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THE POWER OF THE PEN: BUT WHO DETERMINES THE TRUTH?



By Steve Bakke  November 27, 2018

Some believe the “fake news” controversy was born during Trump’s candidacy and presidency. The fake news designation has gained favor recently, but the contention that some news reports are subtly skewed with judgements and opinions goes back much farther. Whether or not this is a significant problem, we find ourselves with this controversy facing us each day. There’s probably something to be learned from looking at some examples that might invite criticism.

I reviewed my notes from 2008 that referred to a discussion then going on among news reporters which reflected a popular sentiment that a reporter’s job properly includes making ethical judgments when deciding how to frame a report.

More recently, the Columbia Journalism Review interviewed media and communications expert Jill Geisler in September 2017. She warned that including “context” in news reports “requires exceptional skill and commitment.....be bold, but when you say it, prove it.....absent that, you are merely spouting opinion.” I’m sure some of the accusations of “fake news” are reactions to situations where that wisdom was ignored.

Here’s one example. “Poll: 1 in 4 believed Kavanaugh” – that’s the headline for an October AP news report. Included in the report’s details are these statistics: 39% of respondents believe Kavanaugh was mostly honest; a separate 25% believe he was totally honest. Those total 64%.

I’ve constructed a different headline for the same report: “Poll: almost two out of three believe Kavanaugh was substantially truthful.” The real headline implies that only a small percentage give Kavanaugh any credibility. The other acknowledges that a significant percentage believes Kavanaugh was very credible. The same facts can result in two different headlines conveying very different messages. Which headline is more likely to bring accusations of “fake news”?

Here’s another example. Following are titles for two 2016 news reports. Both appeared on the same front page of a prominent newspaper:

- “Trump deepens nuclear worries – He sows confusion, using Twitter to make provocative comments.”
- “U.S. allows resolution on Israel to pass – Abstaining from U.N. vote a break with past practice.”

These were news reports, so the titles should be factual, not editorial in nature. We shouldn't have to investigate the content to determine their accuracy. The first title gives editorial-type analysis by using subjective evaluations like “deepens worries,” “sows confusion,” and “provocative comments.” The second merely provides the facts of what was done and points out this was a change from past practice.

For the first title to be consistent with the simple factuality of the second, it could have been phrased like this: “Trump tweets reactions to Putin’s comments on nuclear weapons – here’s how folks are reacting.” The original, more judgmental title could encourage taunts of “fake news.”

We hear a lot about the migrant caravan approaching the border. Trump is sending troops to the border, and teargas was used by the border patrol to disperse rock-throwing rioters. The press is outraged. Many editorials, editorial letters, and news reports frame the U.S. actions as desperate, outrageous, and acts of cruelty to families fleeing poverty and violence in Guatemala, Honduras, and beyond. Much of the reporting focuses on the San Ysidro port of entry

Even if you object to the border patrol’s actions, if reports and opinions characterize Trump’s orders as outrageous, you should also agree that important context was omitted. I’m referring to the fact that this action is patterned after that followed by the Obama administration. In 2013, a similar but smaller attempt at storming our border was met by U.S. military troops and teargas. The Obama administration approved those actions. Might omission of this relevant information encourage accusations of “fake news”?

Powerful political leadership can breed mischief, to be sure. That also applies to a powerful group like the national media. We want the press to shine a powerful light on all truths, but some reporters personally decide what the truth is before shining their light on their selection. Those transgressors incapable of providing complete truth in the proper context, should work on shining their light on just the facts and dispense with trying to subjectively decide what the “truth” is. Like Jill Geisler advises, if reporters say it, they must prove it – otherwise it’s mere opinion.