

THE MYTH OF OBJECTIVITY:

HOW JOURNALISM GETS IN ITS OWN WAY

By Ron Sirak • @ronsirak
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In golf, there is a difference between breaking the rules and cheating. Breaking the rules is accidental; cheating is an intentional effort to gain a competitive advantage. In journalism, there is a difference between getting it wrong and telling it wrongly. One is accidental; the other is an intentional blurring of fact in an effort to appear to be fair.

In golf, there are two kinds of rules officials: Those who *have* made a mistake and those who *will*. In journalism, there are two kinds of reporters: Those who have made a mistake and those who will. But in the 60 years I've been around golf, I've never known a rules official get it deliberately wrong. And in nearly 50 years in journalism, I've never known a reporter get it deliberately wrong.

Yes, there are troubled souls like Stephen Glass or Jayson Blair who deceived their editors. And yes, in both cases institutional procedures to verify stories failed. But those

are outliers. The most valuable commodity for reporters is their reputation. There is nothing to be gained by getting it wrong – and everything to lose.

Journalism, however, gets it wrong when it pursues a mythical place called complete objectivity. Essentially, the media gets it wrong when it tries too hard to get it right. The notion that there are two sides to every story handcuffs the media. That's just not true. Some stories have three, four, five sides. They are awash in a sea of gray, adrift in ambiguity. Other stories have only one side.

Those who say the Holocaust didn't happen are simply wrong. Those who say Barack Obama was not born in the United States are wrong. Those who say tobacco is not linked to deadly health issues are wrong. Those who deny the Earth is warming are wrong. These are stories for which there are not two sides or, at least, the overwhelming body of evidence is on one side. Yet at times the media feels an obligation to give equal voice to discredited positions.

In April, Bill Nye the Science Guy said it very well in an interview with CNN on the day of the March for Science. The cable news network had Nye on with a climate change denier. Nye said that if the network wanted to accurately portray the thinking of the scientific community it would have 97 climate change believers on and 3 deniers.

But in an effort to appear to be fair, equal weight was given to a discredited position. The same was true for the five years the media kept alive the false assertion that Obama was not born in the United States.

That may have been what Obama was referring to when he spoke on March 28, 2016, at the Toner Prize for Excellence in Political Reporting. Obama made essentially the same point as Nye when he said this:

“If I say that the world is round and someone else says it's flat, that's worth reporting, but you might also want to report on a bunch of scientific evidence that seems to support the notion that the world is round. And that shouldn't be buried in paragraph five or six of the article.”

Journalism has rules. One is that, like the scientific method, someone else must be able to take the information you have and reach the same conclusion you reached. While there can be facts that are in dispute, there are no alternative facts. That is a rule. The path is the pursuit of truth.

There are also rules for the use of anonymous sources. When I was an editor on the general news desk at The

Associated Press I was taught there must be multiple sources and not a single source. There must be corroboration. Another rule is that information from an anonymous source must be factual and not opinion.

For Rex Tillerson to say that Trump is a moron is an opinion and if he said it anonymously it could not be used. But if three sources who were in the room say they heard Tillerson call Trump a moron that is factual and can be used. It attaches no validity to the assertion that Trump is a moron, only reports that his Secretary of State said it. That's news.

My experience is that the most important news decision is not *how* to cover a story but rather *what* to cover. Early in my career, I worked in what was called the alternative press. We covered the civil rights and antiwar movements, equal rights for women and gays, environmental issues, the need for tougher workplace safety rules, poisonous food additives and more – all issues we felt were under-covered in mass media. We never published untruths; we just had a different definition about what was important to cover.

As reporters, our skills are to make contacts, gain trust, probe, perform mental triage on a mountain of information, ask tough questions, extrapolate the unknown from the known then communicate what we have learned to the

public. But the most important quality is believability. There is nothing to be gained from lying, and everything to lose. Getting caught in one lie ruins a career.

Yes, reporters make mistakes. But media institutions make bigger mistakes when they fall victim to the myth of objectivity and give equal weight to all sides of a story – even the side they know to be false. That path is a disservice to the truth. In this era of fake news and at a time when untrue statements are boldly made by some in power it is more important than ever to call a lie a lie and to point out that the world is not flat.