

Quick to report, quick to mislead

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Over the last two weeks, two stories have highlighted an issue that has cropped up in modern journalism. The stories, one a BuzzFeed report regarding President Trump and the other a standoff between high schoolers and a Native American activist, were both found to be false or misrepresented soon after their initial coverage. The stories brought to light the tendency for news organizations to favor quick reporting over accurate reporting. To explore this issue, as well as the role of journalism in today's world, the Clackamas Print spoke with Vince Filak, a professor of journalism at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh as well as the author of the "Dynamics of Writing" textbook.

The Clackamas Print: What do you perceive to be the role of journalists in today's world?

A: I think our role as journalists is the same as it has always been: Seek truth and report it. That said, we now have to add more elements to that concept. We have to better understand our audience, so we can report the news in a way that demonstrates why our specific readers should care about it. We can't just sit back and say, "We think this is important, so you better listen." We need to say, "OK, here's what is going on and this is why you should care about it, based on what we know about you as an individual and as part of our readership." We also have to seek facts almost more than truth, because what is true for you might not be true for me. However, if we can agree on basic facts, we can eventually come to a conclusion on how truth tends to operate for us as journalists and readers.

TCP: Do you believe journalists can be reasonably accurate considering the pace of today's news cycle, or is the pace simply too demanding if modern journalists are to stay relevant?

A: It's completely possible to do this. In fact, a lot of great journalists do this now. The trick is that you have to prize accuracy above speed. Part of the problem is that now there are so many more outlets that are pumping content out into the world that journalists often freak out that their missing something. That "FOMO" idea

isn't just a recent concept. When I worked in newsrooms, we always had a competing city paper, at least one weekly paper and a couple other outlets like student papers that covered some of the stuff we covered. The minute our competitor's paper hit the street, we grabbed a copy and scoured it for things we missed. When I worked night desk, I was responsible for watching the three local TV channels to see if they had anything we missed. Later, when everything started going online, we would refresh the browser a dozen or more times a minute, making sure we didn't miss something. Being scooped sucked and having a scoop was like the first time you ever fell in love. However, now information dissemination is 24/7, anyone with a digital connection can do it and you have to worry about more than what's going on in your little geographic hub. That tends to heighten people's anxieties in newsrooms as they desperately rush to keep ahead of the story, whatever the story is. In addition, we have outlets that are clearly partisan driving an agenda, so people who might otherwise be objective journalists; find themselves chasing down things that are less than objective, for fear of losing the audience to these other places.

It's hard to wait on something, particularly when it looks like everybody else has the news and you don't. However, if we decide that being right matters more than being first, we'll be in much better shape and have a lot less to apologize for going forward.

TCP: What do you think the coverage of both the BuzzFeed story and the Covington Catholic Kids says about modern journalism?

A: I don't know if this is necessarily a "modern journalism" thing, other than to say the reach of media is now able to do a lot more damage when a story goes south. It's like if I were to be reckless with a firearm: If I'm reckless with a .22 pistol, I can hurt some people, but if I'm reckless with a rocket launcher, I can do a lot more damage. That's the difference between things in the pre-digital era and now. I think the BuzzFeed story and the Covington Catholic story are akin to issues we've always had: How far do we trust a source and how is a story generally



Talia
@2020fight

This MAGA loser gleefully bothering a Native American protestor at the Indigenous Peoples March.



582K views

1/18/19, 11:13 PM

The politically charged Twitter account @2020fight originally posted the video of the students and protestor. The account has since been suspended by Twitter.

framed. In terms of the Covington story and the initial video, I think back to the fall of Baghdad where newspapers ran close up photos of Iraqis repeatedly striking a fallen statue of Saddam Husein. That image's framing made it look like the square was flooded with people who, now free, sprang from their homes throughout the country to celebrate the deposed despot's fall. However, other photos shot from overhead, that never really got a wide release, showed only a small gathering of people and the square was surrounded by US tanks, basically creating a "velvet rope" of limited access to the square. In terms of the BuzzFeed story, I've been on both sides of that issue: Pushing against what was basically a source I wasn't sure of and defending a reporter while others called her work into question based on a source. I don't know if it's entirely factually inaccurate or what specific elements were just incorrectly

nuanced. For example, if a police officer tells you that a person who crashed a car was operating a motor vehicle under the influence of a mind or mood-altering substance, you can't say "the driver was drunk." It could be drugs, it could be medication, it could be alcohol but not enough to be legally drunk. I have no idea. The point is that these issues aren't new. We just deal with them on a higher level now that the stakes are higher and more of us hear about them.

TCP: Do you believe public trust in journalism is important?

A: Yes. Trust is not a boomerang: When we throw it away, it doesn't come back. If the public doesn't trust us, what's the point of doing the job?

Answers have been edited for clarity and space.