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THE POWER OF THE PEN: WHO SHOULD DETERMINE THE TRUTH?

By Steve Bakke  March 12, 2020



The “fake news” designation has gained favor recently, but it didn’t originate during the Trump era. The contention that some news reports are subtly skewed with judgements and opinions goes back much farther. Let’s examine some potential examples of this controversy that we face every day.

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. Often, the result is to “take sides” while presenting the news.

Consider this example from an October 2018 news report. First, the headline: “Poll: 1 in 4 believed Kavanaugh.” Reading farther into the article, one encounters these statistics: 39% of respondents believe Kavanaugh was mostly honest; a separate 25% believe he was totally honest. Those total 64%. Does the headline reflect those facts?

I’ve constructed an alternative headline for the same report: “Poll: almost two out of three believe Kavanaugh was substantially truthful.” The original headline implies that only a small percentage gave Kavanaugh any credibility. My recommended version acknowledges that a significant percentage believes Kavanaugh was very credible. The same facts, represented by two different headlines, with the result being very different messages. Which headline would you consider the most accurate?

Here’s another example. Following are titles for two unrelated news reports from prominent newspapers:

- “Trump deepens nuclear worries – He sows confusion, using Twitter to make provocative comments.” Trump wasn’t yet inaugurated.
- “U.S. allows resolution on Israel to pass – Abstaining from U.N. vote a break with past practice.”

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. Titles should be

factual, not editorial in nature. We shouldn't have to search the content to be assured of accuracy. The original, more judgmental title would attract accusations of being "fake news."

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 voters are reacting."

Recall the migrant caravan that approached our southern border a couple years ago. Trump sent troops to the border, and the border patrol used tear gas to disperse rock-throwing rioters. The press was outraged. Many editorials, editorial letters, and news reports framed the U.S. actions as desperate, outrageous, and acts of cruelty to families fleeing poverty and violence.

In 2013, a similar but smaller attempt at storming our border was met by U.S. military troops and tear gas. The Obama administration approved those actions. You should at least expect to be told that this action was patterned after that followed by the Obama administration, even if you object to those actions. Could this omission of accurate and relevant information be considered "fake news"?

During the Trump impeachment trial, republicans denied the democrat request for additional witnesses. They were accused of obstructing justice. The mainstream media failed to inform us that during the Clinton impeachment trial, democrats, led by Joe Biden, took a position mirroring the 2019 republican position regarding the trial and presentation of witnesses – i.e. that neither were necessary nor required.

And finally, a headline in a major newspaper used the word "erupt" to describe the recent increase in coronavirus diagnoses in the U.S. Since the article referred to only two new diagnoses in the United States, should using the word "erupt" be considered an exaggeration?

Powerful political leadership can breed mischief, to be sure. But that also applies to powerful groups like the national media. The press should shine a powerful light on all facts, not just those things which support their bias or meet their imaginary ethical litmus tests.

The Columbia Journalism Review recently interviewed media and communications expert Jill Geisler. 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."

Some of the accusations of "fake news" are reactions to situations where Ms. Geisler's wise guidance was ignored.