

Four Models of Journalism Among Christian Readers

A lecture on the Importance of the American Model of the Press

It didn't take long in the digital age for editors to realize that if they wrote a provocative staff memo there was a good chance that it would surface somewhere on the Internet.

That's what happened in 2003, when the editor of *The Los Angeles Times*—John Carroll at that time—wanted to make a point about media bias in the pages of his own newspaper. He wrote a famous memo to his section editors with this title: “Credibility on abortion.” Sure enough, the memo was soon published by the *L.A. Observed* website. It opened like this:

“I'm concerned about the perception—and the occasional reality—that the *Times* is a liberal, ‘politically correct’ newspaper. Generally speaking, this is an inaccurate view, but occasionally we prove our critics right. We did so today with the front-page story on the bill in Texas that would require abortion doctors to counsel patients that they may be risking breast cancer.

“The apparent bias of the writer and/or the desk reveals itself in the third paragraph, which characterizes such bills in Texas and elsewhere as requiring ‘so-called counseling of patients.’ I don't think people on the anti-abortion side would consider it ‘so-called,’ a phrase that is loaded with derision.”

There were basic reporting issues, as well, according to Carroll. It was clear that most scientists rejected this connection between abortion and breast cancer. However, the *Times* team that put this story together downplayed scientists who backed the Texas bill. Instead, the story quoted one of the sponsors of the legislation, noting—another cheap shot—that he “has a professional background in property management.”

Finally, the *Times* did quote a professor of biology and endocrinology who endorses the connection between abortion and breast cancer.

“But do we quote him as to why he believes this? No. We quote his political views,” wrote Carroll. “Apparently the scientific argument for the anti-abortion side is so absurd that we don't need to waste our readers' time with it.”

Clearly, there was more to this controversy than mere politics. Thus, the *Times* editor ended his memo with a strong reminder that journalists need to focus—even when covering hot-button

issues that mix religion, science and, yes, politics—on professional standards of fairness and accuracy.

“I'm no expert on abortion,” he concluded, “but I know enough to believe that it presents a profound philosophical, religious and scientific question, and I respect people on both sides of the debate. A newspaper that is intelligent and fair-minded will do the same.”

The key word is “respect,” backed with a call for journalists to be “fair-minded.”

Christians who work in the field of journalism can say, “Amen” to that. For decades, I have offered a loose paraphrase of scripture and told journalism students that they should strive to “report unto others as you would want them to report unto you.”

This famous 2003 memo by the late John Carroll is a classic statement of what journalism historians have often called the “American Model of the Press.” This is not the oldest model of journalism that has shaped the American press, but it has long been the most prominent in the media marketplace. This is old-school American journalism that strives for a concept of objectivity that is defined, not as some “my mind is blank” philosophy, but in terms of professional standards seeking accuracy, balance, fairness and respect.

There are many “models of the press” in our world today, including the kinds of systems at play in nations with totalitarian governments or in newsrooms directly or indirectly linked to the economic or political powers that be in their cultures. However, in my experience, when you talk to Christians in America you are going to encounter four models of the press, including one—“public relations”—that really isn't a journalism model at all.

I. THE AMERICAN MODEL

The American model comes first, for me, because it has been the most common in our culture for more than a century and, through wire services and networks, it has shaped news around the world. However, the American model is under fierce attack right now—although few

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Mattingly's father was a pastor and his mother a language arts teacher. Thus, it's no surprise that Mattingly is a journalist and teacher who focuses on religion and that he continues to study both writing and religion. He double-majored in journalism and history at Baylor University and then earned an M.A. at Baylor in Church-State Studies and an M.S. in communications at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign.

He has worked as a reporter and religion columnist at *The Rocky Mountain News* in Denver and *The Charlotte Observer* and *The Charlotte News*. In 1991, Mattingly began teaching at Denver Seminary. While teaching, he has continued to write the weekly “On Religion” column for the features department of the Scripps Howard News Service in Washington, D.C., which is sent to about 350 newspapers in North America. He is the founder and editor of the GetReligion website -- born in 2004 -- that critiques the mainstream media's coverage of religion news.

journalists will state that openly—because of changes in technology and economics.

More and more Americans are seeking out news sources that, as we say in the Bible Belt, “preach to the choir,” offering consumers news that consistently tells them what they want to hear. This trend can be seen in the programming at MSNBC, as well as all of those popular opinion shows every night at Fox News.

Let’s start with the basics. Under the old-school American Model, how do journalists know when they are getting the job done right?

Journalists at the Poynter Institute in Florida have long used a helpful term—“stakeholders”—in these discussions. They define a “stakeholder” as someone whose life is going to be directly impacted by a particular news story. These people are directly involved in the story and they will often have strong, one-sided opinions. Nevertheless, when stakeholders keep saying that your coverage is inaccurate, that’s bad. When stakeholders consistently tell you that your coverage is biased against one group or another, it’s important to hear them and look into whether or not they are speaking the truth. Where did the American model come from?

In the mid 19th century or so, printing presses began to speed up as technology improved. The impact was easy to see in Lower Manhattan, where there were a wide variety of newspapers being published for different audiences.

Ponder this question: If you had a slow printing press—printing 10,000 copies or thereabouts—how would you make the most money? You would focus on a very specific audience, allowing advertisers direct access to those customers. Thus, New York City had a variety of products, with newspapers for the wealthy and for laborers, addressing the lives of blacks and

larger, more diverse audiences with advertising and news.

What happened next? One of my graduate-school professors at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, the great James Carey, used to put it this way in his famous seminar on the impact of the printing press: “Technology shapes content.” Carey was also known for his years of work teaching journalism at Columbia University in New York City.

With faster presses, it eventually made sense to offer news coverage that would appeal to people on both sides of big issues in city, state and national life. Eventually, wire services, newspaper chains and broadcasting networks strengthened this emerging approach to the business of news.

The American Model fit well with other American values—promoting a lively public square in which citizens could believe that their views would be treated with respect. It was possible, reading coverage over a period of time, to see which newsrooms were striving to be accurate and fair-minded. This approach meshed with a liberal approach to the First Amendment, as well.

Yes, this is a challenge for journalists as they do their work. I’ll be blunt. I think the most important skill in journalism is the ability to accurately report the views of a person with whom you disagree. Journalists are supposed to strive to show respect to people on both sides of hot-button debates. In the American model of the press, journalists are not supposed to jam the news into a template created in advance.

One of my heroes in journalism is Russell Chandler, known for his religion-beat work with *The Los Angeles Times*. He is an articulate Christian, with a seminary degree. Early in my career, I heard him defend the American model with this statement: “We worship a God that is not afraid of debates.”

Chandler believed that he was called—that he had a unique vocation—to be a Christian working in the mainstream press. He believed that Christians could thrive in a press model built on professional standards of accuracy, fairness, balance and respect.

II. THE EUROPEAN MODEL

This brings us to an older approach, which is often called the European Model of the Press—even though it was used for generations in America, as well.

For me, one of the miracles of American history was Thomas Jefferson’s strong support for freedom of the press. After all, early American newspapers printed stuff about his political life, and his personal affairs as well, that would

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as well as Latinos, Christians and Jews. In terms of politics, there were liberal and conservative dailies.

This affected newspaper content, of course, as editors focused on the needs and views of their niche audiences. It was crucial to please the target audience. If there was a labor strike, readers at the start of the 20th Century would see very different coverage in *The New York Call*, a socialist newspaper, than in *The Wall Street Journal*. This editorial approach made financial sense.

Eventually, printing presses began to gain speed, allowing publishers to target

make Bill Clinton or Donald Trump blush.

The newspapers of Jefferson's day were open about their biases and causes that they supported, through both their editorial and their news coverage. This is the key to this older model of the press: Journalists work in newsrooms that

issues in *Ms. Magazine* or *Rolling Stone* to resemble what is printed in *Christianity Today* or magazines published by Focus on the Family.

When reading news stories in these kinds of advocacy publications, loyal readers will almost always know, in advance, who will be right and who will



Terry Mattingly (r) sitting with Nigerian journalist Emeka Izeze at a shuffleboard court in St. Petersburg, Fla. in 2019. The men were teachers and mentors at The Media Project Coaching and Leadership Fellowship at the Poynter Institute.

openly and honestly state their biases, letting readers know where they stand.

There was no need for balanced coverage and, often, for respect when dealing with opponents. As I stated earlier, “preaching to the choir” was part of this niche-market business model, as well as the editorial approach practiced in these newsrooms.

In the European Model of the Press, editors are not shy about fitting news stories into templates in which it is clear who is bad and who is good, the kinds of people and organizations that are trustworthy sources of information and those that are not.

This affects the content of the news, of course. Some causes are logical and virtuous, while others are stupid or even dangerous. While journalists in newsrooms of this kind are expected to be accurate, and maybe even “fair,” there is no need for their reporting to be “balanced.” It is easier, for example, for reporters using this approach to write in first-person voice, as another way to make their worldviews clear to readers.

Today, this approach to journalism is the norm in the magazine business. In politics, no one expected to see the same approach to coverage of the Barack Obama administration in *The New Republic*, on the left, that they would see in *National Review*, on the right. No one would expect coverage of abortion-rights

be wrong. When editors use templates, it is almost always easy to predict the shape of the coverage.

The question today is this: What happens when mainstream journalists begin using an American model approach to the coverage of some topics, but a European approach to others?

Take business reporting, for example. People who invest billions of dollars will be willing to spend millions of dollars to get information. When they do this, they will work hard to find business news organizations that stress American model values about accuracy, balance and fairness. They do not want editors tipping the scales, when covering laws, debates and research that will influence their decisions in the marketplace.

In recent decades, however, we have seen growing tensions in journalism about news coverage of issues linked to politics, morality, culture, religion and law. As a religion-beat reporter, I have paid close attention to media-bias debates about news coverage of the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and '70s—abortion rights and gay rights issues, in particular.

On one level, most journalism leaders continue to endorse the American model as the standard of excellence in their publications. At the same time, more and more readers are having their doubts,



Terry Mattingly visiting Martina Maskova at Czech Radio in 2017 when Mattingly was in Prague, teaching at the European Journalism Institute of The Media Project. Maskova is an alumna of the TMP Leadership Fellowship at the Poynter Institute in Florida.

even when dealing with America’s most elite newsrooms.

Take *The New York Times*, for example. In 2004 the newspaper’s “public editor,” Daniel Okrent, published a column with this headline: “Is The New York Times a Liberal Newspaper?” His lede stated: “Of course it is.”

The hottest arguments about *The Times*, he stressed, focused on “social issues” such as “gay rights, gun control, abortion and the environment.” Two of those issues, of course, are directly linked to centuries of Judeo-Christian doctrine.

“If you think *The Times* plays it down the middle on any of them, you’ve been reading the paper with your eyes closed,” wrote Okrent. “But if you’re examining the paper’s coverage of these subjects from a perspective that is neither urban nor Northeastern nor culturally seen-it-all; if you are among the groups *The Times* treats as strange objects to be examined on a laboratory slide (devout Catholics, gun owners, Orthodox Jews, Texans); if your value system wouldn’t wear well on a composite *New York Times* journalist, then a walk through this paper can make you feel you’re traveling in a strange and forbidding world.”

In particular, he added, for readers who believe “news pages cannot retain their credibility unless all aspects of an issue are subject to robust examination, it’s disappointing to see *The Times* present the social and cultural aspects of same-sex marriage in a tone that approaches cheerleading.”

Okrent’s essay would provoke heated arguments for years to come, including among journalists rising to the top of the *Times* hierarchy. It was becoming harder to argue that old-school standards—such as showing respect for competing voices in public debates—were the norm on issues of religion, culture and morality.

The bottom line is the postmodern bottom line: The European Model of the Press—appealing to choirs of subscribers united by shared beliefs—is a perfect fit for the technology that dominates America’s public discourse. This is becoming more obvious as journalists struggle with emerging economic realities, as billions of advertising dollars flow to a few digital giants.

The *BuzzFeed* “News Standards and Ethics Guide” puts it this way: “We firmly believe that for a number of issues, including civil rights, women’s rights, anti-racism, and LGBT equality, there are not two sides.”

In other words, “cheerleading” has become a common strategy for journalism entrepreneurs online. After all, the goal is “hot takes” that fire up faithful readers—mouse click after mouse click—and sell the newsroom’s creed.

The technology is shaping the content. Will this business model last?

III: “DIRECTED REPORTING”

The March 29, 1997, *WORLD* magazine cover was certainly a grabber. It showed a Bible morphing into a black warplane, with the headline, “The Stealth Bible: The popular New International Version Bible is quietly going ‘gender-neutral.’” The headline inside the magazine was just as provocative: “Femme fatale: The Feminist Seduction of the Evangelical Church.”

This ignited quite a firestorm since the NIV has never been just another volume on the crowded shelf of Bible translations. At the time of the “Stealth” cover it was America’s most popular Bible—with a 45% share of the Bible sales market. The NIV translation was guarded by the

International Bible Society, controlling the copyright, and the powerful Zondervan Publishing House, with exclusive commercial rights to the text.

Zondervan publicists cried “foul” and circulated a letter claiming the *WORLD* feature followed a “predetermined agenda” that suggested a “conspiracy of evangelical Bible translation with radical social feminism.” According to Zondervan, the result was unethical—an article full of “innuendo and sensationalism, containing unconscionable slander.”

The “Stealth Bible” war drew coverage from secular newsrooms, as well. In mainstream media the content of the *WORLD* coverage was more controversial than the translation work behind the “gender-neutral” Bible.

The key: *WORLD* editor Marvin Olasky had openly stated that his reporters didn’t need to use American Model standards of “objectivity” and even, some would say, “fairness.” Instead, he has consistently argued that journalists should write the stories that God wants them to write, the way God wants them written. The goal is “true objectivity” or “the God’s-eye view.”

In his book “Telling the Truth,” Olasky bluntly stated: “Biblically, there is no neutrality.”

As a journalism historian, best known for his teaching tenure at the University of Texas in Austin, Olasky knows that his approach to news is rooted in the older European Model of the Press. He also knows that what he calls “directed reporting” is considered heresy by some Christians, including many who work in the mainstream press. This doesn’t surprise him, since he believes that most “Christian journalism” he sees—including work built on the American Model—is “baptized secularism.”

In “Telling the Truth,” written in 1995, Olasky stated: “Liberal theory emphasizes the balancing of subjectivities: Specific detail A, which points a reader in one direction, should be balanced by specific detail B, which points the reader in another. A pro-something statement by Person X is followed by an anti-something statement from person Y. In practice, this objectivity has limitations: Reporters have never felt the need to balance anticancer statements with pro-cancer statements. In recent practice, secular-liberal reporters have seen pro-life concerns or ‘homophobia’ as cancerous, with other Christian beliefs as similarly harmful. But you should be aware that many reporters still publicly maintain their so-called objectivity.”

This leads to an Olasky quotation that is frequently used in features about his work: “Christian reporters should give equal space to a variety of perspectives only when the Bible is unclear. Editors who see leftist evangelicals as misled should still give them a chance to respond

to questions—but a solidly Christian news publication should not be balanced. Its goal should be provocative and evocative, colorful and gripping, Bible-based news analysis.”

Those seeking to understand this take need to know that Olasky is not your run-of-the-mill Christian conservative. He grew up in a Russian-Jewish family and graduated from Yale University before doing his doctorate in American Culture Studies at the University of Michigan. During those years he transitioned from Judaism to atheism, becoming a card-carrying member of the Communist Party. In 1976, he converted to Christianity—a rock-ribbed brand of Calvinism—as he neared the end of his graduate-school education.

Olasky is accurately described as a “conservative.” However, it is more accurate to say that he is a religious and cultural conservative, as opposed to being a Republican loyalist. This distinction was crucial when President George W. Bush kept quoting “The Tragedy of American Compassion,” one of Olasky’s best known books. Lots of people noticed those soundbites, but missed the fact that *WORLD* later published a cover story critical of the Bush team’s timidity on

“After all, the goal is “hot takes” that fire up faithful readers -- mouse click after mouse click -- and sell the newsroom’s creed.”

issues linked to religion in public life and controversial social issues.

The “Stealth Bible” story, meanwhile, was a perfect example of Olasky’s willingness to cover controversial issues that affect the evangelical Protestant establishment. This has not been a safe journalism strategy. Anyone who scans an issue of *WORLD* will note the absence of advertisements from most mainstream evangelical publishing houses, and many evangelical colleges—crucial revenue sources that support the competing *Christianity Today*.

Why does Olasky insist on covering “bad news” in his own camp? If the point of the European Model is to push the causes and beliefs of loyal readers, why has he dissected more than a few evangelical sacred cows? Try to imagine *Rolling Stone* printing cover stories that threaten Planned Parenthood or infuriate key leaders in the Democratic Party.

The answer is that his “directed reporting” model has a strong theological component. He believes he is supposed to hold other Christians to the same ethical standards, or higher standards, than he applies to the secular world. He believes he is covering God’s actions in the real world. The Olasky definition of news

includes this question: What is God doing right now? The assumption is that God's actions will support the teachings of the

“I think that what you think you're doing is journalism and the people who sign your paycheck think it's public relations.”

Bible, as seen in core of Christian teachings for 2,000 years.

In a 2015 profile in *The New York Times*, Olasky stressed that he sees “no contradiction between Christian faith and reporting on the dark side of Christianity. ‘We don't have to cover up, because we do have faith that God forgives and saves the sinner.’”

In that same story, I was quoted offering this take on his approach: “Marvin believes that sometimes you have to tear the scab off for healing to happen. ... He is running Rolling Stone for cultural conservative evangelicals. It's just that Rolling Stone isn't going to tell you what their Bible is—maybe it's the Kinsey Report? ... Marvin will hand you one of his.”

It's significant that Olasky has rejected Christian-niche public relations as well as the old-school approach of the American Model. This became clear in the aftermath of the “Stealth Bible” wars, when progressive evangelical “egalitarians”—many active in the “Christians for Biblical Equality” network—attacked *WORLD* and its leaders. At the same time, talk-radio patriarch James Dobson of Focus on the Family and leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention issued statements opposing the use of a “politically correct” NIV in their institutions. After these economic threats the International Bible Society waved a white flag.

Leaders of the Evangelical Press Association, however, moved to censure *WORLD* founder Joel Belz and Olasky.

This statement was crucial, quoting the EPA Code of Ethics: “Christian publications should be honest and courageous, their presentations characterized by sincerity, truthfulness, accuracy and an avoidance of distortion and sensationalism. Those responsible for the publication must exercise the utmost care that nothing contrary to the truth is published. Whenever substantive mistakes are made, whatever their origin, they should be conscious of their duty to protect the good name and reputation of others. In dealing with controversial matters, opposing views, when presented, should be treated honestly and fairly.” This code was disregarded by *WORLD*. Truthfulness and accuracy were missed. Rather than avoiding distortion and sensationalism, *WORLD* employed them. Utmost care was not exercised. Opposing

views were not treated honestly and fairly. And *WORLD* seems to be unconscious of its duty to protect the good names and reputations of Zondervan Publishing House, International Bible Society, and Committee on Bible Translation.”

Belz and Olasky defended the core facts in their stories. At one point they published a short piece with this headline: “The Smoking Gun.” It noted that, writing in the Priscilla Papers newsletter (published by Christians for Biblical Equality), IBS President Lars Dunberg wrote: “I'm happy to break the ‘silence’ and resolve this mystery. ... Zondervan and IBS will publish an inclusive version of the NIV for North America.”

Months after the date of that statement the Zondervan public-relations office continued to tell *WORLD*: “No decision has been made to publish an edition of the NIV like the Hodder & Stoughton [in England]. ... No decision has been made to publish such a Bible.”

WORLD responded: “Oops. When asked about Mr. Dunberg's letter, IBS refused to comment further.” Once again, IBS leaders asked *WORLD* to put its questions in print. Thus, *WORLD* asked: “Does Mr. Dunberg, international president of IBS, still speak for IBS?”

The whole affair left *WORLD* editors asking an important question about the EPA judgment: Was it really their job, as journalists, to “protect the good names and reputations of Zondervan Publishing House, International Bible Society, and Committee on Bible Translation”?

Wouldn't that blur the lines between journalism and public relations?

IV: PUBLIC RELATIONS

Days after I graduated from Baylor University—with my BA in journalism and history—I flew to Nashville to meet with one of the editors at Baptist Press. There was a job open and, as the youngest member of a well-connected Southern Baptist family, I thought I should pay a visit and hear what they had to say.

We ate lunch in downtown and sat down in the lobby of the complex that locals called the “Baptist Vatican.” The key was that I had come to Nashville to ask the following question: “Is what you do at Baptist Press journalism or public relations?” That's what I wanted to know.

The first thing the editor said was, “Terry, I really need to ask you a crucial question, ‘Do you think that what we do here at Baptist Press is journalism or public relations?’” After a long silence, I replied: “Sir, I came to Nashville to ask you that question.” He said, “I asked you first.”

This was, I knew, a crucial moment in my life. Finally, I said: “I think that what you think you're doing is journalism and

the people who sign your paycheck think it's public relations." The editor, who had quite a bit of mainstream journalism experience, replied: "That's exactly right. Can you live with that?" I said, "No, I can't."

That was that. We had a nice talk, but after that day I knew it would not be wise for me to work in religious-market news.

There are reasons that most elite public-relations programs are based in journalism schools. The fields are connected in some ways, when it comes to research and writing.

Good PR people need to understand, when writing press releases, what "news is" from the perspective of working journalists. They need to know what kinds of information reporters need. A good PR pro knows her or his organization well enough to know who is doing work worthy of coverage and who has skills when it comes to talking to reporters. However, mainstream journalists will reject the idea that "public relations" is a valid "model of the press."

So why is this No. 4 in my list of ways that many modern Christians view journalism? To be blunt: Many Christian leaders, including some in higher education, have such a negative view of journalism that they truly believe that working in public relations is the only spiritually appropriate career choice.

In religious circles, this leads to reporting and editing jobs in the denominational press—Baptist, United Methodist, Presbyterian, etc. During my lifetime, however, the biggest surge in jobs has been in mission agencies, nonprofit groups and parachurch organizations, such as Campus Crusade for Christ (now known as Cru). There have been similar trends among secular nonprofits, lobby groups and think tanks in Washington, D.C.

Remember the Evangelical Press Association that clashed with Olasky and WORLD? Almost all of its members work in some form of nonprofit publishing. Much of what these professionals do is linked to fundraising and corporate communications.

What is news, in these press offices? That depends. The key is that Job 1 is promoting good news, or the Good News (with capital letters) about their organizations. In some cases, public-relations professionals often help manage bad news, when that is necessary.

Mainstream journalists will say that their job is find "the story." Many European journalists will say that their job is telling stories that resonate with the worldview of their unique set of readers. Olasky openly states that his goal is to find news about what God is doing in the world—the super-story that shapes all other stories.

For public-relations professionals the goal is to tell "Our story," as in the story of our denomination, our missionary group,

our college. The goal is to help mainstream media tell good news about people, events and trends that will help their Christian cause.

One of the quickest ways to detect the presence of a public-relations worldview, among Christians, is to listen for this word—"brother." Here is how that word sounds in context, in a conversation between a public-relations official and a Christian who works in mainstream media: "You wouldn't want to cover that story, because you would hurt your Christian brother."

All too often, the result is a steady stream of what media scholar Terry Lindvall, the former president of Regent University, has called, "Happy little Jesus stories." Why would anyone want to write



The fall 2020 class of the NYC Semester in Journalism (NYCJ) at The King's College in NYC. Terry Mattingly taught a class in that program from 2015 to 2020 and had founded a predecessor of the program called Washington Journalism Center in Washington D.C.

stories that make other believers unhappy?

This is interesting, according to Lindvall, because the Bible includes all kinds of stories about believers who make mistakes — including saints and disciples. Journalists cover a world that reveals the glory of God, but it is also wracked by sin and brokenness. How does that affect the work of journalists and public-relations professionals?

As the old journalism saying goes: It's hard to cover a war when a general is signing your paycheck.

That's what I heard, long ago, during my job interview at Baptist Press. I have always appreciated that the editors there were honest with me.

FINALE

The question I always hear after delivering these lectures is this: Is the American model of the press going to survive the Internet?

My honest answer: I don't know. I hope that it will, because I believe the state of public discourse will continue to suffer if the vast majority of our citizens keep consuming news that only tells them what they want to hear. It's hard to have honest

“The issue is not whether this approach to covering the news is perfect, but whether professionals working in the mainstream press are consistently striving to follow high standards.”

debates and reach constructive compromises when Americans are tuned into prime-time shouting matches on Fox News and MSNBC and that's that.

I know that many journalists are doing fine work on a wide variety of beats, from business to sports, from international news to metro news in smaller markets. At the same time, I have spent my entire career watching many—not all, by any means—mainstream journalists struggle to cover news about religion, culture and moral issues or ignore those topics, until they affect political news.

The trend appears to be toward the European model, especially on hot-button social issues. This was true long before Donald Trump reached the White House.

A key moment came in the fall of 2011, when—days after he stepped down as editor—Bill Keller of *The New York Times* appeared in a forum at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum in progressive Austin, Texas. Right off the bat, the moderator asked if the Times had evolved into a “liberal” newspaper.

Keller insisted that it was still important for *Times* journalists to be balanced and fair when covering politics and other important subjects. But when it comes to matters of moral and social issues, he said it was only natural for scribes in the world's most powerful newsroom to view events through what

he considers a liberal, intellectual and tolerant lens.

Flashing back to the controversial 2004 Okrent column, Keller said it was important that the public editor conceded that the newspaper's worldview is “steeped in the mores of a big, rambunctious city,” which means that it tends to be “skeptical of dogma, secular, cosmopolitan.”

Is that liberal?

“We're liberal in the sense that ... liberal arts schools are liberal,” he said. “We're an urban newspaper. ... We write about evolution as a fact. We don't give equal time to Creationism.” Keller continued: “We are liberal in the sense that we are open-minded, sort of tolerant, urban. Our wedding page includes—and did even before New York had a gay marriage law—included gay unions. So, we're liberal in that sense of the word, I guess. Socially liberal.”

Asked directly if the *Times* slants its coverage to favor “Democrats and liberals,” he added: “Aside from the liberal values, sort of social values thing that I talked about, no, I don't think that it does.”

The key words, of course, are “aside from.”

As I wrote in one of my national “On Religion” columns: “And what are America's hot-button social issues? Any list would include sex, salvation, abortion, euthanasia, gay rights, cloning and a few other sensitive matters that are inevitably linked to religion. That's all.”

What does this mean, in practice? Shortly before stepping down, Keller—who has called himself a “crashed Catholic”—wrote a column arguing that traditional religious believers—evangelical Protestants and conservative Catholics, in particular—should face strict scrutiny when running for higher office. After all, he once wrote that if a candidate believes that “space aliens dwell among us,” shouldn't voters know if these beliefs will shape future policies?

This socially liberal worldview does have its weaknesses when it comes to covering news outside zip codes close to Manhattan, especially when the news—think U.S. Supreme Court coverage—veers into issues of religious liberty and First Amendment freedoms. It would appear that the great Gray Lady is using the American Model on some issues, while applying an advocacy, European Model on others.

Meanwhile, surveys of Americans indicate that their belief that journalists are accurate and fair keep sliding. In 1972, Gallup researchers found that 68% of Americans trusted the news media. That fell to 32% in 2016, with Republican anger fueling the fire. Last year (2019) Gallup found that 13% have a “great deal” of trust in the news, 28% a “fair” amount, 30% “not very much” and 28% “none at all.”

It doesn't help that news consumers say they want accurate, balanced news—but that doesn't seem to show up, when it comes to ratings for cable TV news or

viral news reports in social media. I think it's fair to say that millions of Americans have no idea what is “news” and what is “opinion” when reading information that has chopped, diced and filled with “spin” on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and late-night comedy shows.

Americans seem to have lost faith in old-school American journalism and, clearly, many journalists are losing the faith as well.

No one needs to claim that the American Model of the Press is perfect or that journalists are perfect, as they strive to do hard work in economically trying times. However, journalists are supposed to have professional standards that they are striving to meet. They are supposed show respect for citizens and institutions on both sides of divisive issues in political, cultural and religious life.

Think of it this way. Rational people know that the American court system is not perfect. But how many Americans would, if they were in trouble, want to be tried in a court system in some other part of the world?

The American Model of the Press is like that. The issue is not whether this approach to covering the news is perfect, but whether professionals working in the mainstream press are consistently striving to follow high standards. As John Carroll said, challenging his *Los Angeles Times* team to do a better job covering a hot-button religious, moral and political issue: “I respect people on both sides of the debate. A newspaper that is intelligent and fair-minded will do the same.”

Let me state this, once again, in theological terms: We live in a sinful, fallen and broken world.

That's the human condition, and that affects the work done by journalists, along with other professions in the marketplace of ideas. This doesn't mean that journalists should stop striving to follow high standards of excellence, even when covering matters that cause bitter fighting in our stressed-out public square.



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