

Journalism's Lessons for Risk Leaders



By Glenn Mott

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Like many professions, journalism has its own unique set of values. Made more unique because journalism is the only profession explicitly protected under the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees freedom of the press—though these First Amendment protections are broadly defined, continually to be defended, and anything but guaranteed.

This year in the U.S. alone, a politically motivated gunman murdered four members of the press in the *Capital Gazette* newsroom at Annapolis, Maryland. The murder of *Washington Post* correspondent Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul is a harbinger of impunity against a profession that is under attack around the world, as perhaps no other. Even as we acknowledge nonprofit humanitarian workers have also come under attack this year and been killed.

Leaving aside independent media outlets that are themselves nonprofits, information gathering at all nonprofits provides an independent media function for dissenting and alternative perspectives, counter-checks on misinformation, misrepresentation, and prevailing narratives.

Critiquing the media is part of the work nonprofits have always done. Nonprofits are also active defenders of, and depend upon, First Amendment protections with journalists. It must be noted, however, that not all tax-exempt nonprofit organizations are staunch defenders of free speech or interpret these rights equally.

The Elements of Journalism

In 1997 the Committee of Concerned Journalists, a nonprofit consortium of journalists, publishers, academics and citizens, began a national conversation to identify and clarify the principles that underlie the discipline of journalism. After four years of research, including public forums, a study of press history, and a national survey of journalists, the group identified ten essential principles. These became the basis for Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel's classic book *The Elements of Journalism*.

Here are those principles:

1. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification.
4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power.

6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
8. It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
9. Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.
10. Citizens, too, have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news.

Many of these may seem contradictory or counter-intuitive, until you consult the findings in Kovach and Rosenstiel, [here presented](#) in an easily encapsulated format by the American Press Institute.

Media Matters

Media relations at nonprofits is about more than reputation management, it's about cultivating and maintaining long-term values for trusted organizations. In NRMCC's book [Vital Signs](#) we identify the essential principles and practices of nonprofits interacting with journalists, and lay out several ways in which to manage and even embrace your media roles. Here are 10 principles common to good sense drawn from the book:

1. *Always tell the truth*, or don't speak to the press. See Kovach and Rosenstiel #1: "Journalism's first obligation is to the truth."
2. *Be clear about what you want the media to know*. You control what to tell third parties about the organization. Don't feel that you need to tell the media everything you know. In fact, it may be perilous to do so, since you then give a reporter the chance to pick a sound bite that may eventually sink you—it may be a phrase or off-hand comment that's regrettable when taken out of context. Journalistic truth is a process. Be measured and don't force a message. And a word to the wise, there is no such thing as "off the record." If you say it, it's fair game.
3. *Where possible, make use of a prepared text*. The written documents in your communications strategy are essential tools for media interviews. Think of your fact sheet as more than a list of talking points; it's essentially your script.
4. *Conduct media training*. Everyone on your staff tasked with media relations and content production or publishing should have media training.
5. *If you don't know, say so*. If feasible, agree to try to find the answer and indicate you'll get back to the reporter.
6. *Accommodate reasonable requests*. On occasion a reporter will make a special request, such as requesting that an introduction to a news piece be filmed in front of your organization's entry, or an interview be held at the location of an incident rather than in your office. If it's possible to accommodate a special request without jeopardizing your crisis communications plan, be cooperative.
7. *Admit when a mistake has been made*. In some cases, admitting that a mistake has been made is the first step to re-establishing credibility and confidence with key constituencies.
8. *Don't ignore requests from the media or evade interviews*. Stalling has the potential to cause a great deal of harm. The reporter you're avoiding will try to find someone to speak to about the situation. Someone almost always surfaces and it's possible that person won't be an effective representative of your organization or position. Why put the selection of a spokesperson in the hands of a potentially uninformed reporter?
9. *Designate a backup* for your spokesperson in the event your spokesperson is unavailable or is the subject of the crisis. Both the spokesperson and the backup should be trained, articulate, sincere and persuasive.
10. *Tell the truth*. Did we mention this one? It bears repeating to clarify the points above. Despite the trend of post-truth hermeneutics in political life, the discipline of journalism is still the practice of fact-finding. Some have suggested substitutes for seeking truth; the two most widely held are "*fair*" and "*balanced*." Your organization may seek fairness in the media, but the question must be asked, fair to whom? Balanced toward what? Balanced may not be fair to the facts. Fairness is not the same as factual. As an example: Science has established a factual link between global warming and human intervention, should journalists be fair to a climate change hoaxer or global warming denier in the name of fairness? Audiences may be divided along ideological lines, but to paraphrase the Bard: *truth will always out*.

Refer to Kovach and Rosenstiel's principles of journalism. Some of these fall under their #10: Citizens, too, have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news.

Like journalists, most nonprofits are concerned with providing checks and balances to power and are community- and service-minded. Workers in the Third Sector and the Fourth Estate uphold critical values and responsibilities in a democracy. They are often the underpaid and unacknowledged legislators of those values. Ethics codes for journalists and nonprofit workers serve the same function. The goal is the reliable benefit and

welfare of the people we serve.

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