

# THE READER

A publication of the McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute

## Restoring Public Trust in News

A talk by Walter E. Hussman Jr. at the 8th Annual John McCandlish Phillips Lecture

We have a serious problem today in America with journalism. It relates to a serious lack of trust in news reporting.

I believe journalism has two parts:

- 1) news reporting and
- 2) opinion writing.

This serious lack of trust has to do with what the public perceives as a lack of fairness in news reporting. They believe that opinion writing has become too much part of news reporting.

Almost all journalism schools would teach that you need a clear and distinct separation between news reporting and opinion writing. But more and more news organizations are blurring those lines, and often they are not clearly labeling what is news and what is opinion.

But you do not need to take my word for it. Let me show you what the public thinks.

### Public Polls on the Lack of Trust in News

The Gallup poll has been recording what Americas say about trust in the newspapers now for over 40 years.

#### American's Trust in Newspapers

2019	23%
2009	25%
1999	33%
1989	39%
1979	51%

Source: Gallup

This poll was released in February 2020, and it covered 20,000 interviews from all 50 states.

Here's the front page of the results, which was funded in part by the Knight Foundation.

As you can see, some 40 years ago, over 50 percent of Americans trusted the newspapers. And as you can see each decade that percentage has dropped, and in 2019, it was at a low point of 23 percent.

And here you can see how it compares to other American institutions.

#### Americans' confidence in U.S. Institutions, 2018

	Great deal/ Quite a lot
The military	74%
Small business	67%
The police	54%
The church or organized religion	38%
The presidency	37%
The U.S. Supreme Court	37%
The medical system	36%
Banks	30%
The public schools	29%
Organized labor	26%
Big business	25%
<b>Newspapers</b>	<b>23%</b>
The criminal justice system	22%
Television news	20%
Congress	11%

Source: Gallup, June 1-10, 2018

If you delve into this report, you will see that what Americans said about their lack of trust in news was even more disturbing. American clearly see too much bias in reporting. They also think inaccuracies are either intentional distortions or fabricating news.

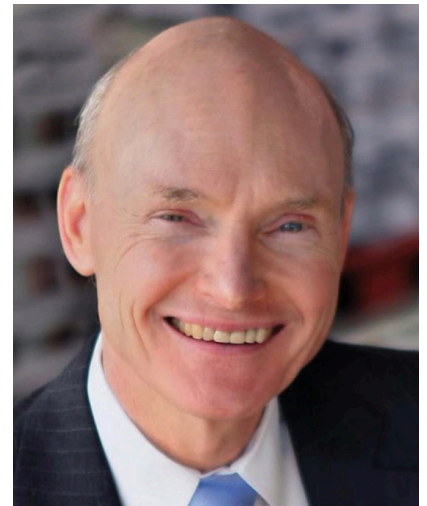
Also from a Gallup report, here is how people differentiated among the media regarding different levels of trust.

#### Gallup Poll/Trusted News Sources

Local TV Stations	74%
<b>Local Newspapers</b>	<b>67%</b>
Local Radio Stations	65%
Friends & Family	62%
P.B.S.	59%
N.P.R.	55%
Network News (ABC,CBS,NBC)	54%
Morning TV Network News	51%
N.Y. Times, W.S. Journal, USA Today	49%
CNN News	48%
Fox News	43%
Internet	40%
Radio Talk Shows	38%
TV Talk Shows	33%
Entertainment TV Shows	29%

Notice the greatest trust is in local media, local television and local newspapers. Trust in

### WALTER E. HUSSMAN JR.



**Walter E. Hussman Jr.**, publisher of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette and Chairman of WEHCO Media, Inc. was named Editor & Publisher's Publisher of the Year in 2008. According to Editor & Publisher, Hussman, a third-generation newspaperman, has become a contrarian in an age of newspaper industry conventional wisdom. Rather than shrink circulation, the Democrat-Gazette maintains its ambition to be a statewide newspaper.

Hussman, 75, was a member of Board of Directors of The Associated Press from 2000 - 2009 and is Chairman of the P.A.R.K. Foundation, an after school program for at-risk teenagers. Included in Walter's many civic activities are his continuing efforts to improve public education and after-school programs in Little Rock and the state of Arkansas. In 2016 he joined the Board of Directors of Pathway to Freedom to assist in its prison ministry and education efforts.

Walter was the first recipient of the Frank Mayborn Leadership Award from the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association, where he served as president in 2001-2002. He served as chairman or president of the Gladney Society, the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce, the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, the Anthony School, and the Donaghey Foundation. In October 2009 Walter received University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Distinguished Alumnus Award. On February 10, 2012, Walter Hussman was inducted into the Arkansas Business Hall of Fame. In 2019, he was named Arkansan of the Year by EasterSeals. In October 2019, the journalism school at the University of North Carolina was named the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media.

national news organizations, including newspapers, is significantly lower.

Unfortunately, it's local media that are struggling with sustainability, while some of the national newspapers are doing far better in a digital world with a larger potential audience to reach. If we lose more and more local news outlets, trust could drop further in news reporting.

fewer people than CNN, but you could not tell it by the ratings. Fox News also proved they could have a smaller audience compared to the broadcast network news shows, and they could still be profitable.

This did not go unnoticed. Soon MSNBC was trying to carve out its own niche on the left. CNN, probably for economic reasons, realized it was far less expensive to have opinion shows like Fox, and they moved away from a straightforward news format.

Walter Isaacson ran CNN News in its earlier version, and he confirms it bears little resemblance to the objective format that drove its initial popularity in the 1980s.

Because of the 24-hour news cycle, and the fact that there are slow news days, the cable networks adopted standards where they would report virtually anything anyone else reported, even before verifying its accuracy. Most newspapers had a standard where they would try to verify accuracy before publishing. In this regard, the AP was a great resource. For example, if a newspaper in Hartford reported something, we wouldn't necessarily report it in Little Rock until the AP moved the story. This gave us and other newspapers the assurance that the AP was checking it for accuracy.

But with a new paradigm where cable news network would report something that someone else reported, and if later they learned it was not accurate, they would report it again, not so much as a correction, but as news that it was not accurate when first reported.

It created a new awareness among news consumers. A friend of mine told me a number of years ago that when he saw something reported on television, he would wait for about three days to see if he could determine if it was really true.

## The Internet

Then along came the Internet in the 1990s. Desperate for content to use to sell digital advertising, companies like Yahoo and Google bought news content from The Associated Press, which incidentally is owned by most of daily newspapers in America. These companies would take the AP news report and mix it with reports from other sources, some which did not have the same journalistic rigor for accuracy as the AP. So, you often had both accurate and inaccurate information merged together in a scrolling website. This created obvious credibility problems.



Photo of Walter E. Hussman Jr. giving the presentation at the John McCandlish Phillips Annual Lecture on April 13, 2022.

Last year, an even larger survey of trust in media was released. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University in England interviewed 92,000 people in 46 countries on six continents. (Apparently no one was interviewed on Antarctica!) They asked a lot of questions other than trust, but one was whether they trusted the news media in their country.

The countries were ranked by the percent of people who did trust the news. The highest was Finland, at 65 percent. Of the 46 countries the lowest was 29 percent. It was the United States.

If we don't believe we have a serious problem, we're not being realistic.

How did this happen?

For many, many years survey after survey showed that the public generally thought most of the media were left leaning and more liberal than conservative.

Fox News came along and realized they could create a niche by having a more conservative approach. Indeed, they soon realized they could get good ratings with opinion shows, which were far less expensive to produce than supporting bureaus around the world. For a while, Fox News employed far

## Facebook

Then came companies like Facebook, who created terms like “news feeds,” which might actually include some news but also just personal content. Then these “news feeds” started including information that was anonymous. This crossed another boundary. For example, our newspapers will not publish any letter to the editor that are anonymous. Contrast that with all the anonymous or unrecognizable names on Facebook. But with anonymity, people will say things they wouldn’t say in person, or if their identity was disclosed. So, it’s easy to see how this devolved into a lot more vitriol than what you would read in a family newspaper.

## Format

Format also played a role in this decline in credibility. As newspapers almost universally gave away their news for free, and did it mostly on scrolling websites, they were delivering their news in the same format as many less reputable websites, or even outlets spreading disinformation or misinformation. The format was the same for both: scrolling websites. These websites without normal journalistic standards tended to tarnish the news organizations that had good standards, further eroding public confidence.

According to journalism professor Iris Chyi at the University of Texas, a leading scholar on the study of digital subscriptions, this blurring of the lines between accurate and inaccurate news website has made the scrolling website appear to be an inferior product. It is more difficult for newspapers to charge for their news online than what they could once charge for a printed newspaper, which conveys the idea of a professionally curated news product. These subscriber value perceptions are part of the reason for the decline in local newspaper economics.

## A.G. Sulzberger’s

### 15 million goal

The New York Times Publisher A. G. Sulzberger commented on his company’s goal to reach 15 million digital subscribers by 2027. They are currently closer to 10 million, so they need another 5 million. It appears that they have realized the low hanging fruit, and that next 5 million could be

a challenge. To address that challenge, he said the Times needed greater trust and credibility with readers who believe news needs to be fair and impartial.

## Adolph Ochs

It’s interesting to compare this to over 120 years ago, when his great-great grandfather, Adolph Ochs, came from The Chattanooga Times to gain ownership control of The New York Times. In the late 1890s, many of the big New York dailies were cutting the single copy price to a penny a copy. It even had a name in journalism history, the penny press. Also, at that time most newspapers in America were highly partisan, often affiliated with a political party.

Ochs realized that his New York competitors were cutting the price to a penny to get more circulation, which would yield more advertising, so even if it was a loss leader to go to a penny, it would be more profitable. Ochs was an astute businessman and publisher. He came up with an even better idea. He reasoned that if The New York Times was not affiliated with either political party, and stressed impartiality in news coverage, he could get even more circulation.

### “To give the news impartially, without fear or favor...” - Adolph Ochs

His strategy worked. And it did not go unnoticed. Soon more and more newspapers were moving away from partisan news to impartial coverage. Soon impartiality and objectivity in news coverage became the standard in America, which prevailed for most of the 20th century, quite a contrast to the 19th century in American journalism.

Adolph Ochs coined a phrase, to me one of the greatest in American journalism, and he did it in under 10 words: “... to give the news impartially, without fear or favor...”

## Could Come Full Circle

The New York Times could come full circle over a century later, like Ochs did in the 1890s, to again emphasize impartiality in news, with the same business reason today as

then, to increase readership and paid subscriptions.

So, what is the solution? How can trust be restored in the American news media?

I believe Adolph Ochs famous phrase is as relevant today as it was over 120 years ago. And to me, it's a key to the solution. The New York Times has great science reporting and great arts coverage. But most of the people I know, both liberal and conservative, do not believe their political, election, and national public affairs reporting is impartial. Hopefully A. G. Sulzberger will go back to his great-great grandfather's phrase over a century ago. If he does, I think the Times may get to that 15 million, and in doing so provide a great journalistic service with renewed impartial standards.

## Trip to Vietnam

Five years ago, I was on a trip with some friends in Vietnam. Looking for some U.S. news, I turned to CNN International. Christiane Amanpour, who I respected for doing great reporting out of the Middle East, was doing an ad for her employer, CNN. As I was buttoning my shirt getting ready to go down for dinner, she said that she did not believe in the false equivalency of giving both sides. I stopped buttoning my shirt. I thought to myself, did I hear that correctly? I remembered that was in my first class in journalism: always give both sides. She said it was her job to find the truth, then reveal that to viewers.

The pursuit of truth is indeed a noble goal of journalism, but sometimes the truth is elusive, deceptive, and only reveals itself after some period of time. Until the truth is verified, it is best to give readers facts.

## Drafting a Statement of Core Values

I realized I did not want our readers to think what she said were our journalistic values. But how to do that? The answer was to tell our readers what our journalistic values were. I sat down and drafted seven short paragraphs. I showed them to all our editors. I showed them to the dean of the journalism school at UNC where I got my journalism degree over 50 years ago. I showed them to some other newspaper owners.

One highly respected newspaper owner wrote back "I wouldn't change a single word. They should be on the desk of every CEO of every news organization in America." So, in January 2017, we began publishing this statement of core values on page 2 in all ten of our daily newspapers every single day.

It didn't take long to start hearing from our readers. They universally praised them. Comments like "finally someone is willing to adopt solid journalism standards", and "now we know how to hold you accountable." I realized quickly that these were very popular with readers.

## Naming of UNC Journalism School

Over the course of the next two years, the Dean and the University of North Carolina approached us about naming the journalism school there for our family. I was first taken aback, given that names like "Cronkite" adorn certain journalism schools. I first turned it down, saying we couldn't afford it. But when we finally worked out a way to do it financially, I make two requests. First, they would change the name of the school from the school of media and journalism to the school of journalism and media. In

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***"A newspaper has 5 constituencies, including first its readers, then advertisers, then employees, then creditors, then shareholders. As long as the newspaper keeps those constituencies in that order, especially its readers first, all constituencies will be well served."  
(Walter Hussman, 1906-1988)***

other words, journalism first. They asked me at one point if I was going to insist on that, and I said yes. The other condition was that they would embrace and adopt the statement of core values, with slight modifications, for the school.

## Reason for the Donation

Some probably thought we made a donation because

1) I was an alumnus, and a number of my family members graduated or attended UNC. That was not the main reason.

2) Some may have assumed we wanted our name on the school. Well, I did think it was an honor to recognize four generations of our family committed to journalism. But that was not the main reason.

3) Some might have thought it was because our family loves journalism. Giving money to one of the very best journalism schools in the country could be a great idea to support journalism, but that was not the main reason.

4) The main reason was if we could get one of the top five journalism Schools in the country to embrace these core values, maybe we could get other journalism schools to do likewise. Then maybe we could get more news organizations to do it, too, and we will start slowly regaining credibility and trust among the public.

Maybe I was naïve, or maybe there's a better idea on restoring the public's trust. If there is, I'm all ears to hear it.

## Core Values


Let me briefly show you those core values:

Impartiality means reporting, editing, and delivering the news honestly, fairly, objectively, and without personal opinion or bias.

Credibility is the greatest asset of any news medium, and impartiality is the greatest source of credibility.

To provide the most complete report, a news organization must not just cover the news, but uncover it. It must follow the story wherever it leads, regardless of any preconceived ideas on what might be most newsworthy.

The pursuit of truth is a noble goal of journalism. But the truth is not always apparent or known immediately. Journalists' role is therefore not to determine what they believe at that time to be the truth and reveal only that

Arkansas Democrat  Gazette

### Statement of core values

"To give the news impartially, without fear or favor." (Adolph Ochs, 1858-1935)

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as completely and impartially as possible all verifiable facts so that readers can, based on their own knowledge and experience, determine what they believe to be the truth.

When a newspaper delivers both news and opinions, the impartiality and credibility of the news organization can be questioned. To minimize this as much as possible there needs to be a sharp and clear distinction between news and opinion, both to those providing and consuming the news.

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— Walter Hussman, Jr.  
Publisher

Copy of the Core Values as printed in the Arkansas Democrat Gazette.

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Note the word "objectivity" is used. The word has come under attack in some journalism circles. People say no one can be objective. Does that mean you shouldn't even try? To me it is like saying no one can be completely virtuous. So, does that mean you shouldn't even try to be virtuous?

I looked up the definition of "Objective". Here is what it says:

"Not influenced by personal feelings, interpretations, or prejudice; based on facts; unbiased"

Doesn't that sound like a laudable goal in reporting news? Don't you think that would give the public more confidence in news reporting. Which brings up another consideration. Objectivity is not just a state of mind or an object of reality. It is a guideline and a goal to pursue in

reporting a news story, its details and context.

I was recently reading about Albert Einstein, who in 1919 believed in the solid-state theory of the universe.

The theory was the universe was static, always had been, always would be.

Then 10 years later in 1929 he changed his mind. Based on new evidence, he realized he had been wrong, and now he believed the universe was constantly expanding, and probably had been all the way back for over 13 billion years to the Big Bang. I am thinking that Albert Einstein was being objective. He was willing to change his mind upon seeing new evidence. Isn't that a good standard for journalists too, to keep an open mind rather than adhering to a narrative that may or may not prove true in the future.

I found the word "objectivity" recently in a few news stories. On a story about the Ukraine and our intelligence gathering before and during the war, Avril Haynes, the Director of National Intelligence said that "objectivity was a core ethic of intelligence."

In a news obituary about former US Senator Kaneaster Hodges Jr., who led the Senate in prayer on September 30, 1978, the Senator said then: "Heal our wounded feelings, release our tensions, restore our objectivity."

That raises the question of what is the underlying objection, especially among some journalists, to be objective. It may well be human nature. Think about it.

Don't we all want people to agree with us? Don't we think we want other people to think like us? I believe that it is part of the human condition. That is why these core values are necessary. Think of them as guardrails for journalists.

It would seem tempting to write a story to convince others to our way of thinking. But that is the very reason reporters need to resist those normal human instincts in order to tell the story as straight as possible, to keep our emotions, prejudices, and politics out of covering the news. Those core values of journalism help us do just that.

My hope is that more journalism schools and news organizations will embrace these time-tested principles of journalism and we can begin to regain the trust of the American people.



# Walter Hussman's Core Values

- **"To give the news impartially, without fear or favor." (Adolph Ochs, 1858-1935)**
- **Impartiality means reporting, editing, and delivering the news honestly, fairly, objectively, and without personal opinion or bias.**
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- **To provide the most complete report, a news organization must not just cover the news, but uncover it. It must follow the story wherever it leads, regardless of any preconceived ideas on what might be most newsworthy.**
- **The pursuit of truth is a noble goal of journalism. But the truth is not always apparent or known immediately. A journalist's role is therefore not to determine what they believe at that time to be the truth and reveal only that to their readers, but rather to report as completely and impartially as possible all verifiable facts so that readers can, based on their own knowledge and experience, determine what they believe to be the truth.**
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## The Reader is a publication of The McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute

The McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute (MPJI) is based at The King's College in New York City. MPJI provides education, training and professional development programs for journalists at the high school, undergraduate and professional levels. It is named after the late John McCandlish Phillips, a legendary reporter at *The New York Times*.

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