

NEWS MEDIA & SOCIETY: RESTORING THE PUBLIC TRUST

Good journalism is vitally important for a strong democracy, but Americans increasingly do not trust the news media. We must restore citizens' trust in news reporting in order for our democracy to function well. This issue book suggests three approaches to repairing the relationship between the news media and the American people. Each approach offers different perspectives on what has damaged citizens' trust. Each presents various ways to address those problems. The ideas and suggestions come from citizens and experts across the country.

Approach 1: Strengthen Journalists' Conduct

Negative influences in journalism have been allowed to flourish because journalists have been working without identified standards of conduct. They have lost sight of journalism as a public service. Many professions, such as accounting, law, and teaching, require ongoing certification for participation in the field. Journalists should be subject to this kind of scrutiny especially given their unique role in our society.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

- Journalists should develop and post standards that help citizens discern fair and accurate news coverage.
- Once standards are devised, journalists should be officially tested and certified in these new standards.
- A greater commitment should be given to training journalists — in newsrooms and journalism schools — so they develop skills with the tradition of American democracy in mind.

DRAWBACKS

- Standards don't guarantee good behavior. Consider the recent Enron scandal. In this case, professional accounting standards were simply ignored.
- Journalism standards are a constantly moving target. Acceptable and non-acceptable behavior by journalists cannot be completely identified.
- While the behavior of journalists remains in question, we can't afford to wait for established standards. We must find quicker ways to address the problems.

TRADEOFFS

- If the conduct of journalists is monitored, it could limit the innovative thinking and risk-taking that leads to ground-breaking stories. It could also lead to censorship.
- If there is to be ongoing certification of journalists and continued monitoring of their conduct, it will require a huge commitment of both time and money. Also, opinions will differ on how best to execute this plan.

Approach 2: Open Up the Marketplace

It has been said that freedom of speech only applies to those who own the printing press. The reason news coverage has declined in quality is because the media is made up of corporate entities that are more concerned about profits than anything else. Too much ownership exists in the hands of a few, large companies. This squeezes out diverse opinions and coverage. We must guard against the type of ownership that big conglomerates such as Time Warner and Disney have garnered.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

- Place limits on how much ownership can exist in a market by one company, and lower the expectation of profit for news companies.
- Clearly define "public interest" and hold the media accountable to serve that interest.
- Boost alternative broadcasting by funding independent productions, public affairs programming and similar avenues.

DRAWBACKS

- To adequately cover the world's news, we need big media entities. Many important stories have been reported because these companies had the resources to support the pursuit.
- Free speech is paramount but it does mean we may sometimes have to watch and read things we don't like. After all, the media is simply feeding the public appetite as they continue to pay close attention to sensational stories.
- The marketplace is working. Americans have more choice than ever before and media corporations have used profits to create new programming such as The Learning Channel. They also earned no income during the aftermath of the September 11th attacks when they chose to broadcast commercial-free news coverage.

TRADEOFFS

- Without the money and resources of large corporations, the variety and quality of news could drop.
- More regulation could stifle free speech and make it harder for the media to respond to what we want. It would also take control away from journalists and give it to the government, and lead to regulation of both the internet and cable TV.

Approach 3: Get Citizens In

To regain the trust between the public and the media, citizens and journalists must find ways to relate as equals. When citizens take bold steps to impact the actions of the media, they will be more in control of how news stories are presented. They can also help to define newsworthy stories by becoming involved in the process of reporting them.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

- Citizen councils should be created that meet regularly with members of the media and serve as an arbitrator between the press and the public.
- Citizens should create their own news sources to cover stories they feel are missing in the mainstream media.
- Citizens should also boycott media coverage when they feel it is inadequate.

DRAWBACKS

- Ordinary citizens do not have the savvy, resources, or training to cover the news. If they tried, coverage would get worse.
- A news council was attempted at the national level and failed due to a lack of interest. These approaches won't last in the long run.
- There should be separation between the media and the public in order for the news to be accurately pursued and reported. Newspaper and TV stations cannot be run like Rotary Clubs.

TRADEOFFS

- By tearing down the wall that exists between the press and the public, members of the media would end up getting more involved in our daily lives.
- Councils and boycotts run by citizens are difficult to organize and sustain, and require a great deal of money to publicize.

The Kettering Foundation, a nonpartisan nonprofit 501 (c)(3) corporation, is based in Dayton, Ohio. Established in 1927, the central question behind the foundation's research work is: What does it take to make democracy work as it should? Rather than look for ways to improve on politics as usual, Kettering is seeking ways to make fundamental changes in how democratic politics are practiced. Guiding Kettering's research are three hypotheses: 1) Democracy requires citizens who accept their responsibility and are able to make sound decisions about the public's interest; 2) Democracy requires healthy societies of citizens in communities; 3) Democracy requires legitimate institutions that encourage healthy civil societies. The Foundation's research focuses on finding ways to make democracy work better by devising and testing strategies that will strengthen the role of citizens in governing themselves.