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Kovach and Rosenstiel's *Elements of Journalism*: a foundational text or a moment in history?

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Abstract

For many journalism students and teachers, and indeed working journalists, Kovach and Rosenstiel's elements of journalism, as set out in their book *Elements of Journal-*

ism have become veritable tablets of journalistic stone. Their Elements are seen by many as the definitive statement of ethical journalism practice. The book, first published in 2001, was based on the findings of an inquiry by the Committee of Concerned Journalists who gathered some of America's "most influential news-people" and, according to the book's blurb: "Through exhaustive research, surveys, interviews, and public forums, they identified the essential elements that define journalism and its role in our society." This paper asks whether Kovach and Rosenstiel's work – last updated in 2014 - should be regarded as a foundational text for journalists across the world, or as just an interesting reflection on the state of journalism in the United States at the turn of the century? For four basic reasons this paper argues for the latter. First, although when the book was first published in 2001 when we only had glimpses of the impact that web 2.0 would have on almost every aspect of journalism, by 2014 it was pretty clear that it had been transformative. And whilst in their updated version there is some recognition of this, in a world in which the very notion of who is a journalist has come under intense scrutiny, Kovach and Rosenstiel's analysis appears to be somewhat dated. Second, do the Elements, even updated, help in combatting 'fake news' however defined? Third, the book's sub-title "what newspeople should know and the public should expect" implies a division between news producers and news consumers that is no longer appropriate. And finally, behind the Elements lurks the twin shadowy notions of 'the truth' and 'objectivity' which still lie at the core of American journalism practice and education but which are highly contested elsewhere. The article will

argue that whilst Kovach and Rosenstiel have made an important historical contribution to the debate about journalism ethics – they have not produced universal and enduring tablets of journalistic stone (indeed, given the changing dynamics of contemporary journalism such an artifice would be outdated even before publication).

Introduction

For many journalism students and teachers, and indeed working journalists, Kovach and Rosenstiel’s ‘elements of journalism’, as set out in their book *The Elements of Journalism: What News People Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, (2014) have become veritable tablets of journalistic stone.

Their Elements are seen by many as encompassing the definitive statement of professional, ethical journalism practice. The book, first published in 2001, was based on the findings of an inquiry by the Committee of Concerned Journalists who gathered some of America’s “most influential news-people” and, according to the book’s blurb: “Through exhaustive research, surveys, interviews, and public forums, they identified the essential elements that define journalism and its role in our society.”

In many ways this is a very good guide to journalism practice containing useful practical insights combined with a plethora of enlightening anecdotes and some indications of a number of theoretical approaches to journalism and journalism studies. But this article asks whether Kovach and Rosenstiel’s work – last updated in 2014 - should be regarded as a foundational text for journalists across the world, or just an interesting and useful reflection on the state of journalism in the United States at the turn of the century?

There are three substantive reasons why this article argues for the latter interpretation.

The authors’ understanding of the notion of ‘the truth’ – which is a cornerstone of their elements - is problematic and there is also an unsatisfactory engagement with the debates around objectivity.

The tone (and content) of the book has an underpinning assumption that American journalism values and practices are universal and this coupled with a discomfiting ‘Pollyannaism’ gives it a certain unworldliness.

And linked to this unworldliness there is a naivety, even for a book published in 2014, about the supposed liberating powers of the internet and the ‘wonders of citizen journalism’; as a result, readers could be forgiven for being somewhat baffled by the subsequent rise of ‘fake news’ (a phenomenon that came to prominence after the book’s publication date).

Before engaging with these substantive points there are three minor (though significant) issues to be mentioned. First, the main title, ‘Elements of Journalism’ is somewhat misleading. It should more correctly be titled ‘Elements of News Journalism’ - a feature writer, a showbiz reporter or a columnist, for example, might find significant parts of this book not just irrelevant but inappropriate. Then there is the book’s subtitle: “What newspeople should know and the public should expect”; this implies a division between news producers and news consumers that is arguably no longer appropriate. Indeed, the entire debate about who is a journalist and, indeed, what is journalism, is now at the very heart of the journalistic debate as the formal boundaries between producers and audience continue to dissolve. One final quibble; the introductory chapter is headed ‘What is Journalism For?’ and the authors go on to tell us: “The primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with information they need to be free and self-governing” (Ibid. p. 17) It is a fine-sounding declaration but does it really have any meaning other than something to be carved over the portico of the entrance to a media publishing house? But just to confuse us, a little later we are told “The essential product of journalism is trust” (Ibid, p 83) - so which is it - one, both, neither, or should authors of journalism texts seek to avoid any such grand-sounding aphorisms?

The 'Truth'

At the core of the book is a problematic and confusing notion of the 'truth'. The chapter heading for the very first Element is, "Truth: the First and Most Confusing Principle" (Ibid. p. 47) and shortly after we have a section heading "Journalism's first obligation is to the truth" (Ibid p. 49). So we begin with the notion that 'truth' is the first obligation but a confusing one. The authors then go on to compound the confusion by writing "On this [the obligation to the truth] there is absolute unanimity and also utter confusion: everyone agrees journalists must tell the truth, yet people are befuddled about "the truth" means." (Ibid. p. 49) – hardly surprising.

The problem that the authors keep confronting is that they seem to be aware that, in most cases, the notion of a definable 'truth' is hugely problematic but cannot bring themselves to admit that in most cases it doesn't actually exist in the singular there are as many truths as there are observers. The result is that they are in danger of sending young journalists on what amounts to a wild goose chase in pursuit of a non-existent truth. If it doesn't exist, as such, then it can't be found and to suggest to would-be journalists that they should be pursuing a chimera is, at the very least, unhelpful.

This argument should not be interpreted as a crude postmodernist Nietzschean notion of there being no such thing as the truth per se, rather it is to suggest that in most situations, whilst there might be obtainable facts, there are many truths depending on who is being asked. It is a position closer to Lyotards' argument that

"...truth is always contingent on historical and social context rather than being absolute and universal and that truth is always partial and "at issue" rather than being complete and certain. (Aylesworth, 2015).

In other words there are 'truths' for journalists to uncover but rarely 'the truth'. This is not to deny that there are not observable facts – the car was travelling on the wrong side of the road, a cyclist was in the middle of the road, the car struck the cyclist. But why was the car on the wrong side of the road, maybe avoiding a pedestrian, why was the cyclist in the middle of the road, maybe to avoid a pothole and why did the collision happen, perhaps it was night time and the cyclist had no lights? In other words is there not one truth about this accident but many.

This is not to argue that journalists should not always be 'truthful' - there are verifiable facts which journalists should obtain, check and publish, and nor should they resile from attempting to distinguish 'true facts' from false ones. But this does not imply that there is a pot of gold at the end of the journalists' rainbow labelled 'the truth'; although Kovach and Rosenstiel suggest that it does exist and is worth pursuing when they write: "We understand truth is a goal – at best elusive – and still embrace it" (Op cit. p. 58/9)

Tony Harcup put the notion of the 'the truth' into a more rounded context when he wrote:

"Journalists aim to get as close to the truth as possible within the constraints under which they work and in as far as the facts of the matter under consideration are known to anyone. However, all the potential facts will be subjected to a process of selection and construction of news that is often said to simplify the messiness of reality into neat narratives. Also, exactly what the best obtainable version of the truth is may change over time as more information becomes available and/or more sources speak out. Furthermore, what is regarded as being true may also depend on the background and predispositions of journalists, sources, and members of the audience..." (Harcup, 2014, p. 140)

Or, as put more succinctly by veteran Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein, who said journalists' mission was to seek "the best obtainable version of the truth" (Bernstein, 1998)

Deliberate falsification in journalism is rare - we will come back to 'fake news' later - but arguments as to what are and are not the most important elements of a particular event are not, and this is where the problem lies. For example, a reporter sent to cover a political gathering listens to perhaps an hour of speeches, followed by an hour of further contributions from the audience. What does he or she extract for a two-minute news package, or a 300-word story? Is it the main point the speaker is attempting to make? Or is it the central point of the speech as the journalist ascertains it, which might well be different from the intention of the speaker? Or is it the line that s/he, and the other journalists covering the meeting, subsequently agree upon? Or even, the line fed to the journalist by the speaker's spin doctor before the speech had even begun?

One thing is for sure, members of the audience will be unlikely to agree with the journalist's choice of lead. This is partly because, as Harcup notes (Ibid.) we all tend to experience the same event slightly differently, even if all things are equal; but in the case of the political meeting all things are not equal. Supporters of the speaker will undoubtedly appraise the speech more enthusiastically than any reporter could or should, and opponents will undoubtedly take a more negative view. Then, what of the other speakers? Are they to be

totally ignored in order to ensure that the main speaker's remarks get a prominent airing? And how about the contributions—heckles or questions - from the audience (if any), are they a part of the story? Which brings us to the bigger question. No political reporter goes to a meeting just to hear a speaker per se. They go to hear what the speaker has to say about a particularly salient issue. Should the speaker use the occasion to re-state his or her party's (or government's) well-known position that might constitute a story, but not an important one. However, should the speaker attack his or her party, or colleagues, then that becomes 'news' and takes precedence over all else. In other words, there are many ways of reporting a political meeting—dependent on the framing - all true but none of them necessarily the 'truth'.

Kovach and Rosenstiel clearly do recognise the problematics of fetishising the 'truth' and they do say that "the truth is a complicated and sometimes contradictory phenomenon, but if it is seen as a process over time journalism can get at it..." (Op. Cit. p. 58) The problem is that it isn't a "process" – at least not in common parlance – the truth is a noun, which suggests a verifiable existing fact which, in most cases, it isn't.

The UK media's 'difficulties' over reporting Brexit are a vivid example of how dangerous an illusion the notion of 'the truth' can be? Following the 2019 elections for the European Parliament, in which the UK was obliged to participate despite its commitment to leave the EU, the Brexit Party, who as their name suggests were very much in favour of the UK's withdrawal, finished first achieving 31.6% of the vote leading them to claim to have 'won' that election. But the parties that were wholly opposed to the UK's withdrawal gained 40% of the vote and hence they too claimed that they had won the vote. And the ruling Conservative Party, which came fourth, claimed that the election simply demonstrated how divided the country was and nobody had won the election. So there was no single truth just a number of truths, all of which differed but all were factually correct.

In a final attempt to justify building their elements on the shaky foundation of the 'truth' the authors posit that: "Coherence must be the ultimate test of journalistic truth" (Op. Cit. p. 57). But this is naïve. Any competent spin doctor can make any number of seemingly problematic statements appear coherent, and therefore, to follow Kovach and Rosenstiel's argument, these statements become the 'truth'. Politicians, or more probably their communications advisors, usually, try and ensure that their statements, particularly on controversial issues, leave them with, what is known as, 'wriggle room'. In other words they seek to ensure that their pronouncements are sufficiently ambiguous to enable them to present their latest prognostications as being consistent with their previous statements, despite the appearance of inconsistencies or lack of 'coherence'.

The ongoing objectivity obsession

Closely linked to debates around 'truth' are those around 'objectivity' – another chimera that journalists pursue in vain. A forcible reminder of the pointlessness of its pursuit was demonstrated in 2018 when the UK minister then responsible for the media, Matt Hancock, told an audience at the Oxford Media Convention:

"Objectivity means stating this fact is wrong, and that fact is true, and not giving any airtime to total nonsense at all. Where facts can be established, your duty is to tell the truth. Objective reality exists. Your job is to find it and tell it." (Hancock, 2018).

At least Kovach and Rosenstiel do accept the problematics surrounding 'objectivity' but still display what almost amounts to a nostalgic longing for it when they head their section discussing this issue as "The Lost meaning of Objectivity" (Op. Cit. p. 101) The section begins with a quote from Dan Gilmour who states: "We are human. We have biases and backgrounds and a variety of conflicts that we bring to our jobs every day." (Op. Cit. p. 101) And the authors note that he suggests abandoning the word altogether and replacing it with "thoroughness, accuracy, fairness and transparency" (Op. Cit. p 101) But Kovach and Rosenstiel are clearly reluctant to let go of objectivity completely, instead arguing: "The call for objectivity was an appeal for journalists to develop a consistent method of testing information – a transparent approach to evidence – precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work." (Op. Cit. p 101) But objectivity (like truth) is not a process it is a noun which implies it is something that actually exists. It does not; and it would be far healthier if journalism text books dropped the term altogether, or at least only discussed it to discount it. As this author has argued elsewhere (Gaber, 2015) 'fairness' is a far more worthy goal for journalists to pursue. And whilst, like objectivity, it is also a process rather than an end in itself, for the individual journalist it does have some sort of reality, which is revealed if, after completing a story, they interrogate themselves sufficiently robustly as to whether – given all the material they have collected – they

have been fair to all involved in the story and also fair to the audience.

Because the authors clearly recognise the fundamental weaknesses surrounding the notion of objectivity as a mythical journalistic mountain-top, they look for other ways to define it. In the final chapter of the book they remind readers that in their chapter on verification (Chapter Four) they had "... called on journalists to make a major shift toward transparency, arguing that this concept came closer to the real meaning of objectivity than the more muddled notions connected to neutrality that some journalists have used." (Op. Cit. p. 290). One wonders why they, like other journalism instructors, don't just cease trying to square this particular circle and abandon the idea of objectivity (and the truth for that matter) once and for all?

Pollyanna-ism

Elements also displays a rather simplified view of the journalistic process and one that is essentially viewed, through a Stars and Stripes lens. One small, but significant, example of this is their assertion that the *New York Times* has become "... the most influential newspaper in New York and then the world (Op. Cit. p. 74)". This sort of statement is akin to assertions such as "we" (in this case the UK) have "the best broadcasting system in the world". It might be the case, but who is to judge, who is to say? In the case of the authors' assertion about the *Times*, it ignores the claims of the *Daily Mail* and the *Guardian*, both of whose websites have many more daily users than the *Times*, nor the claims of Japan's *Yomiuri Shimbun* which has a print circulation four times that of the *New York Times*.

This American bias could be discounted were it not for the fact that it perhaps explains the problematic tone of the book (a tone which bleeds into its substance). This tone can be characterised as "all is for the best in the best of all worlds". This is manifest early on when the authors trace the beginnings of newspapers in America to a golden age of small-town communities – an interpretation which relies more on American folklore than historical accuracy: and they betray a similar naivety in their descriptions of the origins of the Habermassian public sphere in eighteenth century European coffee houses when they write:

"Community creation has always been at the heart of news from the earliest days of newspapers growing out of the conversation that occurred in coffeehouses to the communities of citizens and journalists that form and reform around breaking news stories or communities of interest on social platforms such as Twitter"
(Op. Cit. p.153)

Most interpretations of the motivations of American newspaper proprietors in the last century, as with the merchants' conversing in the coffee houses of Europe in the century before, suggest that commerce and profit were at the forefront of their considerations rather than Kovach and Rosenstiel's notion of "community creation". As Michael Schudson put it: "Commercial motives propelled American journalism from its beginnings" (2008, p. 28)

This Pollyannaism is, to some extent, fundamental to the authors' argument. They have section heads that enjoin journalists to be independent from "class or economic status" (Op. Cit. p.157) and from "race, ethnicity, religion and gender" (Op. Cit. p.161). This is all fanciful. As Harcup earlier argued journalists, like any other social animal, are shaped by their backgrounds, experiences and dispositions - which cannot be simply wished away. As a political reporter this author was always deeply suspicious of those of his colleagues who would claim to have "no political views". What they were in fact saying, unless they were being mendacious, is that they were not aware of their own political views, which is a hazardous state to be in if one is seeking to produce politically unbiased coverage. The notion that journalists can somehow transcend their own backgrounds, gender, ethnicity etc is, I fear, naïve not to say potentially dangerous.

Perhaps even more profoundly mistaken is the authors' views of how the capitalist system works and how it intrudes on virtually every aspect of journalism. They have an almost blind faith in the perfectibility of capitalism: "History promises that a market economy in an open society has the capacity to correct its mistakes organically" (Op. Cit. p.190), they write. Clearly 'history' promises nothing and its supposed ability to correct its own mistakes was not on show when the world economy crashed in 2008 and more parochially as newspapers in the US and elsewhere suffered, and continue to suffer, potentially mortal wounds as a result of the growing dominance of the big tech players - Google, Facebook, Apple etc.

This unreality also permeates of the authors' vision of life in the newsroom of today. "Journalists have an obligation to exercise the personal conscience (Op. Cit. p.272) they write and "... journalists have a responsibility to voice their personal conscience out loud and allow others around them to do so as well" (Op. Cit. p.272). They make these statements without any suggestion that in today's work environment of unpaid internships, freelance assignments and zero hours contracts, journalists just don't have the freedom to call

out their bosses should they deem them to be crossing some ethical line - indeed there was no golden age when this was ever feasible. Although in a tone that sounds more like whistling in the dark than a reality-based observation they say: "Those who run news organisations must encourage and allow staff to exercise this personal obligation" (Op. Cit. p.273) And if that doesn't work they almost urge working journalists to martyr themselves when they write: "In the end most journalists should feel that communicating to fellow citizens is a mission that transcends the institution where they work. That it is something of a calling and everyone who works in a newsroom is a steward of that mission page" (Op. Cit. p.284). At this point it might have been appropriate to have had some discussion about the role of trade unions in protecting journalists who speak out against unethical practices, but of this there is no mention. Indeed, throughout the entire 334 pages of the book, journalists' trade unions receive no mentions whatsoever.

In Kovach and Rosenstiel's world journalists are seen as essentially free agents, able to write what they like without constraint "...for truth to prevail, journalists must make clear to whom they owe their first loyalty" to which they argue it is to 'the citizen' rather than as it is in the real world – the employer.

That might have been the notion behind the early years of small-town journalism in the US when the press developed under the carapace of 'serving the community' But even then it was something of a myth and has become increasingly so. For the defining characteristic of mainstream media in the US (and much of the rest of the world) is that it is, for the most part, either a creature of the state or commercially driven. In the States most newspapers are privately-owned as are the major broadcasting outlets. Hence, in crude terms the journalists' first loyalty is not to the audience, as Kovach and Rosenstiel argue, but to preserving her or his job and that means obeying the diktats of the management hierarchy who are mainly, and understandably, focussed on the bottom line.

Hence, the first 'loyalty' of the journalist might be, notionally, to the audience but only to the audience as consumers rather than citizens. This means, inevitably, that the choice of stories to be covered is largely determined by what the audience wants, rather than what they might need. But this is ignored by the authors who write: "Thus people who produce journalism have different loyalties from employees engaged in other types of work. They have a social obligation that at times overrides employers or financial sponsors immediate interests, and yet this obligation is the source of their employers' financial success." (Op. Cit. p.73). This is, I fear, in the context of the commercial media, close to delusional, as is their statement: "Journalism works best when both sides are committed to the values of honest independent news, not one side to business or ideology and some other cause and the other to public service. History suggests that this works only when the owner of the operation believes deeply in these core journalistic values." (Op. Cit. p.92)

The Online world and fake news

Pollyannaism is also much in evidence in the discussion about the Web and whether, in terms of journalism, it is essentially a benign or malign factor. In the first edition of the book, published in 2001, we only had glimpses of the impact that Web 2.0 would have on almost every aspect of journalism, but by 2014 it was pretty clear that it had been, and would continue to be transformative, mainly as a result of the rise of social media. And whilst in their updated version there is some recognition of this Kovach and Rosenstiel's analysis appears to be somewhat dated; their guidance for journalists working on/with/against online news and social media would find little to assist them, as they seek to navigate their way through the shark-infested waters of the online world, where 'fake news' would soon be found lurking.

The authors begin their discussion about online journalism identifying the key issue when they write:

"It has become fashionable recent years to wonder who is and who isn't a journalist. We think this is the wrong question. The question people should ask is whether or not the person in question is doing journalism.... Anyone can be a journalist not everyone is" (Op. Cit. p.144/145)

As the digital revolution gathered momentum a number of respected scholars saw, or tried to see, in the growth of social media the possibilities of an idealised electronic public sphere. Followers of Habermas, if not the man himself, evinced great enthusiasm for the democratic potentials of the internet as a means of bypassing the traditional domination of the public sphere by the capitalist media. Habermas himself was not so sure. In 2006 he argued that far from the internet being the realisation of his notion of 'communicative action', the internet in fact performed a 'parasitical' role in the public sphere because of the fragmentation that inevitably arose from a communication medium that was essentially individualised (Habermas, (2006, p411-426). And the distinguished political communications scholar, Jay Blumler, moved from initial enthusiasm about the democratic potential of the web, to pessimism and back again to optimism as he became

enthused by the notion of the web providing “an online civic commons” (Blumler & Coleman, 2009). However, by the following year he (and his fellow author) were beginning to worry about the ratio of ‘signal to noise’ in the new online dispensation. (2010, pp. 139-154). Nonetheless such arguments did not detain Kovach and Rosenstiel who allowed their Pollyannaism to kick in when they asserted: “The web is a self-cleaning oven” (Op. Cit. p.199) It might have appeared to be the case in its earliest incarnations but surely by 2014 it would have been clear that this was a long way from the reality.

Fake news, as a major problem for journalists, only arose in 2016 during the Trump presidential campaign, hence its absence from the 2014 edition of the book is hardly surprising but given the upbeat tone of this edition one wonders how the issue will be tackled? Certainly, in terms of predicting the key issues that will be facing journalists in the future the authors did not predict either the mendacity of the web or the rise of fake news.

Having identified a number of flaws in the book it is only right that the conclusion of this article should reaffirm its beginning. In other words, in highlighting those aspects of the book that appear to fall short, it is also important to recognise that the broad thrust, not to mention much of the detail, makes this one of the best general books about journalism currently available. But journalism is undergoing rapid change and the speed of that change is intensifying. In these circumstances it is to be hoped that a book that has the standing of *Elements* should be updated and re-published – and in so doing perhaps some of the shortcomings and contradictions addressed in this article may be resolved.

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