

How to be a good journalist in the era of “fake news”. 2018 Palimpsest Article.

It is a weird time to be a journalist. When you tell somebody that you are studying journalism, they usually react in one of two ways: 1) they tell you about their favorite journalists, the best stories they’ve read in the last week, and invite you to a party they’re throwing for the First Amendment next week, or 2) they run away screaming something about the evil that is mass media, alternative facts, and fake news.

Okay, so, maybe that is a bit of an exaggeration. There might be a couple other reactions that have occurred in the history of people telling other people they are a journalist, but those two situations are clearly the most common—at least in my experience. Historically, the public has both loved and hated the press, but never has there been such a deep chasm between journalists and those who consume journalism. So how should we, as journalists, bridge that divide?

While it would be much easier to ignore the idea of fake news, continue to do our jobs, and hope for the best, it is important to think about fake news in order to be the best journalists we can be. Fake news, while often referred to simply as something one does not like or agree with, is actually news that is published with the sole purpose of deceiving the reader. These stories and posts are often sensationalized statements that harbor little to no truth and are created as clickbait to make money or advance the publication’s agenda.

To be a good journalist in the era of fake news, we must remember what it means to be a good journalist in the first place. We should not use clichés or ask rhetorical questions. We cannot make assumptions, and we should always, always, always use active voice instead of passive. We have to change our middle names to objective and treat the Associated Press Stylebook as if it were our first born child. We must embrace our inner courtroom witness, and, as always, we must report the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

To be a good journalist we must check and double check our sources. Use sound, researched facts—not the alternative kind—to backup every single word in our stories. Triple check our sources. Make sure not to state opinions from sources as if they were facts if those sources do not have the credentials or data to back their claims up. (When you’re writing a story about global warming, do not give the less than 2 percent of scientists who do not believe in it the same space and time as the overwhelming 98 percent who use facts to prove their claims.)

Being a good journalist in the era of fake news does not actually vary from being a good journalist during the era of yellow journalism or the era of civil rights or 50 years from now when the term fake news is (hopefully) something that is taught by a very, very old Jeffrey Miller in History of the American Press. But that doesn’t mean it’s easy to do, so I have a few tips for you that are specific to 2018.

Be empathetic. While I think one should always be empathetic—it is, after all, the reporter’s job to be the voice of *all* people—I think it is especially important in today’s world. Being empathetic is not violating objectivity. One of the three philosophical underpinning of the press is being the people’s watchdog, and a watch dog must look out for the underdogs. People in vulnerable positions are often most negatively impacted by fake news. Stories not based in fact

have the ability to enforce untrue stereotypes, and empathy works to enhance one's world view by showing human suffering and emotion.

To be a good journalist in the era of fake news you absolutely have to take care of yourself. You have to make sure you are not letting negative perceptions of your profession stop you from doing your job well. Journalists are often told to take themselves out of the situation completely in order to give the reader unbiased facts, and while I am not anti-objectivity, doing so neglects the fact that journalists are people, too. It is easy to believe that making your deadline is the most important thing in the world, but it's important to consider your mental health so that you can continue making those deadlines in the future.

Finally, stand up for journalism. When those people we talked about earlier scream at you about the "awful mass media" stand up to them. Tell them why journalism is important. Show them examples of good journalism. Buy subscriptions to small papers and big papers alike. After all, at the National College Media Convention held in Dallas in October 2017, renowned broadcast journalist Bob Schieffer told me (and a room full of other student journalists) that they should not only go into journalism because it is fun, but also because it is necessary for a democracy to survive. Who am I to try to contradict Bob Schieffer?