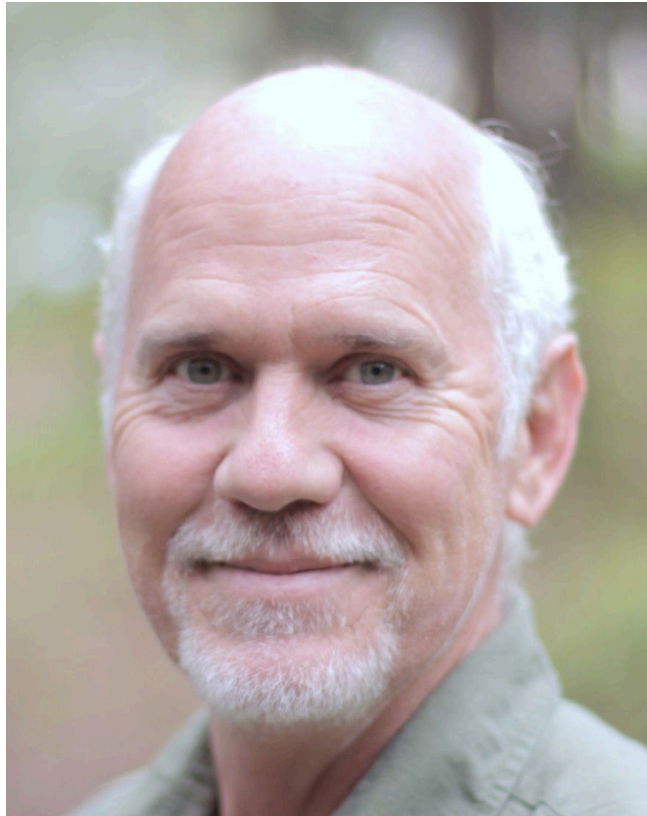

In My View: Broken News and Opinion Journalism

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I frequently see a banner scroll across a TV news program that screams, “BREAKING NEWS!” Recently I heard someone describe formerly breaking news as “broken news.” This got me thinking about the state of the news in general. Is news actually broken?

Fifty years ago, news programs honestly reported factual news as a public service to ensure a well-informed populace. Walter Cronkite was the model news anchor.

When Cronkite signed off his news program he would say, “And that’s the way it is” and people believed him. His political views or opinions were not presented. During the 1960’s and 1970’s Cronkite was often cited as the most trusted man in America.

As news changed, Cronkite observed, “The democratic system is challenged by the failure in television because our evening news programs have gone for an attempt to entertain as much as to inform in the desperate fight for ratings.”

Opinion Journalism

I heard the phrase “opinion journalism” for the first time on a TV news program. This describes a news format where the basic facts of the news are reported and then talking heads express opinions about what it means. This can be informative if they provide a variety of perspectives on a topic.

However, the value of this format is only as good as the information the discussion is based on. The value degrades when opinions are based on speculation rather than facts. The value goes negative when the opinions are based on lies and disinformation.

Legitimate news organizations usually have standards and practices they follow to ensure the integrity of the news being disseminated. Typical guidelines include a thorough process to verify the accuracy of information before reporting it.

What I do could be considered opinion journalism. I try to ensure that my stories and opinions are fact based, but unlike Walter Cronkite I make no effort to be neutral. I want you to know where I stand.

Opinion journalism can spark thought and informed debate if accurate facts are presented. When truth is obscured, denied, or misrepresented then news and opinions lose all value.

Broken News

Today we have a news corporation that made a calculated commitment to a business model built on telling lies. Fox News recently settled a defamation lawsuit and must pay \$787 million for lying about Dominion voting machines.

Fox News was amplifying the “Big Lie” that the 2020 election was stolen. This financially benefited the corporation, but at what cost? What is stunning is that Fox feared if they told the truth they would lose viewers. News is seriously broken when “news” programs contort the facts to tell viewers what they want to hear rather than what is true.

It is challenging these days to know what to believe from the firehose of news sources that are out there. As more people tell lies, it is harder to discern the truth.

Multiple Sources

When I am looking to filter news for factual correctness, I apply a lesson that I learned while traveling in Mexico. A friendly local told me the best way to get good directions. He said that people will want to help even if they don’t know the answer. His advice was to ask multiple people and when you find three that give the same directions that that is likely the correct answer.

I get local news from a variety of sources including the Del Norte Triplicate, Times Standard, Wild Rivers Outpost and KFUG Community Radio.

I subscribe to the San Francisco Chronicle newspaper and the New York Times online. These provide a good baseline to evaluate current events. Then there is the bottomless content that can be found online, but you can

not believe everything you read on the internet.

Collateral Damage

When some people believe the disinformation and act on it, other people can get hurt. A cautionary tale of damage done by disinformation occurred in neighboring Shasta County.

Some folks in Shasta got riled up over covid precautions, the Big Lie about the 2020 election, and other conspiracies. Angry mobs disrupted the Supervisors meetings. Eventually the more reasonable Supervisors were driven out and the extremists now control the majority on the Shasta County Board of Supervisors.

This radical majority decided recently to let their lease with Dominion voting machines expire because they believed the election lies. Without consideration of the cost or consequences, they decided to jettison their voting machines and committed to count ballots by hand.

These errant Supervisors discovered later that it would cost a million dollars more to hand count all the ballots. There is no evidence that Dominion voting machines are faulty. These reactionary politicians made a policy and financial decision that was based on the lies from Fox News and others.

In the end, the voters will be hurt by the disruption of local elections and taxpayers will be stuck with the bill for this misguided policy blunder. This is collateral damage resulting from broken news.

Local Voting

Del Norte County uses Dominion voting machines. We have had no problems or concerns with our local elections. No one is contemplating a change to our voting systems.

I encourage everyone, including elected officials, to continue to learn and allow new information to guide your decisions. Whenever possible seek out multiple sources of news.

I close with a humorous quote from Walter Cronkite who said, "Objective journalism and an opinion column are about as similar as the Bible and Playboy magazine." Well that's his opinion.

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