

The news media's credibility problem

by Herbert_G_Klein

Most polls rate the press and the Congress at a low ebb in public respect. That represents a strange phenomenon where reporters, particularly broadcasters, are treated as celebrities, as are members of Congress, and yet they are the subject of strong, often bitter, criticism.

During my career, I have been both a reporter and a White House communicator, first asking questions and then answering them. And I have learned that the question-and-answer process forms many public opinions.

Those who answer evasively, ducking reasonable questions, appear weak; those who ask questions are criticized when the public feels they are unfair.

In this ongoing battle between the public and the press, the media seem to be losing ground. A major reason for public criticism of the media stems from how questions are asked. Too often the reporter inserts his own opinion in the questions and expects the interviewee to accept this innuendo.

A recent interview of Vice President Dick Cheney by CNN's Wolf Blitzer has stirred new controversy and illustrates the issue. At one point Cheney told Blitzer: "I simply don't accept the premise of your question. I just think it's hogwash." In his question, Blitzer included the phrase "the Senate and the House now seriously question your credibility because of blunders and failures."

In his retaliation for the hogwash comment by Cheney, Blitzer countered: "What, that there were no blunders? The president himself says there were blunders."

The transcript shows no comment by the vice president saying there were no blunders. He did accuse Blitzer and the media of "writing us off."

At another point, Blitzer voiced the opinion that the prime minister of Iraq seems "more interested right now in establishing good relations with Iran and Syria than he is with more moderate Arab governments in Jordan, Egypt or Saudi Arabia." Cheney answered, "He's got to develop relationships with all of them, and he is."

The point (or premise) of Blitzer's question seemed more apparent when he asked, "How worried are you of this nightmare scenario that the U.S. is building up this Shiite-dominated Iraqi government with an enormous amount of military equipment, sophisticated training, and then in the end, they're going to turn against the United States?" Cheney dismissed Blitzer's concept as a "what if," but the question, and Blitzer's opinion,

planted with listeners another seed of American distrust of their Iraqi allies.

Unfair news leads frequently come out of questions with innuendos like Blitzer's. Reporters' innuendos are frequently combined with the answer of an interviewee and incorporated into their story giving the false impression that the combined thoughts are the view of the interviewee.

The controversial Blitzer interview with Cheney was picked up later in a column by Eugene Robinson of The Washington Post. It was almost as if Robinson felt he had to support a media buddy or that he was just looking to write something discrediting Cheney.

Robinson wrote: "Amazingly, the vice president is sounding as if he lives in a land of his own imagining, a place beyond the truth. In Cheney's world, the Iraq war is an enormous success. The idea that anyone would think otherwise is hogwash."

For anyone who reads the Blitzer transcript carefully, it is the Robinson comment that is hogwash, although Blitzer's questions and Cheney's answers illustrate a major, but expected, difference in their evaluation of successes and failures in Iraq. The Robinson column illustrates what happens when the writer's opinion is based on bias, not fact; and that imbalance builds a negative perspective of the media.

In his column, Robinson carries on his exaggeration into real la-la land:

"Let's hope that Cheney isn't really out to lunch, that he's just playing politics. A conservative friend reminded me the other day that all the White House has left in terms of public support is the hard-line Republican right. Let's hope Cheney is just tossing out red meat to keep these stalwarts on the team.

"But yes, he is coming across as a little crazy."

The Blitzer interview and then the Robinson personal attack illustrate why the public loses faith in the media. In retrospect, these professionals made bloggers look totally credible.

Personal attack and name-calling, such as demonstrated by Robinson, only lowers public respect for the media. Does any reader believe the vice president is "crazy" or "out to lunch"? A columnist has a right to disagree with a public official, but personal accusations like "crazy" breed contempt for the writer unless he is accurate.

The news world is undergoing an evolution with viewers, listeners and readers changing their news sources frequently. This is a communications era where formats of communication change often. In the broadcast field, formats are shifting.

Fifty years ago, when television was in its infancy, local stations struggled to add more national and international news to their formats. Today the emphasis is local. CNN, which developed a reputation of balanced coverage when it was run by Tom Johnson, now has become more liberal with Lou Dobbs almost sounding like a one-man band against world trade. Fox, headed by Roger Ailes, thrives on conservatism and controversy. Newspapers are struggling to make the best use of their ability to gather complete news, and their emphasis has become more local. Not long ago, national news was more predominant.

All these format changes will have little effect if the news media continue to lose credibility. It takes courage to dig into a tough story, but the results usually are higher readership, if the story proves to be factual. The public's judgment of balance comes not only from the subject matter but the content of media questions and how they are asked.

Much stress is being placed today on the lack of civility, the lack of compromise in today's government, and that is a critical problem. An effective democracy also needs a credible media, and that requires reporters and editors whose dedication is to getting the news right. Credibility never has been more important.

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