid seeking the truth. Relying on a simplistic "A said, B said" formula provides very little insight into who is telling the truth.^{vi}

Second, the loss of insider access is a powerful deterrent, particularly in the hothouses of Washington and Wall Street. Whatever discomfort the resulting self-deception might cause would, however, be ameliorated by the next invitation to a seat on Air Force One or a game of squash at the Downtown Athletic Club.

Next, never underestimate the role that laziness plays in human affairs. Knowing the world, remaining undeceived, is work. Hard work that must be done every day. Not everyone, not all of us, are willing to do it all the time.

And fourth, lastly and perhaps most significantly, we should acknowledge that we are at a critical moment in the life of the profession of journalism, a time that some have called an existential crisis. Faced with the brave and often threatening new world of digital technologies, the efficacy of existing business models has become less robust with each passing day. The result is that market forces and business strategy play an ever-increasing role in journalism's self-definition.

"What are journalists for?" asks Jay Rosen.^{vii} In response to that question, one can argue that the answer must have less to do with branding and marketing, where the test is plausibility and profit, and more to do with helping our fellow citizens "know the world"—where the final test is journalism's role in the enrichment of the public sphere.

And I am fairly sure that we should never deceive ourselves about that.

ⁱ James Ettema, a professor of communication studies, is the co-author of *Custodians of Conscience: Investigative Journalism and Public Virtue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), which won the Frank Luther Mott-Kappa Tau Alpha Research Award from the national journalism and mass communication honor society. For more information, see <http://www.communication.northwestern.edu/faculty/index.php?PID=JamesEttema&type=alpha>.

ⁱⁱ See Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

^{iv} Perhaps the best summary of the Rather affair can be found in a book by one of his collaterally damaged colleagues at CBS News, Mary Mapes. An award-winning television news producer who broke the story of the Abu Ghraib prison tortures, she was fired, along with three others, by CBS after producing Rather's story based on the forged George W. Bush National Guard documents. See Mary Mapes, *Truth and Duty: The Press, the President, and the Privilege of Power* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2006).

^v For a wonderfully readable account of Sir Francis Bacon's life and evolving world view, see Loren Eiseley, *The Man Who Saw Through Time* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973).

^{vi} Perhaps the last axiological nail in balance's coffin has been provided by News Corporation's Fox News and its adoption of "Fair and balanced" as a motto. The network's claim to balance in its newscasts can be interpreted as either Kafkaesque or something out of Eugène Ionesco, or both.

^{vii} See Jay Rosen, *What Are Journalists For?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).