

[Tweet](#)[Share](#)

Be the first of your friends to like this.

[View](#)

A Good Report

Les Sillars on Journalism as an Exercise of the Moral Imagination

The newsroom where I got my start in the 1990s, at a conservative newsweekly called *The Alberta Report*, loved to skewer the pretensions of establishment media. Establishment journalists saw themselves as professionals graciously bestowing their wisdom upon the unwashed masses; we saw journalism as a trade. "It's kind of like plumbing," our publisher, Link Byfield, would chuckle, "only less complicated."

That's plausible. The reporter's job is to get accurate information from *A* to *B* with no

leakage. You talk to somebody, you write down what he says, and you put it in your news story. How hard can it be, really?

Journalists themselves, being humble creatures (cough), concede that the moderately gifted can work in the field. "That awful power, the public opinion of a nation," wrote occasional journalist Mark Twain, "is created in America by a horde of ignorant, self-complacent simpletons who failed at ditching and shoemaking and fetched up in journalism on their way to the poorhouse."

But perhaps we're oversimplifying the inherently interpretive process by which people, information, and events become "news." Maybe journalism is something more than a profession. Perhaps journalism is, in a Burkean sense, an exercise of the moral imagination.

Well, talk about pretentious. To mention journalism in the same breath as the liberal arts, to suggest that news stories cranked out on deadline should and do address morality, faith, human dignity—indeed, the essence of what it means to be human—who do I think I'm kidding?

Then again, how's that "professional" approach to journalism working these days?

Conservatives and Christians have long complained about the news media's failure to meet supposed professional standards. Lately

the major media have doubled down on their liberal bias, putting out sloppy, clueless, and at times deranged coverage of religious liberty, gender issues, and President Trump. Their professional orientation, which is focused on credentials and legitimacy, encourages groupthink and arrogance. All this has left the public with the same regard for reporters as it has for lawyers and roadkill.

As for conservative and Christian news media, they mostly just reframe, analyze, or add a few details to the stories dug up by a relatively small group of national outlets. Few have the resources or the will to do much original reporting, and audiences don't see why it matters.

It does matter. The professional approach introduced useful concepts, but journalism is more than standards and practices. It requires the talents of a storyteller, a historian, a philosopher, and a theologian; it requires a love of language and a commitment to truth; it is, in short, an exercise of the moral imagination.

Professionalization & Pushback

The professionalization of the industry began in the early 1900s, partly in reaction to the sensational yellow journalism of Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. At the time, law, medicine, and other fields were forming their

own associations and training schools, and journalists longed to attain the same kind of respectability.

Some were doubtful that it could be achieved. When the University of Missouri started the first American journalism school in 1908, the editor of the Moberly *Democrat* harrumphed, "As long as men can embark in the newspaper business without education, character, brains or money, there is very little inducement to take higher courses in journalism."

But journalists persisted and eventually came up with an ideal that could serve as a professional gatekeeper: objectivity. Radical skepticism was growing in America and Europe, so, as historian Michael Schudson has observed, objectivity "was not the final expression of a belief in facts but the assertion of a method designed for a world in which even facts could not be trusted." Pundit Walter Lippmann wrote in 1929 that because news "is complex and slippery, good reporting requires the exercise of the highest scientific virtues."

Over time, journalists developed a cluster of standards, including accuracy, balance, fairness, non-partisanship, detachment, and attribution of sources, whose application would demonstrate a reporter's commitment to objectivity. To be considered reliable by the whole community, publications needed to

convey the impression of neutrality and to attain the reputation of an honest broker of information. So by the 1950s, objectivity had become a kind of shibboleth. Explicit interpretation was relegated to the op-ed page, and only "objective" reporters were allowed to write news.

In short, reflecting a naïve empiricism common in the early 1900s, the industry imported a caricature of the scientific method as an ideal way to bolster the credibility of news, and professionalization locked it into place—for a while.

Some reporters asserted that there was no such thing as "just the facts, ma'am" and pushed back. Maintaining balance and verifying sources, however admirable, do not make reporting a science. But the standard was set, and so objectivity became a veneer over the reality that almost every fact that has ever appeared in a news story has been interpreted. The appearance of bias disappears when everybody agrees upon what the facts mean, but interpretation is unavoidable.

Ask mainstream reporters today about objectivity, and most will cheerfully endorse the standards it enjoins on them. Christian journalists, too, can affirm them. Accuracy is non-negotiable. Balance helps a publication speak across cultural and political lines. Naming

sources lets the public hold them accountable. These are good things.

But ask journalists if they're telling the "truth," and many won't know how to answer. In surveys, vast majorities of respondents doubt or deny that transcendent truth exists and is knowable. For some, journalism is simply an expression of power. Consequently, support among journalists for "objectivity" has softened over the past decade to the point where a *New York Times* pundit conceded in 2016 that in covering Trump, a uniquely "dangerous" figure, reporters have chosen to "throw out the textbook."

Assistance from Burke

Christians, then, need a way to think about journalism that both affirms truth and recognizes the interpretive nature of reporting in a fallen world. Here Edmund Burke is helpful.

In explaining Burke, Russell Kirk said that the purpose of the humane letters is the expression of the moral imagination, itself long sustained by the "spirit of religion." That is, the humanities, informed by Christianity, teach us what it means to be genuinely human. According to Kirk, what Burke meant by "moral imagination" was a power of ethical perception that goes beyond "private experience and momentary events." The moral imagination

"aspires to the apprehending of right order in the soul and right order in the commonwealth."

Burke was referring to literature and art, but journalists similarly express their moral imagination, even through their accounts of "momentary events." This is so because Creation itself has a moral order. If people are to understand "their true nature, their dignity, and their place in the scheme of things," as Kirk put it, they need information about the world around them. To describe and interpret events accurately is, I submit, to acknowledge this moral order, to show how events relate to it, and thereby to help people discern right order in themselves and in society.

All journalism works this way. The question is, by *which* understanding of the moral order does a journalist interpret a given event? When, say, the *Washington Post* runs a fawning story about a gay couple renting a womb to obtain a child, it interprets the event based on particular beliefs about the nature of marriage, sex, and procreation that are favorable to the gay couple's actions. In so doing, the paper also implies that any interpretation of the moral order that would be unfavorable to the couple's actions is itself immoral.

A journalist's construal of even the briefest, seemingly least-open-to-interpretation news item will reflect his moral imagination because

we humans live and understand life as a story. The CNN editor posting a headline about President Trump's latest tweet will insinuate through that headline his own "story" about what manner of man President Trump is, which is part of his larger story about contemporary American society, which is part of his even-larger story of humanity. The reader will then use that bare-bones item to contribute to his own nested series of stories about Trump, American society, and humanity.

Journalistic "bias" reflects the reporter's understanding of humanity's story as much as it does his ideology. Most mainstream reporters, for example, write as though humans are purely material beings that evolved by chance yet somehow are progressing toward a higher, better, more just future. Events have no inherent meaning apart from the meaning society "constructs" for them, and transcendent standards of morality don't exist at all.

Christian reporters writing for Christian news outlets, in contrast, write with the knowledge that we are part of God's Story—Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration. We believe that Truth exists, that meaning resides in events themselves, and that humans can discern these meanings but not create them. This is the only story that offers a coherent explanation of good and evil (a problem central to journalism itself)

and the only story that offers hope.

Alisdair MacIntyre noted that the practice of virtue requires a context: "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" Journalism helps provide some of these stories; without them, calamity results. We are, as Burke said, cast out "from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow."

The Limits of Mere Reaction

Niche media, both conservative and liberal, tend toward opinion because talk is cheap and reporting is costly. Their audiences accept the premise that, no matter where it comes from, a fact is a fact, right? Well, it's possible to reframe factual information in helpful ways, but in the long term, can you construct an accurate picture of society by reinterpreting second-hand information gathered to support a false narrative? It's like trying to assemble a puzzle using pieces from different boxes. Worse, merely reacting to mainstream media coverage lets the media define the narrative and set the terms of public debate.

Here's an example: Most American media cover "transgenderism" in terms of political rights,

focusing on the legislative and judicial efforts on both sides, while also noting the backlash against those who defy liberal orthodoxy (that sexual identity is a construct that can be changed at will).

WORLD, a Christian newsmagazine I work for, recently had a lengthy feature looking at transgenderism from a different perspective. It focused on the damage people do to their families and themselves when they reject their biological sex. Transgenderism, said that article, is not the story of an oppressed group fighting for their rights. Rather, it is another chapter in the story of fallen humanity's tragic attempt to find fulfillment on its own terms. You can't tell that story by reinterpreting mainstream coverage; it requires original reporting.

An Opportunity Awaits

There are still some mainstream media outlets (I know a few) where Christians and conservatives could fit in, where most of the workers adhere to traditional professional standards and are willing to treat other people's understanding of the moral order with respect. While their number is getting much smaller, these outlets retain the broad credibility needed to speak across political and culture lines, hold the powerful accountable, build community, and foster public discussion. Such enterprises perform worthy functions critical to a free

society.

But given the trends, it might be better for conservative and Christian journalists and audiences to put their efforts into building and supporting news media outlets that have a moral imagination. There are challenges to doing so, certainly. New technology and other factors have seriously disrupted the news industry, and few young Christians seem inclined toward a career so widely reviled in churches and conservative circles. But with disruption comes opportunity; there has always been and will always be a market for truthful, original, and compelling news, and for talented people to produce it. The chance to make a difference is staring us in the face.

Les Sillars (author.php?id=886) teaches journalism at Patrick Henry College and is writing Radha Manickam's story, Intended for Evil, to be published by Baker Books next year.

PLEASE NOTE: If you are enjoying your *Touchstone* subscription, please consider purchasing a gift subscription for a friend or loved one. We depend on our subscribers and donors to keep publishing. Subscribers get six issues a year plus full access to the *Touchstone*

online archives —that's 30 years worth of award
winning articles!

([http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives
/subsctibe-to-touchstone.php](http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/subsctibe-to-touchstone.php))

([http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/subsctibe-to-
touchstone.php](http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/subsctibe-to-touchstone.php))

GIVE A GIFT SUBSCRIPTION
TODAY!

([http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/subsctibe-to-
touchstone.php](http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/subsctibe-to-touchstone.php))

Touchstone is published by

(<http://www.fsj.org/>)

All content © The Fellowship of St. James (<http://www.fsj.org/>) — 2018. All rights reserved.
Returns, refunds, and privacy policy. (<http://www.fsj.org/new/policies.php>)