

**Engaging with
the Press:
A Guide for
Perplexed
Readers and
Sources**

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Communication
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Engaging with the Press: A Guide for Perplexed Readers and Sources

By Richard J. Tofel



**HARVARD
T.H. CHAN**

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
Center for Health Communication

Foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare how little we have invested in preparing public health professionals to navigate today's media environment.

Brilliant scientific minds interviewed by the press spoke in complex, impenetrable jargon. They conveyed certainty where it was not justified. They were caught off-guard by misinformation. And they missed opportunity after opportunity to communicate how science truly works.

These communication missteps should have surprised no one. We train scientists and health professionals to collect and analyze evidence. Yet we're far less intentional about equipping them to credibly communicate it in an increasingly skeptical and fragmented world.

But make no mistake: We will find ourselves staring down the barrel of another pandemic. And next time, we must do better.

That's why in 2022 Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health rebooted its Center for Health Communication with a new focus on defining, teaching, and sharing best practice in health and science communication. And it's also why we published the booklet you are now holding, *Engaging the Press*, written by veteran news executive Richard J. (Dick) Tofel.


Communicating with and through the press is imperative for public health. But for many public health professionals it remains unfamiliar, daunting, and even downright scary.

We hope this primer is the antidote. In it, Dick demystifies how the press operates—and explains what it means to be an expert source. Its lessons are informed by Dick's decades of leadership at ProPublica and the Wall Street Journal. And its examples benefit from the wisdom of the many journalists, PR experts, and public health officials who have participated in “Engaging with the US Press,” the popular Center for Health Communication class that Dick teaches at Harvard Chan School.

In my two decades working as a science journalist, most of the experts I interviewed never had the benefit of media training or any kind of window into what it means to be a source. Many will therefore find Dick's booklet a must-read—the practical primer they need to engage with the media, rather than avoiding it.

We hope you'll keep this booklet handy as you navigate your own interactions with the press. And don't forget to visit the free online version of the book at hsph.harvard.edu/chc, where you will find

additional resources and worksheets that you can use to prepare for your next interview.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amanda Yarnell". The script is cursive and fluid.

Amanda Yarnell

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1

Introduction

I have worked in and around journalism for more than 40 years now, and I'm the sort of person who gobbles up books like *All the President's Men*, and all its worthy successors—volumes that detail, elucidate, and celebrate the relationship between reporters and their sources. You can learn a lot from those books, but they have a common perspective: they provide insight into how journalism works from the viewpoint of journalists.

After watching officials, experts, and reporters flail during the pandemic, I have been teaching a course for graduate students—mostly in public health, but also in public policy and medicine, as well as a few undergraduates—about “engaging with the press.”

The course is intended for people whose careers will likely require them to do just that, at least from time to time.

I wanted to start the reading for the course with a book that described the process from the perspective of sources. The best one (and pretty much only good one) I could find was written a half century ago. It's Leon Sigal's *Reporters and Officials*, from 1973, and it's an excellent piece of sociology, but the examples in it are all so dated as to be virtually inaccessible for many modern readers. To make things worse, it was written at a time in which women were pretty much invisible in the professional world, and the word “internet” had not yet been coined.

This is an attempt to craft a meditation about engaging with the press in our own time. And while I'm at it, my hope is to write not only for people whose jobs may entail working with reporters, but also for people who just read reporters' work and would like to better understand what lies behind and drives it.

In this, I have tried to draw some inspiration from one of my journalistic heroes, Barney Kilgore, the father of the modern Wall Street Journal, and to a considerable extent an inventor of modern journalism. I had the honor to be Kilgore's biographer (the book is called *Restless Genius*), and one of the critical lessons from Kilgore's life and work was his determination to broaden the work the Journal was doing. One way that was often summed up was to say that Journal coverage of banking should be written not only for bankers but for bank depositors—in significant measure because there are so many more of the latter. Similarly, I hope this will serve as a guide not only for those who help shape news stories, but also for those who consume them.

I come to this project with experience on both sides of these relationships. Over the course of 20 years, I was responsible for press relations for a succession of organizations, first a major public company in the news business, then a fledgling museum, next a leading institutional foundation and finally a growing national nonprofit newsroom. Along the way, I also spent 25 years (many of them overlapping) in senior roles in newsrooms, first at the Wall Street Journal, then at ProPublica. In recent years, in addition to my teaching, I have had occasion to consult on a range of matters for another 40 news organizations. All of those experiences inform what follows.

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**What motivates
the press?**

Perhaps the first thing sources—and readers— need to better understand about reporters is what motivates them. The range of motivations varies, of course, as it does for people working in any industry.

Journalism is a job, to be sure, but for most of the people who make their living at it, it is something of a calling as well. Not all journalists live up to the impulses that draw most to the field, but those impulses remain high-minded: to inform the public, to reveal facts and buttress understanding, to play a critical role in democratic governance. Journalism is the only industry specifically sanctioned in the Constitution (with its guarantee of “freedom of the press”), and the people who work in the field are very much aware of that.

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More prosaically, there are a few critical distinctions between the types of work reporters undertake, and in the incentives and rewards available to journalists. These distinctions play important motivational roles and are worth parsing here.

Specialists vs. generalists

Broadly speaking, we can divide reporters into two types, generalists and specialists. They will tend to approach the stories they write in very different ways. In either case, they may be on the staff of the publications for which they are writing or may be writing for the same publications on a freelance basis.

Traditionally, newspaper stories were predominantly written by staffers and magazine pieces most often by freelancers, but freelance reporting in all venues has grown as publications seek to shed costs.

Generalists may include reporters who regularly cover a broad range of topics, as well as those who find themselves assigned to a

particular story on a subject with which they are not familiar. They include reporters assigned to beats that generate a wide range of stories, from city rooms and general assignment desks to the White House.

As a professional source (*not* someone who is approached, for instance, as an eyewitness) dealing with a generalist reporter, it will almost always be the case that you will know more about the subject under discussion than will the reporter. That's essential to bear in mind throughout your encounter. Don't assume the reporter understands things about your discipline or area of expertise. Explain things, including jargon, acronyms or obscure or complex concepts—or avoid them if there isn't time to explain. Provide background and context when you can.

Don't hesitate to re-frame questions. White House reporters, for instance, may be inclined to view questions through a prism of politics. Thus, one of the problems in having centered the critical early public briefings on the pandemic in the White House was that they put politicians—first the President, later the Vice President—up front, and left the questioning to reporters who knew very little about medicine or public health, and a great deal about politics.

No one should be surprised that the ensuing discussion was politicized—it could hardly have been otherwise. Had the briefings been held at the CDC in Atlanta, for instance, the questioners would largely have been health reporters, and the dynamic—and likely the resulting substance—would have been entirely different. (For the same reason, but to very different effect, offering briefings on armed engagements from the Pentagon results in their focusing on military details that are the specialty of both those crafting the questions and the answers.)

Unless politics is your field as well, reframing political questions from political reporters to lay out policy considerations may better serve both your interests and the reporter's readers.

The larger the story, and especially the more it is unexpected, the more likely you are to find yourself dealing with a generalist reporter. With the emergence of the pandemic in 2020, again for instance, audiences and editors' demand for stories quickly far outstripped the supply of health reporters. The same phenomenon occurs in communities facing natural disasters or mass shootings. If you find yourself suddenly in such a situation, try to recognize this factor—that very few of the reporters involved will have much, if any, expertise in the subject—and take it into account in interacting in that moment.

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Working with a specialist reporter, one regularly assigned to a limited beat and often, after some time, fairly expert in it, can be very different. (But if you yourself are in a very specialized world, even a specialist reporter can effectively be a generalist for your purposes. Not all health reporters, for instance, will be conversant in the particulars of epidemiology or hospital administration.)

With a specialist reporter the reporting process is much more likely to be both a two-way interchange and a continuing conversation. The reporter is more likely to know things you don't, and perhaps be willing to share them, more likely to be both able and willing to challenge your opinions or even your factual assertions. They will be more likely to be readers of trade or scientific journals, more likely to know other experts. You may find it useful to share information with such a reporter about your industry or specific competitors. Within the limits of ethics and necessary confidentiality, it may even make sense to talk privately about your own agency or company.

If we look back to the most influential journalism from the pandemic year of 2020, we can clearly see the impact of specialization. Take for example Ed Yong of the Atlantic, Helen Branswell of Stat, and Caroline Chen of ProPublica. These three set the agenda for many others in the press, from charting the early missteps of the CDC to rapidly teaching the nation (including through many other journalists) a great deal about epidemiology and infectious disease. Other names may have emerged more prominently, but the regard in which these three were held can be seen in awards from the Pulitzer Prize (won by Yong, and for which Chen was a finalist) to the George Polk Award (won by Branswell).

It will be important that you don't mislead or misinform specialist reporters, not only because that's wrong, but also because they will frequently remember for the next time you encounter them—and there likely will *be* a next time. By the same token, it will tend to be more useful to shape the specialist reporter's thinking on your subject if you can. After all, they are in the business of shaping the thinking of others, who you will often want to see your field as you do.

One other thing to watch for as a source is the opposite, however, of deferring to your expertise: it is not uncommon for reporters to use expert sources to put into quotable words a conclusion the reporter has already reached. There's nothing really wrong with this: it beats the alternative of the reporter asserting the conclusion without any evident support, it provides a measure of accountability with readers for both the reporter and the chosen source, and, assuming you are being asked to say something you believe, well, fine. But try hard to resist the temptation to adjust your own views to those being sought for a story—that serves nothing, save possibly the time of a reporter who may be in too much of a hurry, and could be missing a subtle but important point. Simplify, but don't oversimplify.

Pressures on a beat reporter

As with anyone whose work you are trying to comprehend, it's useful to understand the cross-pressures under which beat reporters (those assigned for a time to confine their work to a particular subject or institution) operate. First, of course, is competition with other reporters on the beat. Reporters like to be first with accurate stories, and will be rewarded for this—and sometimes punished for lagging behind. But I referred to “cross-pressures” because competition is not the only one. In fact, as the ranks of reporters continue to shrink (which they have been for almost 20 years now), competition on many beats has lessened or even disappeared.

Even where competition remains, beat reporters often face significant pressures to cooperate with their competitors. “Pool” reports, where one reporter stands in for a group when circumstances require the group’s exclusion (for security purposes, or because a room or airplane is too small, for instance), are one common reminder of this. But less formal cooperation, from sharing documents to occasionally sharing notes or even bits of news, often occurs when reporters are in the figurative trenches together.

In dealing with people they cover, we think stereotypically of reporters holding officials, scientists, and others to account, and there is no doubt they feel the pressure of professional norms to do just that. At the same time, however, we should never underestimate the counter-pressure to curry favor with those same officials: stemming from the need to maintain access so that tomorrow’s story can be reported as well as today’s, as well as from a desire to demonstrate that accountability has not tipped over into adversarialism or partisanship.

To the extent that those on the left were frustrated by mainstream coverage of the Trump White House and Trump’s inner circle thereafter, this factor has likely been a significant source of that frustration. On one hand, Trump World has proved quite permeable, indeed “leaky;” on the other, preserving the sources that provide this information requires giving them a certain amount of voice, even as the through-line of reporters’ coverage of their activities is consistently quite skeptical and even critical. Sophisticated sources possessing essential information can exploit this tendency in reporters, even those who may be inclined to hostility.

One important factor that has changed, I think, since the days of

Reporters and Officials is a lessening of pressure for reporters covering the same story to reach an informal consensus on the significance of what is occurring, or even the facts of what has happened. There was a time, for instance, not long ago, when reporters at the Supreme Court almost all waited to see the framing of breaking stories on major cases from the Associated Press before filing their own accounts.

The high point of consensus journalism was perhaps the moment described in the book *The Boys on the Bus*, an inside account of presidential campaign coverage in 1972, which both related and lampooned how consensus in such a setting was reached. Newsweek magazine's Conventional Wisdom Watch from the 1990's, overtly charted and simultaneously sometimes punctured the imperative to consensus.

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indulge reporters whose impulse to
contrarianism goes beyond the facts.

In the face of that critique, and especially with the explosion in the number of outlets that came with digital publishing and social media, incentives at least as great exist in journalism today to engage in contrarianism, to offer “hot takes” that feature counterpoint and alternative narrative. For potential sources, this can result in a much wider range of views to which reporters might be receptive, and that they might amplify.

But again, sources should be careful not to overly indulge

reporters whose impulse to contrarianism goes beyond the facts. This poses the greatest risk in areas that are particularly subject to misinformation (dissemination of falsehoods when those circulating it don't understand that they are incorrect) or disinformation (when falsehoods are knowingly disseminated as such). The pandemic and the aftermath of the 2020 election are just two such examples in our own time.

In fact, contrarianism for its own sake is much more prevalent than it was in the last century. It is now difficult for the press to sustain a consensus even on matters on which the facts are no longer at issue, such as the safety and effectiveness of vaccines. The valuing of contrarianism in such cases can literally be set at war with matters which should be beyond dispute.

Building relationships

There are significant advantages to building relationships with reporters who may regularly cover your work or institution, whether as specialists (if you are in a particular field such as climate or infectious disease) or as generalists (if the journalist's beat aligns with your own, for instance in a public executive or legislative role). It is worth determining if there are such reporters corresponding to your own work, and to reaching out to get to know them a bit—if you are permitted to do so—even before a story arises. If you haven't done so before regular coverage begins, it's almost never too late to start.

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Reporters on beats will generally welcome [expert] contacts, assuming they have any free time at all; they need all the sources they can get.

Reporters on beats will generally welcome such contacts, assuming they have any free time at all; they need all the sources they can get. It's worth understanding how they see the boundaries of their beat, what sort of stories (in length and form) they usually write, what their substantive predispositions may be, how they see the state of your field (and your institution) and especially how you might be most useful to them. As noted above, under many circumstances, they may be delighted to begin an informal information exchange. This can be very much in a source's interest, so long as the source is authorized to share (or willing to assume the risks if not), and assuming that the reporter appears trustworthy.

Reactive vs. enterprise reporting

Another crucial distinction, often not sufficiently understood by non-journalists, stems from how most reporting comes about. A big hint can be found in the following facts: The public relations industry in the US accounts for about \$20 billion in spending and employs more than 110,000 people. Both figures are substantially larger than the equivalent numbers for journalism, which are shrinking even as PR explodes.

That is to say that most of the news you read comes about because people are clamoring for your attention, and thus for that of reporters—holding news conferences, issuing releases, engaging in PR stunts and “photo ops.” In fact, *there is much more “news” seeking attention in most situations than there are newspeople with time to report it.* Most reporters on a beat spend much of their time sifting through “news” they are being offered, trying to sort the novel from the recycled, the important from the trivial. The best of them work to distinguish longer-run trends from momentary fads, facts from spin and lies.

One result is that many reporters have a low-grade contempt for many of the public relations professionals constantly pitching them. Reporters derisively and pejoratively refer to “flacks,” and while the derivation of the word in this context isn’t entirely clear, an analogy of reporters piloting their work through persistent and pesky anti-aircraft fire (“flak,” from a much longer German word) is evocative. Unfortunately for those who engage in the necessary work of public relations with candor and self-restraint, you can expect to be met with more skepticism than may be warranted, on account of the excessive aggressiveness of others.

The internet facilitated the creation of new news organizations much more easily than previously, what economists call lowering barriers to entry. It also made it much more practicable for actors previously thought of only as newsmakers, such as industrial corporations, to also become publishers of information that can look a great deal like news. For example, in the pandemic, Pfizer not only engaged in an historic program to develop its revolutionary mRNA vaccine, it also simultaneously worked at corporate messaging at unusual, if understandable, scale. In the wake of its successful vaccine development, books on the subject quickly appeared authored by both the company’s CEO and its

chief corporate communicator.

The sheer scale of the outnumbering of journalists by those offering them news is new. But while the scale has changed, the phenomenon is hardly novel. *Reporters and Officials* noted that, 50 years ago (admittedly during the Vietnam war), the number of reporters covering the Pentagon was about one-third of the number of public information officers working there.

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A much smaller proportion of news is what people in journalism refer to as “enterprise” reporting—work that is based in the reporter’s initiative, the decision to cover a story without having first been importuned to do so. Some enterprise articles are big projects, but more are short pieces that have occurred to beat reporters who have time to think (not all do, and many don’t have as much as they used to). Or, and often, enterprise results from observations or intuition on the part of editors. One of my newsroom colleagues used to regularly note that “news is what happens to an editor.”

It's important to recognize that not all enterprise reporting is “negative,” and not all negative stories are the result of enterprise. Many “human interest” feature stories are the product of enterprise, especially in publications where editors seek a balance between levity and the darkness that so much news seems to convey. But it should be acknowledged that an inclination to pay more attention to bad news than good does stubbornly persist in the press, perhaps reflecting basic elements of human nature. A significant piece of the cause can be found in where journalists tend to look: as Max Frankel, a former New York Times top editor, once told me in words I have never forgotten, “*the locus of news is at the point of conflict.*”

Reporters raising questions of their own may ask about matters to which answers weren't being volunteered. This is something you need to anticipate—that is, that it's not always possible to duck questions, particularly when the story is one the reporter conceived on their own. The same situation can result if the story has been spurred by a competitor. Those Pfizer books, for instance, were pretty relentlessly positive—except for occasional digs at competitor Moderna. Political coverage is fueled by “messaging” from campaigns and officeholders, but, as you have doubtlessly noticed, a lot of it is derogatory, including an entire cottage industry of “opposition research” (“oppo”) designed to reveal the shortcomings of opponents.

The special case of investigative reporting

Investigative reporting, of which there is much less than you might think, is a special subset of enterprise journalism. ProPublica, where I ran the business side for 14 years, has, at this point, by far the largest investigative staff of any US news organization, but even it employs, directly and indirectly, fewer than 100 reporters. My own guess is that there are probably fewer than 2,000 journalists (including both reporters, editors and others) in the

country engaged in true investigative work at any one time. As discussed below, the significant expense of this sort of work has resulted in many fewer outlets undertaking it than did when the press was generally more profitable.

The best definition of investigative reporting that I have ever heard is that it focuses on something that some individual or organization in a position of power is trying to keep secret, and that the public needs to know. That is, it is precisely the opposite of most reporting, which, as we have seen, is about bringing to wider attention something for which people, often those with one or another sort of power, are seeking notice.

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The best definition of investigative reporting that I have ever heard is that it focuses on something that some individual or organization in a position of power is trying to keep secret, and that the public needs to know.

Thus, reporting material which is intentionally leaked by those in power, even if the substance is officially supposed to remain secret, is not investigative. But there is a fine line here, and Watergate may provide an instructive example. In that scandal, much of the material first reported by the Washington Post, and eventually resulting in President Nixon's resignation, turns out to have come from the FBI. Had the FBI director, looking to protect his agency, approached reporters Woodward and Bernstein and volunteered to be their Watergate source, the resulting reporting

might not have been deemed investigative, just as leaks of grand jury material by prosecutors are not, even though such leaks constitute a crime. Instead, the deputy FBI director, without authorization and acting for more personal motives, acted as the source known as “Deep Throat.” Eliciting information from him was classic investigative work.

Whether to engage with investigative reporters is a complicated question, highly dependent on the situation. But I do believe, based on many years of experience in the field, that, once you are confronted with reporting that has already uncovered significant material, even if highly embarrassing—and even if whoever provided the material to the journalists was acting in breach of important duties or illegally—you will be better off answering questions. Providing any response that might limit the damage will likely put you in a better position than stonewalling.

The audience of journalists

It's very important not to underestimate how much journalists write with an eye to how their work will be received by other journalists. The field is self-regarding to a fault, and routinely, almost reflexively, overestimates the importance of its own sphere. I think it's safe to say that no industry anywhere nearly as small as journalism receives the same volume of news coverage.

Beyond the fact that it's therefore easier to make news about the news than about almost anything else, there are several other implications to journalistic self-regard. First is that outlets for

news favored by reporters tend to have outsized importance in setting the news agenda for society. This was a significant element in why Twitter enjoyed a prominence out of scale to its user base: reporters were early adopters and heavy users of the service. It is also a big part of why the New York Times has long been the country's most influential news outlet, from the way in which its front page affected the lineups for the evening television news shows in their heyday to the amplification of "breaking news" from the Times on cable news and social media today (even when the news was earlier reported elsewhere).

Another aspect of why you should care about journalists writing for other journalists is rooted in the process by which journalism awards are determined. First, journalism awards are often handed out by other journalists, not by readers or those covered by reporters. Indeed, the best general news organizations have generally refused to apply for or accept awards determined by anyone other than fellow journalists. It's as if Hollywood not only glorified the Oscars, but also refused to participate in the Golden Globes or People's Choice Awards.

One salutary result is that journalism is probably much better at self-policing than any other profession. More attention is paid to individual and institutional shortcomings, and there is much greater willingness for those in one newsroom to call out problems at another publicly than in, for instance, medicine or law. To be sure, the industry's record on this is far from perfect.

Other salient facts about journalism awards include that most are organized on a calendar year schedule, which is why you see so many important series conclude in the waning days of December, even as many readers have begun tuning out for the holidays. Most highly prized in the journalism awards industrial complex are

evocative writing, ambitious scope, important news breaks (“scoops”) and “impact,” usually defined as real-world reform.

Most of these factors line up well with the interests of civically minded citizens, which is reassuring. But less salutary is the flip side: work is often disfavored because it is less likely to prove award-worthy. This includes a disinclination to revisit ground that has been plowed before by other journalists, even if the identified problems persist, as well as a tendency not to pursue running stories, even if important, on which other newsrooms have established a head start. The lack of press attention to the endurance of the opioid addiction crisis in this country, long after it was first spotlighted, may be an example of this phenomenon.

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The bias toward bad news, or at least news at the point of conflict, can also lead to overlooking longer term trends which are positive, even while focusing on those that are not. For instance, popular awareness of how much was achieved in the first 15 years of this century on the UN’s Millenium Development Goals is probably much lower than it should be, in large part as a consequence of limited sustained press attention to accomplishments such as halving the rate of child mortality, nearly halving the rates of childhood hunger and maternal mortality, reducing malaria infections by 30%, HIV by almost 40% and measles by 75%. Journalism is simply better at telling stories of glasses one-quarter empty than of glasses three-quarters full.

The audience of readers

Writers write for readers, of course, as well as for other writers. One of the most significant things you can hope to know as a source is who a reporter thinks their readers are. This is so especially because, over time, news organizations tend to respond to what they think their readers want to know.

This has several implications. Unless a news organization is just beginning, reporters and editors who work there will largely take the composition of the audience as a given. In newer publications, of course, the audience may be selected (or at least targeted) more intentionally.

The simplest factor in serving an audience of readers is supply meeting demand—trying to tell readers about things reporters and editors think those readers will find important or just interesting. To the extent you can understand and anticipate these perceptions, you will likely find what you have to say slotting into news coverage much more easily, and more often. The upshot: there is no substitute, whenever possible, for reading the recent work of a reporter before you talk to them, nor for being familiar with the coverage of a publication or program before you interact with their reporter or producer.

Locally, for instance, do a newsroom’s leaders regard the inner city or the suburbs as its core audience? Does it think of its readers as sophisticated and well-informed, or less well educated and in need of having matters simplified? The answers to these questions should guide your own approach if you want to engage effectively.

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As a source of news, it also goes beyond that. News organizations, for similar reasons, tend to avoid stories they think their readers will find uninteresting or unimportant, so the burden may be on you to make at least a preliminary showing of why your perspective on something matters to the readers the publication is trying to reach. As my friend Nancy Gibbs, once the top editor at Time Magazine and now director of the Shorenstein Center at Harvard’s Kennedy School, says, “stories are stickier than facts,”

so a great advantage will attach to sources who can be effective storytellers.

Increasingly, I am afraid, news organizations are also reluctant to confront readers (or viewers) with news they think they won't like, especially that bearing on our polarized politics. I was very disappointed, for instance, when writing a largely positive book review of a memoir from an author whose time in public life had left them widely unpopular. The editor—forthrightly, at least—resisted some of the praise in my draft on the grounds that “our readers just aren't prepared for that view” of the author. This effect has, almost without doubt, become more pronounced as many news organizations have become more dependent on subscription revenues.

3

**What motivates
editors?**

Reporters do not generally assign their own stories; that is most often the province of editors, who will usually be invisible to sources. Because editors are usually the initiators of what gets covered, and shape how stories appear, it is critical to understand their motivations as well. Again, they are as varied as the human beings who occupy these roles, but a few common factors are often at play.

Competition

Once upon a time, before the secular (as opposed to cyclical) business crisis of the press that began about 2005, competition—the need to get stories, or elements of them, before other news outlets—drove much of journalism. As the business crisis has intensified, this is true in fewer precincts of the press. It remains a driver in national news, including of politics and entertainment, as well as in business news. But in much of local news, and even in some subject matter “verticals” focused on a particular subject or industry, competition is less of a factor because there is simply less of it—fewer outlets, fewer beats with multiple reporters, less pressure to report quickly or even completely.

Timeliness and scale

Notwithstanding a lessening of competition in many places and niches, timeliness remains a principal driver of news reporting. As a reader, you have been conditioned to expect this: news is novel, or should be to you, unless you were personally involved in it, in which case you will have been aware of it before you read the “news.” As a source, of course, that will be reversed: if you have been consulted before the news is published, by definition it must not be entirely news to you.

But the novelty of news is deemed by editors to be a primary factor in what attracts consumers: surprise. The greater the surprise, generally, the bigger the news. (Bob Woodward of the Washington Post once famously defined the most important stories as those which caused a reader to exclaim, “Holy Shit!”) This is where timeliness comes in: the more timely the report, the greater the chance of surprise; that is, other sources will not have already delivered the same news. To the extent you are seeking attention for some development, you enhance your chances if you can cast it as a surprise. Conversely, one technique which can be effective in limiting coverage is to convince the reporter that the “news” isn’t really new.

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The novelty of news is deemed by editors to be a primary factor in what attracts consumers: surprise. The greater the surprise, generally, the bigger the news.

At a high level, the second factor in determining the relative importance of news, beyond surprise, might be termed scale: how widespread editors deem its impact to be. Thus, for instance, the unexpected death of a little-known person is surely news, but the unexpected death of a celebrity, known and of interest to many people, is news on a larger scale. Incremental news about treatments for diseases which occur widely will tend to be deemed “bigger” even than developments which are of larger magnitude with respect to diseases which are rare.

Brief philosophical digression: news has a very interesting

relationship to history. I write a newsletter about journalism called “Second Rough Draft.” The name is a reference to a set of quotations referring, more or less, to news as the “first rough draft of history.”

Much news reporting is structured as such a “first draft,” and readers of history will be familiar with how historical writing about the last two centuries—that is since the creation of what we know as journalism—tends to draw heavily on contemporary news accounts, at least for insights into how events were widely perceived at the time they were occurring. One of the reasons I find that history can be so fascinating is that access to a wider range of sources than journalists may have enjoyed at the time often reveals how flawed or limited those contemporary perceptions may have been. Journalists, for instance, cannot usually read the diaries of public people; historians often can.

Beyond this, perhaps the greatest insight of my journalistic hero Barney Kilgore may have been that many people, in many circumstances, are actually looking to the news of yesterday for insights into what is going to happen *tomorrow*. The two best examples of Kilgore’s approach can be found in the lead stories of his *Journal* published after two momentous events, Pearl Harbor and John Kennedy’s assassination. On December 8, 1941, the *Journal*’s headline story began not with an account of events in Hawaii, but with this: “War with Japan means industrial revolution in the United States.” On Monday, November 25, 1963, the lead *Journal* story was not about the weekend’s events in Dallas but instead began this way: “The Administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson will be vastly different in style and method of operation from that of the late President John F. Kennedy. But it will be surprisingly similar in basic direction.”

This leaning forward is the essence of business journalism (“what should I buy or sell today?”), but it is a motivation for both editors and readers that extends well beyond business (e.g. “who seems likely to win this election and what difference will it make?” “when will the pandemic be truly over?”). News and history thus become more than a continuum; to a meaningful degree, they interact with one another, and become iterative.

Mission

In considering the motivations of editors who choose which stories to cover, you don't want to overlook what a publication considers to be its mission. Here it will be useful, although not entirely dispositive, to distinguish between for-profit and nonprofit news organizations, as outlined in greater detail below.

However, there has historically been a significant tension between how editors think about the mission of their publication and how their business bosses view the same issue. The mission of the New York Times Co., for instance, is legally mandated as maximizing

shareholder value over the long run, but Times editors invariably resonate more to the mottoes of “All the News That’s Fit to Print” and doing so “without fear or favor.” A similar impetus prevails in almost all newsrooms, although greater sympathy has arisen for business goals in recent decades, especially in places where the business crisis has become existential. Just as Samuel Johnson said the prospect of hanging “concentrates the mind wonderfully,” so with the prospect of layoffs.

Craft

It is possible, and useful, to make another distinction between kinds of news organizations, the literary vs. the practical. In practice, this is more a continuum than a binary, but, especially today, there are relatively few outlets that put a premium on the literary qualities of their prose, while the majority are simply trying to convey material clearly. The principal upshot of undertaking a literary approach comes in the painstaking effort to locate the powerful anecdote or the perfectly illustrative human subject—as well as the willingness to take the time to do so. Literary journalism simply costs more to produce.

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It becomes worthwhile to think about what you are wearing when dealing with a reporter, your manner of speech, what any office or home the reporter sees looks like, what happens before, after, or during breaks in your formal conversation—and what all of that says to an observer.

For sources, it will be important to understand where an outlet (and a writer) is positioned on this continuum, primarily as a means of determining the depth with which they are likely to explore the characters who populate their reporting. Should you find yourself or someone you represent becoming such a “character,” you will want to take special care in the details you convey, both consciously and perhaps unconsciously (in terms of your surroundings, behavior, and activities), so as to shape the portrait along favorable lines. In this unusual circumstance, for instance, it becomes worthwhile to think about what you are wearing when dealing with a reporter, your manner of speech, what any office or home the reporter sees looks like, what happens before, after, or during breaks in your formal conversation—and what all of that says to an observer.

Space and time

In the days of print newspapers and magazines, the limited physical size of the products (the “news hole”) was a hugely significant factor in the articles that were produced. It was common (and remains so to the extent these periodicals persist) for editors to order up a fixed number of words on a particular subject. This, in turn, drove the depth into which an article could get on a subject, and the appetite of the assigned reporter for shorter or longer quotes—or no quotes at all.

In the world of digital publishing, the length of stories is not nearly

as tightly prescribed—the art of “fitting to space” is much less of a factor. On the other hand, editors now have much more information than they once did on what readers actually consume, and one big thing they have learned for a fact is how few readers read stories to completion and how short (and continuing to shorten) reader attention spans actually are. Along with reporter productivity pressures in an industry under duress, the net effect is that while online stories could run longer, they increasingly do not. Longer, narrative-driven works are an exception; the same analytic tools indicate that for the rare piece that is especially well-crafted, longform journalism is very much alive and well.

The implication for sources is that reporters, much of the time, will appear to be in a hurry, and often impatient with overlong explanations or digressions. It is important to get to your point as promptly as possible, and to answer questions directly and succinctly if feasible.

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On broadcast radio and television, the tyranny of the clock, a different sort of fixed “news hole,” remains very much in place. In most cases, this means that “soundbites” are the order of the day when you are being interviewed. As with so many other aspects of engaging with the press, some familiarity with how a particular broadcast tends to work will be useful in tailoring the length of responses to questions. Some podcasts (and a very few interview shows) will be exceptions, offering the audio analogue to longform

print in welcoming more discursive answers and a truer sense of conversation.

Cost

It would be naïve, especially as the business crisis of the press grinds on, for us not to recognize that the cost of doing a particular story is one of the considerations in the minds of an editor. At the extreme—for instance, in war zones where the expense of security for reporters can be enormous—even the wealthiest publishers find their work constrained in this manner.

On a more workaday basis, some types of reporting are, by their nature, simply more expensive than others. Investigative reporting is especially costly, for two reasons: first, not all stories that are begun yield publishable results; this is the cost of “dry holes,”

analogous to oil drilling. Next is that it's often hard to predict how long investigative reporting will take, or what scope it will assume. In a genuine investigation, you simply do not know where the facts you learn will lead you.

The investigation of apparent euthanasia at a hospital in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina conducted by reporter Sheri Fink was initially published by ProPublica and the New York Times Magazine. It was honored with ProPublica's first Pulitzer Prize. It took literally years of work, first by Fink but then also by her editors, and we publicly estimated that it had cost ProPublica and the Times more than \$400,000 (in 2009 dollars) to execute. Multi-reporter projects of significant duration can cost even more.

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If readers find that stories are growing shorter and less detailed, shorter reader attention spans are one factor, but cost may well be another.

At the other end of the spectrum, deadline reporting of announcements, and science stories that simply report a new research result, to take two examples, are predictably limited in time and in the effort required; costs, at least on a per-story basis, are relatively low.

To the extent that higher cost stories yield greater readership, or garner prizes or otherwise build a news brand, editors may be willing to pay. But the greater the pressure on budgets, the stronger the impulse to concentrate efforts on lower cost means of

generating content. If sources find that reporters are in a hurry, even on matters that do not involve breaking news, this is often one explanation; they are under pressure to get to the next story. If readers find that stories are growing shorter and less detailed, shorter reader attention spans are one factor, but cost may well be another.

4

**What motivates
publishers?**

When people used to complain about stories we had published at news organizations where I worked, the phrase that most easily garnered my silent contempt was that we had published the story “to sell newspapers” or later to “generate clicks.” That’s because this critique, which seemingly harks back to an image of the press shaped in the era of “Citizen Kane,” almost never reflects why stories are published, at least by quality news organizations. Even the tabloid headlines (“Headless Body in Topless Bar” is the classic) that once marked an entire class of publications have faded in both prevalence and significance as the physical newsstands on which they were designed to stand out have disappeared.

When considering the actual motivations of publishers (as distinct from editors), we need to broadly distinguish between those organized with the intention to make a profit and the (mostly) newer nonprofits.

At for-profits, which used to comprise almost the entirety of the press, but no longer do, the ostensible mission is to maximize profits over the long run. That almost always depends on attracting as many loyal readers as possible, either for sustainable subscription revenues or to in turn attract advertisers, or both. But note the words “long run” and “loyal.” Even those most committed to the profit motive will see their mission in terms of brand-building more than sensationalizing or scoring small “scoops” (unless sensation lies close to the heart of their brand, as at some tabloids, or when rapidity of publication is at the heart of the brand, as with all wire services and many business publications).

Nonprofit news organizations have a more coherent view of mission. But their missions differ more widely from one to

another. Some seek to generally inform the community, others to engage it, others to elucidate a particular field (sometimes with eye to advocating for a point of view), yet others to reform society. Someone interacting with one of these newsrooms needs to understand the intentions of the organization, both as an aid to understanding what their interests are likely to be, and as a means of shaping the information a source can provide and the form in which it is provided.

All that said, nonprofits still need to be run as businesses, because they need, at the least, to break even-- with current revenues, including any contributions from endowments or reserves, at least equaling current costs. Better-run nonprofits bear this in mind; those that do not generally fail to be sustainable.

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When considering the actual motivations of publishers (as distinct from editors), we need to broadly distinguish between those organized with the intention to make a profit and the (mostly) newer nonprofits.

Because of these considerations, all news organizations need to be, and are, conscious of revenues, and both readers and sources will be well served by understanding the most important revenue streams that fuel the news. There are many such streams possible, but in the news business today, three are most significant, and each is worth considering in turn.

Advertising

For many legacy news organizations—most newspapers and almost all magazines in print, as well as broadcast television and radio—and for online for-profit sources without a paywall, the most significant source of revenue remains advertising. For nearly all other newsrooms, advertising is one source of revenue, even if not a focus.

This century's business crisis of the press, in the simplest terms, was caused by the fact that the enormous scale of online platforms put them in a position to offer more targeted advertising at lower prices than publishers could hope to provide. Advertising was thus increasingly driven online, *and away from news*, with Facebook, Google and Amazon the winners, and news the loser. At the same time, some older forms of advertising, particularly print classified, were supplanted altogether by digital offerings such as Craigslist.

What remains of advertising sold by news organizations is heavily dependent on the number of readers the news products can attract. In print, that audience has been steadily shrinking throughout this century, and print advertising is in the process of disappearing—more quickly at the national level than locally, but steadily nonetheless, and more rapidly in times of economic distress.

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Online, advertising requires traffic to be effective, and the greatest pressure to amass a large audience is felt by those news organizations most heavily dependent on advertising (which may also be termed “sponsorship” or sometimes even “branded content”). Unfortunately, one common way to attract more traffic

—“page views” or “unique visitors” to a site—is simply to produce more stories, which may leave reporters frequently rushed, as noted earlier. It is not uncommon for reporters in such newsrooms to feel and behave as if they are riding a hamster wheel.

Of course, not all traffic is created equal in advertising terms. Wealthier and more niche audiences (by interest or locale) may be more highly prized by advertisers, and news organizations for whom advertising remains a key revenue source will tend to focus as well on *who* their readers are, as well as on how many of them they have attracted. Understanding this pressure may be a part of realizing which readers a newsroom you are talking to (or reading) is trying to reach.

Having said all of that, advertising is declining as a source of revenue for newsrooms, and the most commercially successful depend on it far less than previously. At the New York Times Co., for instance, reader revenues were almost three times that from advertisers by 2022.

Readers

Revenue from readers and viewers has always been a staple for news organizations in print (subscriptions and single-copy sales) and on cable television (indirectly, through cable fees). But with the advent of the internet, reader revenue has become a much more important factor, in a number of ways.

First, after what I regard as significant business mistakes in the mid-1990's when almost everyone rushed to give away online

content, almost all for-profit news organizations have come to see that online subscription revenue is both an opportunity and a necessity, especially as advertising fades. In the case of the healthiest and highest quality newsrooms, subscription revenues have fairly quickly succeeded advertising as the leading revenue source. As noted earlier, subscription models put a premium on reader loyalty—and thus on the sorts of continuing coverage, and individual stories, that yield such loyalty.

Single copy sales, unfortunately, have all but disappeared with the newsstands that used to make them possible. This has had a particularly dramatic effect on most magazines, the covers and overall editorial design of which were intended, in significant part, to generate such sales.

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Revenue from readers also intrinsically, I think, orients the press toward serving the wealthy (who can afford a subscription or a larger donation) and away from the poor (who cannot).

For nonprofit news organizations, of course, donations from readers comprise an important source of revenue. In most cases, the money brought in from larger donors—both wealthy people and institutional foundations—are a larger piece of the revenue pie, but reader contributions (often characterized as “membership”) are meaningful, especially because, like subscriptions, they tend to be recurring—and thus, again, to hinge on loyalty.

Revenue from readers also intrinsically, I think, orients the press toward serving the wealthy (who can afford a subscription or a larger donation) and away from the poor (who cannot). This is a consequence of the tendency, noted earlier, for journalists to write, over the long term, for the people who read them. The trend is evident, I believe, in coverage of culture, real estate, personal finance, even in the sorts of health concerns that receive the bulk of attention (more on diseases which plague the privileged, less on those concentrated among the poor or less well educated). All of this is a serious societal problem, in my view, and one not yet sufficiently recognized.

Events

Another source of revenue is based on the power of publications to convene communities with live “events.” This has proven important in recent years for such outlets as the New Yorker, the Atlantic, and the Texas Tribune. Even so, the most successful events businesses (SXSW, the Aspen Ideas Festival, those produced by any number of industry shows, universities, and think tanks) are not journalistic, and successful newsrooms, such as the New York Times, have not been able to meaningfully establish a presence in the events business, despite concerted efforts. Within

journalism, the most successful events initiatives have centered on business concerns, often in niche “verticals.”

For sources, events businesses hold out the prospect, and the complications, of potentially becoming, in an even more direct manner than heretofore, part of the “product” the press is selling access to. The resulting coziness can be useful and may provide some sources with additional leverage with news organizations covering them, even as the ethical considerations for journalists can be fraught.

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Try very hard to resist the temptation to decry coverage you don’t like as resulting from a desire to sell advertising or subscriptions or curry favor with donors. Few things anger reporters and editors more, especially because the accusations are quite unlikely to be true.

Having said all of this, it is not only simplistic but also naïve and usually insulting to believe, and especially to assert, that reporters and editors bend their daily coverage to the economic interests of publishers. This rarely happens in practice and is strongly discouraged by the unusual ethic of news organizations that limits the influence of publishers on the work of newsrooms that nominally report to them. Try very hard to resist the temptation to decry coverage you don’t like as resulting from a desire to sell advertising or subscriptions or curry favor with donors. Few things

anger reporters and editors more, especially because the accusations are quite unlikely to be true. When business pressures to behave this way occur, journalists have been known to quit, sometimes noisily.

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**How a source's
material is
presented—and
received**

If you are a source for journalism, you'll want to consider how the material you provide to the press will be presented, and therefore how it will be received. This implicates each level of what we might call the Pyramid of Presentation, which, at the base, is the publication or broadcast with which you're engaging, but narrows, successively, to the package of stories or series (if any) within which the reporting is presented, then further to the atomic unit of the story, and finally to snippets or sound bites of what you might offer, which can take on a life of their own.

One of the themes of this exposition has been that you should, if at all possible, endeavor to be familiar with any publication or broadcast before you talk to them. One reason for this is that, in rare circumstances, you may want to rule out cooperating with some outlets altogether. As noted below, that will particularly make sense in cases where you have reason to doubt their accuracy, or their reliability in fulfilling source agreements.

It doesn't make sense, at least in my view, to decline to speak with a publication or broadcast just because you disagree with its general editorial line, or even because you don't think a piece of reporting they are pursuing is newsworthy. Indeed, in our polarized society—and absent concerns about accuracy and reliability—it may be especially valuable to respond to inquiries where you do disagree with the approach. If your input is being solicited in these circumstances, it could prove particularly influential. Pete Buttigieg, for instance, both as a Democratic presidential candidate and more recently as Secretary of Transportation, has made repeated appearances in the hostile environment of Fox News, with significant positive results both for him personally and for policies he was championing.

As we progress down the Pyramid of Presentation, your questions for those who would question you should become more detailed. If the article in process is part of some larger effort, such as a package or series, it would be helpful to know that, especially in cases where part of the undertaking has already been published.

I referred to the story itself as the “atomic unit” earlier because this is a critical aspect of journalism today. With search, social media, and now increasingly AI, articles are often retrieved and consumed apart from the publication of which they are an element. This is one of the most important changes that the digital era has brought to journalism. On the one hand, as noted earlier, you will want to be aware of the larger context that has caused the piece to be written. But on the other, you will want to understand clearly that many readers will experience the journalist’s work—and your contributions to it—shorn of that context.

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The snippet or sound bite is the extreme result of this process of disaggregation. While there will always be a risk of being quoted out of context, both in a full story and in any excerpt of it (including both a full and a partial quotation), there are steps you

can take to limit this risk. First and most simply, try to speak in full sentences if you can. Next, if a reporter asks to record an interview (and many good ones will), unless you know and trust them, it is good practice, when you readily can, to also record it yourself. Finally, again absent both familiarity and trust with the interviewer, try to resist the colorful phrase or clever riposte that almost begs to end up floating off on its own into the digital ether.

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Problems for readers

Most of the above has been directed to sources and potential sources of news, although I hope all of it is also relevant to readers who want to be alert to material they are consuming. Before concluding, it seems worthwhile to take up a few remaining issues, first of special interest to readers, then, finally, some last thoughts for sources.

Accuracy

Everyone makes mistakes; humans are fallible, and journalists are human. So it's not reasonable to expect that reporting will be flawless, and the more you know about something which is the subject of journalism, the more likely you are to spot errors in the news. This shouldn't make you cynical about journalism. The phenomenon is no different from how experienced chefs will find more flaws in meals they eat, or how athletes see details at sporting events that most who haven't played at a high level will miss.

That said, it is almost certainly the case that the rate of errors in journalism is increasing. Traditionally, newspaper reporters generally did their own fact-checking, while better magazines employed separate fact-checking staffs. But most jobs dedicated to fact-checking and copy-editing have been eliminated, and shorter deadlines and an increased pace of publishing create smaller margins for error—and thus more errors.

Beyond simple fallibility, my friend and former Wall Street Journal colleague Steve Adler, who served at various times as the top editor at the American Lawyer, BusinessWeek and Reuters and now teaches journalistic ethics, identifies five other relatively common sources of mistake: a wish to believe, or the failure to shake a preconception; a desire to “improve” a story by exaggerating it; haste in reporting; being led into error by sources, particularly when two or more offer similar but inaccurate accounts, often when the reporter incorrectly believes the sources are independent of one another; and intentional deception by a source.

Clearly, therefore, not all mistakes are created equal, and how newsrooms respond to making them can tell you a great deal about how you should approach their work.

In this sense, I see published corrections as reassuring, and am more inclined to trust reporting from an outfit that both readily corrects its work and makes the correction easily accessible. Best practice is to correct any error of fact, no matter how trivial, upon request, even if it’s misspelling a name or transposing a number. Online, stories that have been corrected should be revised to reflect the correct information but also to note that they were previously inaccurate.

In the most egregious cases, a corrective story may be in order. I think it serves no one, and is Orwellian, for stories to be unpublished once they have been posted. Leaving a record of errors, even while clearly signaling new readers to beware, is good discipline for journalists. I am therefore not a fan of “retracting” stories—or demanding the same—as I think the term is so imprecise as to be largely meaningless.

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Organizations that make a practice of not correcting errors—something that unfortunately long ago became more or less standard in broadcast television and radio news and has more recently become common practice for some ideologically oriented sites—deserve to have their offerings discounted somewhat. Do you think, for instance, that the evening network television news shows never err? Of course not; they just very rarely correct their errors. Try to “hear” the “dog that didn’t bark,” the missing mechanisms for correcting journalism.

Having said all of that, whether to seek a correction if you notice an error is a complex question. Most reporters, not surprisingly, don’t enjoy the process that correction requests at better news organizations tend to trigger. Such processes can be time-consuming, and any unusual number of mistakes can hurt a reporter professionally.

Importantly, requests to “correct” what a reader or source regards as a faulty interpretation, or material that has been omitted from a story is likely to receive an even colder reception. Correction sections are for mistakes of fact, not a place to vindicate alternative approaches that might have been taken to an article—no matter how strongly felt, or even how widely held.

Understanding the possible cost to the reporter, if a factual mistake has been made on an important point, or even just one that is likely to be the subject of continuing coverage, it’s worth pointing out and seeking to have it corrected. Do so promptly, as the willingness to make corrections tends to diminish once a good bit of time has passed. Stories published months, no less years, ago are almost never corrected. Journalists see that as a role for history.

Be prepared to demonstrate support for what you are asserting. If a name has been misspelled, do say so—in a world of Google and now generative AI it makes more difference than it might have before that. If a story is riddled with factual mistakes (this is rare), that may be worth raising directly with editors, who should want to know.

If you think you have been misquoted, that may also be worth raising, but unless you were taping the conversation, I would recommend doing this with some modesty in tone—reporters are unlikely to correct quotes reflected in the notes most take on conversations, and very few people (including reporters) can take good notes on what they themselves are saying. If you feel strongly that the words attributed to you need clarification or amplification, letters to the editor or online comments, where available, are far less confrontational.

Fairness

If you don't work in journalism, you probably have never read much about most of the things covered here. Fairness in journalism is the exception—it's discussed constantly, at great length, and often in heated tones, both in public life generally and inside journalism itself. This doesn't seem like a place to get dragged into those debates.

Having said that, readers should insist on fairness from their news sources. If you find an outlet consistently unfair, unless you're consuming it for meta purposes ("I wonder what XYZ is saying

about this?”), it’s probably not worth your time. That’s because if a news article isn’t fairly reported and edited, you can’t know what’s being left out, and your objective of informing yourself is defeated.

How can you tell if something is fair? It’s complicated, of course, but here are a few basics: First, the people whose activities are being described should be given a chance to comment. The most basic reason for this is one we all see in our own lives: things are not always as they initially appear. Asking for comment is the simplest and surest way to enhance accuracy. Failing to ask, or asking in a pro forma way but not allowing a reasonable time to respond, is sloppy as well as unfair.

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Fairness is not neutrality precisely because facts are not neutral.

On the other hand, fairness does not dictate always setting forth two or more sides with respect to every assertion. The world is round, rather than flat. Fairness does NOT dictate giving equal time, or indeed any time, to flat-Earthers. Nor are such matters susceptible to public opinion polls. If flat-Earthism suddenly experienced a popular revival, and became the belief of 30% or even 51% of the people, that would still be no reason to accompany each description of the Earth being round with a response. Fairness is not neutrality precisely because facts are not neutral.

Sophistication

The levels of complexity and insight at which stories are written vary, not only by publication, but sometimes within a publication. You shouldn't be surprised by this but will want to take it into account in evaluating an article (or a publication as a whole). Some stories will be more comprehensive than others, some will focus on a particular incident or instance. Some will place events or trends in a larger context, some will fail to note this (or actually be crafted in ignorance of it).

Mostly, this will reflect editorial choices and a given publication's style. Particularly with a running story over days or weeks, some publications will tend to rehearse the story's evolution for new readers, others will assume this knowledge and limit themselves to what is truly new. Some reporters—especially specialists with substantial experience—will look to link seemingly disparate events, to draw connections in the ways that only those with deep understanding can. Others will lack the space or time or knowledge to do so.

In a perfect world, what you are reading would be tailored to what you already know, the depth of your interest and the amount of time you can devote to a story. We do not—at least not yet—live in such a world. You should be aware of this, and try to choose your news sources with an awareness of how each meets your own needs along these dimensions.



Problems for sources

I hope that the foregoing has better prepared you to engage with reporters and their editors. Before concluding, I want to focus your attention, for just a bit longer, on a few special problems that can arise as you do this, and, to varying degrees, have been discussed in other contexts above. Each is worth bearing constantly in mind.

Competing agendas with reporters

Throughout this booklet, I have urged you to try to better understand what a reporter with whom you may find yourself interacting is trying to accomplish. What sort of work does that person do? How are they approaching this story? How much time do they have? What do they already know? What do they think? Is there something in particular they want you to say? If you are fortunate enough to glean the answers to these questions, bear in mind that some of them may be things you can do something about, while others are not.

To start, you are unlikely to be able to influence how much time a reporter has available to work on the story, or what their deadline is. On the latter point, if you are being asked to assemble information that cannot reasonably be gathered in that time frame, by all means say so. But deadlines are often truly deadlines, and frequently beyond the power of the reporter to change. Don't hesitate to ask for more time if you need it, but be prepared to accept a rejection if you get one. And if a reporter on a call is in a hurry, respect that and try, if you can, to respond quickly and briefly.

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Don't hesitate to ask for more time if you need it, but be prepared to accept a rejection if you get one.

If a reporter is misinformed about the facts, you should certainly tell them. If they are focusing on what you regard as the wrong facts, make them aware of others you consider more relevant. If you are asked your opinion on a matter that is subject to debate, feel free to offer it if that is appropriate to your role. But arguing with a reporter about a matter of opinion is very unlikely to be effective.

By the same token, stand your ground if you are confident in it. Don't equivocate on facts unless you have your own doubts about them. As noted earlier, don't distort your own views to match those a reporter may want to include in their story; in such a case, let them find another source.

Competing agendas with colleagues

Too much thinking about the interaction between the press and the people and institutions it covers assumes that an organization in the news is a monolith. That, of course, is far from the case, for several reasons. When Donald Rumsfeld was White House Chief of Staff he formulated a pithy list of “rules,” one of which was “Never say ‘the White House wants;’ buildings don’t ‘want.’” Precisely right.

In dealing with the press, and in reading what it produces, it's essential to bear in mind that your objectives may differ not only from those differently situated from you, but also from those who may appear to be similarly placed. It is not uncommon, in fact, for people in large organizations, and especially in public life, to effectively send each other messages through the press.

Readers do well to frequently ask themselves the classic question “who benefits?” as they consume reporting. As a source, when confronting what other information a reporter may already have, the same question applies.

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Readers do well to frequently ask themselves the classic question “who benefits?” as they consume reporting.

Reporting on criminal justice matters provides a particularly fertile field in this respect. It is, for instance, a serious crime for a prosecutor to reveal what is occurring before a grand jury. But no such limitation applies to grand jury witnesses. Some prosecutors, or their associates, may talk to reporters anyway, but in my experience the vast majority of reporting coming from grand jury inquiries can be traced back, when known at all, to witnesses and defense counsel who have talked with the witnesses. The motivations for these sources range from seeking advantage relative to other possible defendants to trying to shape possible jury pools and community reaction to information exchange with beat reporters to the titillation of sharing secrets.

In less legally fraught situations, and even in more sensitive areas

such as foreign and defense policy, analogous considerations often apply. There are, to be sure, occasions when talented reporters convince sources to share information when it is not in their interest to do so, but these are exceptional moments—and fairly rare reporters. As both a reader and a source you will be safest in assuming that what reporters are learning, they are learning from people acting in their own self-interest, at least as they see it.

Reliability

The vast majority of reporters, in my experience, do their best to achieve accuracy in their reporting, and take any agreements they make with sources very seriously and comply with them scrupulously. But not all do so.

One consideration in any interview should be whether you expect what you say to be reported both correctly and in the proper context. If you don't, the encounter is likely just not worth the risk. This is the best reason to ignore requests from fringe news

organizations—reaching their audiences can be useful, but running the risk that your words will be mangled may outweigh that.

A more significant issue will more often arise with ground rules you may seek for an interview which you are considering. These can include embargoes delaying the publication of material until some agreed moment, or placing comments on background or off the record or an understanding of how you will be described as a source.

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The courts have ruled that such a conversation is contractual—reporters are legally bound by promises they make. But enforcing these contracts is very difficult as a practical matter, so the exchange comes down largely to a matter of trust. If prior contact, or the experience of friends or colleagues, or the personal or institutional reputation of the reporter or news organization gives you confidence, by all means, rely on such agreements. Absent any such indicia, however, proceed with the caution you would in any other dealing with a stranger.

Afterlife of stories

Finally, yesterday's news, as the clichés go, was once used mostly to line birdcages or wrap fish. If it was broadcast, it just vanished into thin air. Today it lingers on the internet, made accessible by Google and soon even more readily by generative AI. What does this mean for those engaging with the press?

I hope it strengthens your resolve to be honest, not only in telling the truth as you know and see it, but also in expressing your uncertainty when you feel it. There should be little more

embarrassing for a supposed expert than revisiting a public proclamation that turns out to have been mistaken when they knew at the time that what they were stating as fact or likelihood was actually uncertain. This was almost certainly the greatest communications mistake made—repeatedly—by public health officials in the first two years of the pandemic.

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The durability in the digital age of what was once “news” should also encourage modesty in tone and temperance in emotion and expression. That doesn’t mean you should hesitate to vindicate your values or forthrightly call out injustice or falsehood. But it does mean that recognizing, if you can, the emotions of a fraught moment will serve you well as your words age.



About the author

Richard J. Tofel is an Instructor in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, where he led a faculty seminar on “The Pandemic, the Press, and Public Health” and teaches a course on “Engaging with the US Press.”

Tofel was the founding general manager (and first employee) of ProPublica from 2007-2012, and its president from 2013 until September 2021. As president, he had responsibility for all of ProPublica’s non-journalism operations, including communications, legal, development, finance and budgeting, and human resources.

During the period of Tofel’s business leadership, ProPublica published stories that won seven Pulitzer Prizes, seven National Magazine Awards, five Peabody Awards, three Emmy Awards and eleven George Polk Awards, among other honors. Also during this

time, ProPublica grew from an initial staff of just over 20 to more than 160, and raised more than \$225 million from other than its founding funders.

Tofel was formerly the assistant publisher of The Wall Street Journal, with responsibility for its international editions and U.S. special editions, and, earlier, an assistant managing editor of the paper, vice president, corporate communications for Dow Jones & Company, and an assistant general counsel of Dow Jones. Just prior to ProPublica, he served as vice president, general counsel and secretary of the Rockefeller Foundation, and earlier as president and chief operating officer of the International Freedom Center, a museum and cultural center that was planned for the World Trade Center site.

He serves on the board/advisory board of the American Journalism Project, the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas, Austin, the Center for News, Technology & Innovation, The Dial, Harvard Public Health magazine, Outrider Foundation, Retro Report, the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and the Center for Media and Democracy in Israel. He also serves as a member of the Communications Coalition of the National Academy of Medicine Commission on Investment Imperatives for a Healthy Nation.

Tofel is a recipient (with Paul Steiger) of the 2021 Kiplinger Award for Contributions to Journalism from the National Press Foundation, and earlier received the 2020 Sigma Delta Chi Award for Public Service in Newsletter Journalism for the ProPublica Newsletter “Not Shutting Up,” and the 2019 Newmark Journalism Award from the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York.



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About the Center for Health Communication

Harvard Chan's Center for Health Communication was founded by Jay A. Winsten in 1985. It was the first such health communication program at an academic institution.

After thirty years of success, the Center for Health Communication was relaunched in 2022 by Senior Director Amanda Yarnell with a new vision: To define, teach, and share best practices for communicating credible health information to an increasingly skeptical and fragmented world.

Since rebooting, the Center has developed a wide variety of classes, programs, and resources to equip students, faculty, content creators, and researchers to credibly and effectively connect with the public. Learn more about our work and access practical resources for health and science communication on our website: www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc/.