

News Literacy Final Essay, Fall 2013

Taking sides

As long as there have been journalists, there have been debates about objectivity. The latest high-profile clash was conducted via The New York Times' website.

On one side was Bill Keller, a columnist who served as executive editor of The New York Times from 2003 to 2011. On the other side of the online debate was Glenn Greenwald, the reporter who broke one of the biggest news stories of the year: Edward Snowden's controversial revelations about the National Security Agency's surveillance efforts.

Their argument was over whether journalists should abandon any pretense of objectivity and take sides in the news stories they write.

One important voice was missing in their debate – yours.

For your final essay, read their exchange and join the debate, speaking on behalf of news consumers in a letter to the editor of the New York Times.

Which writer's model for the future of news reporting do you believe would better serve your search for actionable information? Make your case and back it up with News Literacy lessons and examples from the stories you read and discussed this semester. In their exchange, Keller and Greenwald touched on nearly all of the major course concepts we've discussed. Identify them in your essay, noting where they agreed and where you stand on the points where they disagreed.

The strongest essays will make clear why all of this matters, not just to news consumers, but to you. Remember, this is a letter from you, so don't be afraid to make it personal. Your letter must be 800 - 1,000 words and must be submitted, via Blackboard, before your final recitation.

The top essays will compete for a prize – one semester's in-state tuition – and be forwarded by Dean Schneider to Bill Keller.

We have edited the exchange between the two writers and included it in this document. You must work from this version, as we removed some extraneous issues and wish for all students use the same version.

News Literacy students: This version has been edited for the purposes of the essay assignment. Please work from this version.

The New York Times

October 27, 2013

Is Glenn Greenwald the Future of News?

By **BILL KELLER**



Glenn Greenwald broke what is probably the year's biggest news story, Edward Snowden's revelations of the vast surveillance apparatus constructed by the National Security Agency. He has also been an outspoken critic of the kind of journalism practiced at places like The New York Times, and an advocate of a more activist, more partisan kind of journalism. Earlier this month he announced he was joining a new journalistic venture, backed by eBay billionaire Pierre Omidyar, who has promised to invest \$250 million and to "throw out all the old rules." I invited Greenwald to join me in an online exchange about what, exactly, that means.

Dear Glenn,

We come at journalism from different traditions. I've spent a life working at newspapers that put a premium on aggressive but impartial reporting, that expect reporters and editors to keep their opinions to themselves unless they relocate (as I have done) to the pages clearly identified as the home of opinion. You come from a more activist tradition — first as a lawyer, then as a blogger and

columnist, and soon as part of a new, independent journalistic venture financed by the eBay founder Pierre Omidyar. Your writing proceeds from a clearly stated point of view.

In a [post](#) on Reuters this summer, media critic Jack Shafer celebrated the tradition of partisan journalism — “From Tom Paine to Glenn Greenwald” — and contrasted it with what he called “the corporatist ideal.” He didn’t explain the phrase, but I don’t think he meant it in a nice way. Henry Farrell, who blogs for The Washington Post, [wrote](#) more recently that publications like The New York Times and The Guardian “have political relationships with governments, which make them nervous about publishing (and hence validating) certain kinds of information,” and he suggested that your new project with Omidyar would represent a welcome escape from such relationships.

I find much to admire in America’s history of crusading journalists, from the pamphleteers to the muckrakers to the New Journalism of the ’60s to the best of today’s activist bloggers. At their best, their fortitude and passion have stimulated genuine reforms. I hope the coverage you led of the National Security Agency’s hyperactive surveillance will lead to some overdue accountability.

But the kind of journalism The Times and other mainstream news organizations practice — at their best — includes an awful lot to be proud of, too, revelations from Watergate to torture and secret prisons to the malfeasance of the financial industry, and including some pre-Snowden

revelations about the N.S.A.'s abuse of its authority. Journalists in this tradition have plenty of opinions, but by setting them aside to follow the facts — as a judge in court is supposed to set aside prejudices to follow the law and the evidence — they can often produce results that are more substantial and more credible. The mainstream press has had its failures — episodes of credulousness, false equivalency, sensationalism and inattention — for which we have been deservedly flogged.

Dear Bill,

There's no question that journalists at establishment media venues, certainly including The New York Times, have produced some superb reporting over the last couple of decades. I don't think anyone contends that what has become (rather recently) the standard model for a reporter — concealing one's subjective perspectives or what appears to be "opinions" — precludes good journalism.

But this model has also produced lots of atrocious journalism and some toxic habits that are weakening the profession. A journalist who is petrified of appearing to express any opinions will often steer clear of declarative sentences about what is true, opting instead for a cowardly and unhelpful "here's-what-both-sides-say-and-I-won't-resolve-the-conflicts" formulation. That rewards dishonesty on the part of political and corporate officials who know they can rely on "objective" reporters to amplify their falsehoods without challenge (i.e., reporting is reduced to "X says Y" rather than "X says Y and that's false").

Worse still, this suffocating constraint on how reporters are permitted to express themselves produces a self-neutering form of journalism that becomes as ineffectual as it is boring. A failure to call torture “torture” because government officials demand that a more pleasant euphemism be used, or lazily equating a demonstrably true assertion with a demonstrably false one, drains journalism of its passion, vibrancy, vitality and soul.

Worst of all, this model rests on a false conceit. Human beings are not objectivity-driven machines. We all intrinsically perceive and process the world through subjective prisms. What is the value in pretending otherwise?

The relevant distinction is not between journalists who have opinions and those who do not, because the latter category is mythical. The relevant distinction is between journalists who honestly disclose their subjective assumptions and political values and those who dishonestly pretend they have none or conceal them from their readers.

Moreover, all journalism is a form of activism. Every journalistic choice necessarily embraces highly subjective assumptions — cultural, political or nationalistic — and serves the interests of one faction or another. Former Bush Justice Department lawyer Jack Goldsmith in 2011 praised what he called “the patriotism of the American press,” meaning their allegiance to protecting the interests and policies of the U.S. government. That may (or may not) be

a noble thing to do, but it most definitely is not objective: it is quite subjective and classically “activist.”

But ultimately, the only real metric of journalism that should matter is accuracy and reliability. I personally think honestly disclosing rather than hiding one’s subjective values makes for more honest and trustworthy journalism. But no journalism — from the most stylistically “objective” to the most brazenly opinionated — has any real value unless it is grounded in facts, evidence, and verifiable data. The claim that overtly opinionated journalists cannot produce good journalism is every bit as invalid as the claim that the contrived form of perspective-free journalism cannot.

Dear Glenn,

I don’t think of it as reporters pretending they have no opinions. I think of it as reporters, as an occupational discipline, suspending their opinions and letting the evidence speak for itself. And it matters that this is not just an individual exercise, but an institutional discipline, with editors who are tasked to challenge writers if they have given short shrift to contrary facts or arguments readers might want to know.

The thing is, once you have publicly declared your “subjective assumptions and political values,” it’s human nature to want to defend them, and it becomes tempting to omit or minimize facts, or frame the argument, in ways that support your declared viewpoint. And some readers, knowing that you write from the left or right, will view your reporting with justified suspicion. Of course, they

may do that anyway — discounting whatever they read because it appeared in the “liberal” New York Times — but I think most readers trust us more because they sense that we have done due diligence, not just made a case.

I work now in the realm of opinion, but as a news reporter and editor I defined my job not as telling readers what I think, or telling them what they ought to think, but telling them what they needed to know to decide for themselves. You are right, of course, that sometimes the results of that process are less exciting than a hearty polemic. Sometimes fair play becomes false equivalence, or feels like euphemism. But it’s simplistic to say, for example, unless you use the word “torture” you are failing a test of courage, or covering up evil. Of course, I regard waterboarding as torture. But if a journalist gives me a vivid description of waterboarding, notes the long line of monstrous regimes that have practiced it, and then lays out the legal debate over whether it violates a specific statute or international accord, I don’t care whether he uses the word or not. I’m happy — and fully equipped — to draw my own conclusion.

If Jack Goldsmith, the former Bush administration lawyer, had praised the American press for, in your words, “their allegiance to protecting the interests and policies of the U.S. government” then I would strongly disagree with him. We have published many stories that challenged the policies and professed interests of the government. But that’s not quite what Goldsmith says. He says that The Times and other major news outlets give serious consideration to arguments that publishing something will endanger national security — that is, might get someone

killed. That is true. We listen respectfully to such claims, and then we make our own decision. If we are not convinced, we publish, sometimes over the fierce objections of the government. If we are convinced, we wait, or withhold details. So what would your policy be on publishing information that some would argue jeopardizes national security? (I realize this is not an entirely hypothetical question.) Would you even let them try to make the case?

Dear Bill,

Why would reporters who hide their opinions be less tempted by human nature to manipulate their reporting than those who are honest about their opinions? If anything, hiding one's views gives a reporter more latitude to manipulate their reporting because the reader is unaware of those hidden views and thus unable to take them into account.

It is, I believe, very hard to argue that the ostensibly "objective" tone required by large media outlets builds public trust, given the very low esteem with which the public regards those media institutions. Far more than concerns about ideological bias, the collapse of media credibility stems from things like helping the U.S. government disseminate falsehoods that led to the Iraq War and, more generally, a glaring subservience to political power: pathologies exacerbated by the reportorial ban on any making clear, declarative statements about the words and actions of political officials out of fear that one will be accused of bias.

As for taking into account dangers posed to innocent life before publishing: nobody disputes that journalists should do this. But I don't give added weight to the lives of innocent Americans as compared to the lives of innocent non-Americans, nor would I feel any special fealty to the U.S. government as opposed to other governments when deciding what to publish. When Goldsmith praised the "patriotism" of the American media, he meant that U.S. media outlets give special allegiance to the views and interests of the U.S. government.

One can, I guess, argue that this is how it should be. But whatever that mindset is, it is most certainly not "objective." It is nationalistic, subjective and activist, which is my primary point: all journalism is subjective and a form of activism even if an attempt is made to pretend that this isn't so.

I have no objection to the process whereby the White House is permitted to give input prior to the publication of sensitive secrets.

Indeed, WikiLeaks, advocates of radical transparency, went to the White House and sought guidance before publishing the Iraq and Afghanistan war logs, but the White House refused to respond, then had the temerity to criticize WikiLeaks for publishing material that it said should have been withheld. That pre-publication process is both journalistically sensible (journalists should get as much relevant information as they can before making publication decisions) and legally wise (every Espionage Act lawyer will say that such consultation can help prove

journalistic intent when publishing such material). For all the N.S.A. reporting I've done, the White House was notified by editors before the fact of publication (though in the vast, vast majority of cases, their demands that information be suppressed were disregarded due to lack of specific reasons in favor of suppression).

My objection is not to that process itself but to specific instances where it leads to the suppression of information that ought to be public. Without intended rancor, I believe that the 2004 decision of The Times to [withhold](#) the Risen/Lichtblau N.S.A. story at the request of the Bush White House was one of the most egregious of such instances, but there are plenty of [others](#).

In essence, I see the value of journalism as resting in a twofold mission: informing the public of accurate and vital information, and its unique ability to provide a truly adversarial check on those in power. Any unwritten rules that interfere with either of those two prongs are ones I see as antithetical to real journalism and ought to be disregarded.

Dear Glenn,

“Nationalistic,” your word for the “mindset” of the American press, is a label that carries some nasty freight. It is the dark side of the (equally facile) “patriotic.” It suggests blind allegiance and chauvinism. I assume you do not use it casually. And I can't casually let it stand.

The New York Times is global in its newsgathering (31 bureaus outside the U.S.), in its staffing (for starters, our

chief executive is British) and especially in its audience. But it is, from its roots, an American enterprise. That identity comes with benefits and obligations. The benefits include a constitution and culture that, compared with most of the world, favor press freedom. (That is why your editors at The Guardian have more than once sought us as partners in sensitive journalistic ventures — seeking shelter under our First Amendment from Britain’s Official Secrets Act.) The obligations include, above all, holding the government accountable when it violates our laws, betrays our values, or fails to live up to its responsibilities. We have spent considerable journalistic energy exposing corruption and oppression in other countries, but accountability begins at home.

Like any endeavor run by human beings, ours is imperfect, and sometimes we disappoint. Critics on the left, including you, were indignant to learn that we held the N.S.A. eavesdropping story for more than a year, until I was satisfied that the public interest outweighed any potential damage to national security. Critics on the right were even more furious when, in 2005, we published. Honorable people may disagree with such decisions, to publish or not to publish. But those judgments were the result of long, hard and independent calculation, a weighing of risks and responsibilities, not “fealty to the U.S. government.”

By the way, since you mention WikiLeaks, one of our principal concerns in turning those documents into news stories in 2010 was to avoid endangering innocent informants — not Americans, but dissidents, scholars, human rights advocates or ordinary civilians whose names

were mentioned in the classified cables from foreign outposts. WikiLeaks' attitude on that issue was callous indifference. New subject?

Pierre Omidyar, your new employer, thinks he has seen the future of journalism, and it looks like you. In an [NPR interview](#), Omidyar said that “trust in institutions is going down” and now “audiences want to connect with personalities.” So he is building a constellation of stars, “passion-fueled” soloists, crusading investigators. I know you don't speak for Omidyar, but I have some questions about how you see this new world.

First, it has become a cliché of our business that journalists are supposed to build themselves as individual “brands.” But journalism — especially the hardest stuff, like investigative journalism — benefits immensely from institutional support, including a technical staff that knows how to make the most of a database, editors and fact-checkers who fortify the stories, graphic designers who help make complicated subjects comprehensible and, not least, lawyers who are steeped in freedom-of-information and First Amendment law. So what's so different about the new venture? Is it just a journalistic institution by another name?

Second, in an [interview](#) you said coverage of governments and other big institutions is about to be radically changed because of the pervasiveness of digital content. Governments and businesses depend on vast troves of information. All it takes, you said, is access and a troubled conscience to create an Edward Snowden or a Bradley

Manning. But it seems to me it takes one other thing: a willingness to risk everything. Manning is serving a 35-year prison sentence for the WikiLeaks disclosures, and Snowden faces a life in exile. The same digital tools that make it easy to leak also make it hard to avoid getting caught. That's one reason, I think, the overwhelming preponderance of investigative reporting still comes for reporters who cultivate trusted sources over months or years, not from insiders who suddenly decide to entrust someone they've never met with a thumb drive full of secrets. Do you really think Snowden and Manning represent the future of investigative journalism?

Back to you.

Dear Bill,

To understand what I mean by “nationalistic,” let's examine the example we've discussed: The N.Y.T.'s non-use of the word “torture” to describe Bush-era interrogation techniques. You say that the use of this word was unnecessary because you described the techniques in detail. That's fine: but the N.Y.T. (along with other media outlets) did use the word “torture” without reservation for the same techniques — when used by countries that are adversaries of the U.S. That's what I mean by “nationalism”: making journalistic choices to comport with and advance the interests of the U.S. government.

I don't mean the term pejoratively (at least not entirely), just descriptively. It demonstrates that all journalism has a point of view and a set of interests it advances, even if efforts are made to conceal it.

On the difference between WikiLeaks and The N.Y.T.: From everything I've seen, neither Assange nor WikiLeaks has any remote desire to endanger innocent people. Quite the opposite: they have diligently attempted to redact names of innocents, and sought White House input before publishing (which was inexcusably denied). But to the broader point: even if one were to assume for the sake of argument that WikiLeaks' more aggressive transparency may occasionally result in excess disclosures (a proposition I reject), the more government-friendly posture of The N.Y.T. and similar outlets often produces quite harmful journalism of its own. It wasn't WikiLeaks that laundered false official claims about Saddam's W.M.D.'s and alliance with Al Qaeda on its front page under the guise of "news" to help start a heinous war. It isn't WikiLeaks that routinely gives [anonymity](#) to U.S. officials to allow them to spread leader-glorifying mythologies or quite toxic [smears](#) of government critics without any accountability.

It isn't WikiLeaks that [prints](#) incredibly incendiary accusations about American whistle-blowers without a shred of evidence. And it wasn't WikiLeaks that allowed the American people to re-elect George Bush while knowing, but concealing, that he was eavesdropping on them in exactly the way the criminal law prohibited.

As for the new venture we're building with Pierre Omidyar: We absolutely believe that strong, experienced editors are vital to good journalism, and intend to have plenty of those. Editors are needed to ensure the highest

level of factual accuracy, to verify key claims, and to help journalists make choices that avoid harm to innocents.

But they are not needed to impose obsolete stylistic rules, or to snuff out the unique voice and passion of the journalists, or to bar any sort of declarative statements when high-level officials prevaricate, or to mandate government-requested euphemisms in lieu of factually clear terms, or to vest official statements or official demands for suppression with superior status. In sum, editors should be there to empower and enable strong, highly factual, aggressive adversarial journalism, not to serve as roadblocks to neuter or suppress the journalism.

We intend to treat claims from the most powerful factions with skepticism, not reverence. Official assertions are our starting point to investigate, not the gospel around which we build our narratives.

With regard to sources, I really don't understand the distinction you think you're drawing between Snowden and more traditional sources.

Snowden came to journalists who work with newspapers that are among the most respected in the world. We didn't just have "thumb drives" dumped in our laps: we worked for quite a long time to build a relationship of trust and to develop a framework to enable us to report these materials. How is that any different from Daniel Ellsberg's decision to take the Pentagon Papers to The Times in the early 1970s?

All that said, you raise an interesting and important point about the dangers posed to sources. But it isn't just people like Manning and Snowden who face prosecution and long prison terms. American whistle-blowers who went to more traditional media outlets also face serious felony charges from an administration which, as your paper's former general counsel, James Goodale, has [said](#), has been more vindictive in attacking the newsgathering process than any since Richard Nixon.

And even journalists in this process, such as your paper's Pulitzer Prize-winning Jim Risen, face the very real threat of prison.

So yes: along with new privacy-enhancing technologies, I do think that brave, innovative whistle-blowers like Manning and Snowden are crucial to opening up some of this darkness and providing some sunlight. It shouldn't take extreme courage and a willingness to go to prison for decades or even life to blow the whistle on bad government acts done in secret. But it does. And that is an immense problem for democracy, one that all journalists should be united in fighting. Reclaiming basic press freedoms in the U.S. is an important impetus for our new venture.

Dear Glenn,

We agree, of course, that the current administration's affection for the Espionage Act and readiness to jail reporters who protect their sources have created a hostile climate for investigative reporting of all kinds. We agree that is deplorable and bad for democracy.

There are other things we agree on, too, but this exchange wasn't meant to be a search for common ground, so before signing off, I'd like to return once more to what I think is our most essential disagreement.

You insist that "all journalism has a point of view and a set of interests it advances, even if efforts are made to conceal it." And therefore there's no point in attempting to be impartial. (I avoid the word "objective," which suggests a mythical perfect state of truth.) Moreover, in case after case, where the mainstream media are involved, you are convinced that you, Glenn Greenwald, know what that controlling "set of interests" is. It's never anything as innocent as a sense of fair play or a determination to let the reader decide; it must be some slavish fealty to powerful political forces.

I believe that impartiality is a worthwhile aspiration in journalism, even if it is not perfectly achieved. I believe that in most cases it gets you closer to the truth, because it imposes a discipline of testing all assumptions, very much including your own. That discipline does not come naturally. I believe journalism that starts from a publicly declared predisposition is less likely to get to the truth, and less likely to be convincing to those who are not already convinced. (Exhibit A: Fox News.) And yes, writers are more likely to manipulate the evidence to support a declared point of view than one that is privately held, because pride is on the line.

I believe the need for impartial journalism is greater than it has ever been, because we live now in a world of affinity-

based media, where citizens can and do construct echo chambers of their own beliefs. It is altogether too easy to feel “informed” without ever encountering information that challenges our prejudices.

I’ll offer you the last word, and then we can leave the field to commenters, if any have made it this far.

There’s very little you’ve said about The Times in this exchange that hasn’t been said before in the pages of The Times, albeit in less loaded language. Self-criticism and correction, and I’ve had considerable experience of both, are no fun, but they are as healthy for journalism as independence and a reverence for the truth. Humility is as dear as passion. So my advice is: Learn to say, “We were wrong.”

Dear Bill,

I think there’s some semantic game-playing in how you chose to summarize our debate. My view of journalism absolutely requires both fairness and rigorous adherence to facts. But I think those values are promoted by being honest about one’s perspectives and subjective assumptions rather than donning a voice-of-god, view-from-nowhere tone that falsely implies that journalists reside above the normal viewpoints and faction-loyalties that plague the non-journalist and the dreaded “activist.”

Embedded in The New York Times’s institutional perspective and reporting methodologies are all sorts of quite debatable and subjective political and cultural assumptions about the world. And with some noble

exceptions, The Times, by design or otherwise, has long served the interests of the same set of elite and powerful factions. Its reporting is no less “activist,” subjective or opinion-driven than the new media voices it sometimes condescendingly scorns.

Thanks for the best wishes and the thought-provoking exchange. I appreciate it.