

The Rise of Establishment Reporting: How a Crisis in Journalism Led to the “Cult of Balance”

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Journalism awards are named after I.F. Stone today, but major newspapers shunned him in his prime

A crisis in journalism lasted from the 1890s until the 1920s. Party-driven journalism had disintegrated, the increasingly lucrative and powerful newspaper magnates ruled their independent empires and exercised considerable political power, and the pursuit of profit sometimes led to an incredible, even appalling, journalism. Mounting public anger and dissatisfaction with the journalism of this era produced what became the first great existential crisis for journalism.

The problem at its core was that a relatively small number of very powerful newspaper owners dominated their communities and states, and a handful of them had national empires. Market economics was pushing toward more concentration and ever less competition. As even the publisher of the Scripps-owned Detroit News argued, in private, in 1913, the corrosive influence of commercial ownership and the pursuit of profit were such that the rational democratic solution would be to have municipal ownership of newspapers.

In view of the explicitly political nature of newspapers in American history, this was not as absurd a notion as it may appear today. Scripps, always the most working-class-oriented of the major chains, even launched an ad-less daily newspaper in the 1910s, because it saw how commercialism undermined the integrity of the news.

By 1912, three of the four candidates for president—Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt and Eugene Debs, all but President William Howard Taft—made the irresponsibility and corruption of the daily press a theme of their campaigns. The world of newspapers had turned upside down in three decades.

The major newspaper owners were able to repel any serious threat to their survival, and to do so, they promoted a new sense of journalism, one that saw the press as independent of politics, neutral in stance, and there to provide the facts necessary for citizens to understand the world and participate effectively as citizens. Put crudely, publishers gave up their direct personal control over news content that had been the hallmark of American journalism to create a product that would have legitimacy and allow the increasingly monopolistic commercial system, already generating lovely profits, to remain in place.

The more visionary owners, like Joseph Pulitzer, argued that journalists needed to be educated at universities, and that there needed to be a “Chinese Wall” between the newsroom and the business offices. In this way, readers could trust that they were getting straight news that was not playing favorites for owners, advertisers, politicians, or the editors and reporters themselves.



Joseph Pulitzer with copies of his newspapers

There were no schools of journalism in 1900; by the 1920s, nearly all of the major schools had been established across the nation. In 1922, the American Society of Newspaper Editors was established and formally adopted its professional code of ethics for reporters forthwith.

For press owners, professionalism was the solution to their problem. As Edward Scripps (Richard Kaplan, *Politics and the American Press*) explained it, once readers “did not care what the editor’s views were...when it came to news, one paper was as good as a dozen.” If trained journalists were striving to present an objective report, monopoly would no longer be a pressing concern. Moreover, all attention to understanding news coverage would focus on editors and reporters as the decisive players; publishers and advertisers would drift into the background.

This was a striking shift in American journalism. For the first century of the republic, the vast majority of papers were owned and edited by the same person and the newspaper reflected the owner’s partisan viewpoint. Knowing the owner meant knowing the paper. Americans today often regard independent, nonpartisan, factually accurate reporting conducted by commercial enterprises as the ideal form of democratic journalism, for understandable reasons. But accomplishing such a system without having significant problems proved to be impossible.

Scarce resources needed to be deployed, and some topics would therefore receive coverage and others would not. There was no neutral value-free code or algorithm that could make that decision; it would, in the end, be determined by values. And the process of generating professional journalism was done under commercial auspices, where the commitment to professional standards was tempered by commercial considerations. This is not to say that some forms of news cannot be more neutral than others, only that all news has a set of values and assumptions that drive it and determine the broad contours of what is covered, how it is covered, and what is not covered.

The values that would drive professional journalism were determined and occasionally fought over by publishers, editors and journalists for the first half of the 20th century. There was a strong reform impulse, attached to the Progressive Era and muckraking, which

believed journalism should “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.” This was nonpartisan journalism, and it held politicians of all parties to the same standard, but it was hardly value free.

This type of journalism was embraced by the Newspaper Guild (the union for reporters) when it was founded in the 1930s. To protect the integrity of the news, leading elements of the guild wanted to effectively prohibit owners and advertisers from having any influence over the newsroom.

Some publishers embraced the spirit of the reform approach—if not their formal banishment from controlling their newsrooms—but the vast majority found the notion of a truly independent journalism far too controversial and adversarial toward the power structure, of which they were most indubitably a part. The professional journalism that emerged in the 1920s and crystallized by midcentury moved decisively in an establishment direction, where it remains to this day.

To take the controversy away from story selection, and to maintain neutrality, political coverage was based primarily on what people in power—official sources—said and did. When they debated an issue, or when they had no particular interest in an issue, it was fair game for journalism. When they agreed on an issue, it was considered inappropriate and “ideological” for a journalist to raise questions challenging the elite consensus, except on the rarest of occasions—as, for instance, when a handful of southern editors such as Hazel Brannon Smith questioned the segregationist consensus in states such as Mississippi.

We remember dissenting and dissident editors such as Smith not only because of their courage, but also because of their rarity. For the most part, however, a premium was placed on achieving factual accuracy and on not tilting the coverage toward challenging the powerful and questioning the basic infrastructure of an often corrupt and dysfunctional status quo.

So it was that one of the greatest journalists of the age, I.F. Stone, had to create his own small publications to raise big questions about the health risks posed by cigarettes, the military-industrial complex, and McCarthyism. In 2008, the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University announced plans to award an annual “I.F. Stone Medal for Journalistic Independence,” but in the 1950s and 1960s, when he was in his prime, Stone could not get his writing published in major American newspapers and was given no forum on broadcast television.

That’s because the journalists who got the jobs, and the journalism that was rewarded, bent over backward to avoid taking a side not just in the political debate between the two parties but also in the great debates of the era. This approach fostered the illusion of professional impartiality. But it also had the important business benefit of making journalism less expensive: just plant reporters near people in power and have them report.

There were major problems with this style of professional journalism, problems that surround us to this day, especially when it comes to the coverage of politics. It tended to make off-limits and unquestioned those areas that people in power agreed upon, and that not coincidentally tended to be near and dear to press owners.

Specifically, when it comes to covering politics, professional journalism has a strong inclination to simply publicize the positions of the leadership of the two parties and regard

them invariably as the two legitimate poles of debate—with the rational center between them, the place journalists tend to see themselves and the best people inhabiting.

To maintain neutrality, journalists are loath to call out one side for lying. They also do not want to antagonize their sources, upon whom they are dependent. Instead, journalists prefer to report that one side is calling the other side liars and leave it at that. We report; you decide. The problem is that the liars can dismiss the criticism as being driven by their opponents and ignore it, so this becomes a liar's paradise.

This obsession of professional journalism to play it strictly down the middle between the two legitimate parties, to avoid at all costs the charge of favoritism—the “cult of balance” as Paul Krugman (New York Times, [7/29/11](#)) termed it—compromises the rigor and integrity of where political analysis would go if it simply followed the evidence “without fear or favor.” Krugman defined the cult of balance as “the insistence on portraying both parties as equally wrong and equally at fault on any issue, never mind the facts.” “If one party declared that the earth was flat,” Krugman stated jokingly, “the headlines would read ‘Views Differ on Shape of Planet.’”



Krugman on the “cult of balance”: “If one party declared that the earth was flat, the headlines would read ‘Views Differ on Shape of Planet.’”

Ari Melber (PBS.org, [9/5/12](#)) wrote, “For years, Americans’ political press has been stuck in a fact-free model of neutrality, often covering even the most obvious lies as ‘one side’ of a dispute.”

The grave damage of the cult of balance is that it allows dubious players to pollute the political culture and get away with it. After all, if the news media attack them, the media are accused of being partisan and unprofessional. And when the political culture moves sharply in one direction, journalism comfortably and uncritically goes along with it, sticking resolutely to the “center.” The center, more than anything in the United States, is determined by where Big Money is located.

*This article is adapted from **John Nichols** and **Robert W. McChesney**’s Dollarocracy: How the Money and Media Election Complex Is Destroying America (**Nation Books**). Nichols is D.C. correspondent for **The Nation** magazine; McChesney is a professor of communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.*

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