

Credibility, Incredibility, and the Demise of Objectivity, Civility, and Wisdom

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I have a friend, a newspaper reporter who fancies himself a theologian. He said he finally figured out how the Prophet Daniel escaped the lions' den after the king tossed him in.

It wasn't just faith and prayer, my friend said. Daniel went around to each lion and whispered in their ear: "After dinner there will be speeches."

Since I've been the editor and publisher of a humor newsletter for the past 25 years, I was chosen to be the luncheon speaker to put you all in a good mood to help you digest your lunch. I'm supposed to be the comic relief, but I suggest you digest your lunch quickly so you don't throw it up by the end of this talk.

My all-time favorite journalist was Will Rogers, a great American humorist who was loved by both liberals and conservatives. It was Will Rogers who wrote: "The mind is a wonderful thing. It starts working the minute you are born and only stops when you get up to make a speech."

Rogers once observed in his newspaper column: "I'm fond of the candidate for public office who, during a fierce campaign, penned this note to his opponent: 'Dear Sir: Let us make a deal – if you promise to stop telling lies about me, I will promise to stop telling the truth about you.' "

This grinning, rope-spinning, biracial Cherokee-American cowboy kept Americans laughing through the depths of the Great Depression in the 1930s. President Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "Will Rogers held the secret of banishing gloom, of making tears give way to laughter, of supplanting desolation and despair with hope and courage."

Rogers poked fun at everybody, especially politicians of both parties, but he never attacked or slandered anybody for political or personal reasons. He was unfailingly courteous to everyone he met.

He also was a great humanitarian who never refused anyone help. In the office of our newsletter, *The Joyful Noiseletter*, we've had hanging for 25 years a painting of Will Rogers with one of his choice quotes: "We will never have true civilization until we have learned to recognize the rights of others." (You can see it directly behind me.)

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When he died in 1935, the entire nation mourned, a couple-hundred thousand people showed up at his funeral, and a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi offered the prayers. What journalist today would get that kind of turnout for his or her funeral?

Will Rogers had a loving heart. He was fair-minded. He had *credibility* with the American people. What is credibility? Trust. Americans of all political, philosophical and religious persuasions *believed* Will Rogers. Americans admire fair-mindedness.

What is Credibility?

What is credibility? It is believability. It is objectivity. It is fair-mindedness. It is reporting the news even-handedly. It is a reporter telling both sides or five sides or 10 sides of a story without injecting his or her opinion in the story or slanting the story with choice verbs, adverbs and adjectives.

Credibility. Walter Cronkite had it. In the 1960s he was widely regarded as “the most trusted man in America.” Whom do you trust now? Male or female?

I toiled as a reporter for several newspapers and the Associated Press in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. I regret to say that I was not always a model for objective journalism. It’s a powerful temptation for a reporter to inject himself or herself in a story – but I tried to resist that temptation. We had standards – and tough editors.

Please be patient with me, and hear me out. As that irascible journalist H.L. Mencken once observed: “Whenever an old journalist is in doubt as to which of two adjectives to use, he uses both of them.”

The only vivid memory I still have of my time as a reporter for *The Newark Evening News* of New Jersey was when I was sent to interview a very old woman who was a Titanic survivor.

We were sitting in her living room having a great conversation while her dog – a terrier – sat at the foot of the couch eyeing me suspiciously.

A Titanic Dog Bite

Suddenly the dog growled, jumped on the couch, and sank his teeth in my right arm. I couldn’t shake him loose. Muttering imprecations, the old lady, who was in her mid-nineties, rose from her chair, grabbed her dog’s behind, and we both tugged and pulled until he finally let go. My editor advised me to go to the emergency room for a tetanus shot.

So my only claim to fame is that I am probably the only reporter ever to be bitten by a Titanic survivor’s dog. Those are the breaks.

My editor wouldn’t allow me to mention the incident in the story I wrote. I was trained to keep myself out of news stories. My story was about her and her experiences, not about me and her dog.

Credibility!

If I had done that story for many newspapers today, the headline probably would have read: “NEWS REPORTER FIRST MAN TO BE BITTEN BY TITANIC SURVIVOR’S DOG.” The lead paragraph would have reported on the old lady’s struggles to pull the dog off me. They would have had a photo of me getting a tetanus shot from a doctor.

And in my story, I would have cleverly slipped in the fact that I am a dog lover and feed my own dog a certain brand of dog food recommended to keep dogs even-tempered and good-natured.

I would have become a columnist.

You know you’re getting old if you can remember when reporters were reporters and not columnists full of opinions.

Another time I happened to run into Somerset Maugham, the author of *Of Human Bondage*. Maugham was 82 then and rarely granted interviews, but he granted me an hour of his time for a story for the Associated Press.

I had enjoyed a couple of his novels, but I found him to be in person a vain and irritable old man who devoted much of the interview to putting down some of his contemporary authors.

“George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells were dated,” Maugham told me. “My books will outlast theirs.”

Now that really burned me up because Shaw and Wells happened to be two of my favorite authors (I had named my own dog “George Bernard”), but I knew that my AP editor would insist that I write the story straight, leaving my own feelings and views of Maugham out of it. And that’s what I did.

Credibility!

Interestingly, shortly before he died, Maugham arrived at a more modest appraisal of his own literary work. He described himself as “in the very first row of second-raters.”

A Great Temptation

One of my newspaper editors – a former AP editor – once assigned me to interview a lawyer who had done me wrong and whom I greatly disliked. As some lawyers are inclined to do, this lawyer had slandered me in a civil court case and even the judge had rebuked him for his behavior.

When this lawyer ran for political office, my editor, who had a keen sense of humor, assigned me to interview him and do a story about his candidacy. I was seething inside when the attorney came into the newsroom for the interview. But I gritted my teeth, welcomed him cordially, treated him respectfully, and asked dispassionate questions.

After the article appeared, my editor called me into his office and told me that the attorney had phoned him and expressed great pleasure with the article. When he discovered that I was the reporter, he had come to the interview expecting to be mauled, and he was amazed at the cool objectivity and fairness of my article.

Credibility!

I thought I'd go to my grave without ever saying a kind word about an editor. As a reporter, I admired some of my editors, and thought some of the others were dumb and intolerable. They were all tough. In my day as a reporter, I would have been severely rebuked and maybe even fired if I inserted my personal opinion in a story, or slanted the story with a choice adjective, adverb, or verb.

That's how journalism was taught at universities in those days. Always use "she said"... "he said" – never "he exclaimed," "she sighed," "he growled," "she boasted," etc. Simply report what happened and what people said about it. In a way, Sgt. Friday of the old "Dragnet" TV show was our role model – "Just the facts, ma'am."

There are good editors and bad editors, but even a bad editor is better than no editor. Every reporter and writer needs an editor to challenge him/her, to balance things out, to keep you focused and honest. We were honor-bound to treat everyone with respect and civility, even if we disliked what they were saying and doing.

The news pages of a newspaper were regarded as sacred in those days, and there was a sharp division between the editorial staffs and the advertising staffs. Columns and editorials were for the editorial, op-ed pages, and the sports pages.

An Unnerving Survey

Every journalist and publisher in America must have been unnerved by a recent survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, which showed that public credibility in *all* news media is at its lowest level in more than two decades.

Nearly two-thirds of Americans – compared to only 34% in 1984 – believe that news stories are often inaccurate, and 74% believe that stories tend to favor one side of an issue over another. The increasing number of critics include liberals, conservatives, and independents.

Dr. Paul Starr, a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University, observed in *The Atlantic* that "a growing percentage of people, especially among the young, no longer regularly follow the news in *any* medium, while those who remain the most attentive and engaged tend to be sharply polarized along ideological lines," viewing things "through the prism of the partisan media that dominate cable news, talk radio, and the blogosphere."

So why this credibility gap? Can we blame everything on the economy and the Internet for the decline and demise of newspapers?

This credibility gap, in my view, must be addressed if we are going to restore public trust in newspapers as well as other news media, and help them survive.

There has been a sea change in editorial practices at many newspapers over the past 30 or more years. It's been called "personal journalism" and "advocacy journalism," among other things. And many editors and journalism professors now encourage this style of journalism.

Many newspapers today seem to have as many columnists as reporters occupying their news pages. When did so many reporters become columnists? When circulation began declining, newspapers began introducing columnists on their news pages. But it didn't work. Many newspapers, sadly, are still shrinking, going bankrupt, and closing. People want hard news, not hard opinions.

Writing recently in *The Atlantic* with the question on the cover, "Who is Killing the Media?", Mark Bowden, a former reporter for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, lamented that the reporting we often see on TV and on the Internet is not done by objective journalists but by "political hit men."

"One consequence of the collapse of professional journalism," he wrote, "is that work formerly done by reporters and producers is now routinely performed by political operatives and amateur ideologues of one stripe or another, whose goal is not to educate the public but to win." (with spin)

Many of the bloggers on the Internet are not journalists so much as propagandists.

The Hit-Man Mentality

This hit-man mentality, Bowden observed, "is rapidly replacing objective journalism (which does not shill for a product or a candidate or a party or an ideology), "leading us toward a world where all information is spun, and where all 'news' is unapologetically propaganda."

The opinions of columnists and bloggers are often valuable, but does a community really want to see itself through the opinionated eyes of a columnist or a blogger? Or does a community simply want a newspaper to report what is happening in the community as fairly and objectively as is humanly possible in a balanced way?

All of the paper papers I worked for in New York, New Jersey, and Michigan have either vanished, shrunk dramatically, or gone digital.

Three of my good friends, both longtime, top-notch, objective reporters with impressive resumes have recently been laid off from *The Detroit Free Press*, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and *The Ann Arbor News*.

This is an American tragedy.

For centuries, paper papers have played a major role in American democracy, reporting, investigating, exposing, providing a forum for a variety of views.

Newspapers are a national treasure. A paper paper is the glue that hold a community together. Thomas Jefferson said: "If I had to choose between government without newspapers, and newspapers without government, I wouldn't hesitate to choose the latter."

And it was Voltaire who said, "I disagree with what you say, but I will defend with my wife's life your right to say it." Did I get that right?

In the 1960s, there was a campaign to "Support Your Local Sheriff." Why isn't there a campaign to "Support Your Local Newspaper"?

It amazes me that the American public can let some of these national treasures die out without a whimper or a public outcry.

Is it because so many people have lost confidence in their credibility, and don't care anymore? Is it because some of the press barons discourage any dialogue on the issues?

Incredibility

Whom do you trust?

Edward Deeb, editor-in-chief of *Corp!* magazine of the Michigan Business and Professional Association, recently wrote an editorial expressing bewilderment at the explosion of news and information coming from all directions. "Whom do you believe?" he asked. "Who is telling the truth?"

Do you trust the legions of know-it-all windbags – of all political and religious persuasions – who fill our television screens and radio airwaves with their bombastic views on every conceivable issue, who attack and insult their guests on talk shows, who ask a guest a question and then answer it themselves before the guest has a chance to respond, who demonize anyone who disagrees with them, who attack and slander their competitors, who stereotype and divide people, making it impossible to debate important issues in a civil manner? Are these folks our new role models for the newspaper business?

Are they the role models for the legions of bloggers who now fill our computer screens with their opinions and harsh denunciations of anyone who disagrees with them? Many bloggers have important things to say, but are they objective observers or partisans?

Unquestionably, the Internet has brought some benefits to society. It's brought together relatives and friends separated by great distances. It's opened up many business opportunities, facilitated accounting and bookkeeping, helped people find jobs and buy and sell products at bargain prices. It's made business transactions easier and quicker. It's also enabled us to outsource many of our jobs in Michigan to foreign countries a lot quicker.

The Internet has helped my wife and I market our national humor newsletter, books, cartoon CDs, and prints of our publishing house. And we get a lot of subscribers and orders through our web site.

My wife, Rose, and I started our newsletter, *The Joyful Noiseletter*, 25 years ago to provide jokes, humor, and cartoons to churches, mainly because we couldn't find the word "Humor" indexed in a seminary library and we thought churches were getting too grim. Sort of like newspapers today.

We give subscribers to *The Joyful Noiseletter* the option of receiving a paper edition through the postal mails, or an electronic edition. A subscription costs the same either way. Only 10% have opted to receive it electronically. That's one score for the paper paper people.

Our publication is completely commercial free. In case you need some laughs, our web site is www.joyfulnoiseletter.com.

The Tower of Babble

Incredibly, a communications department professor asked me to “soften my criticism of the Internet” lest I annoy some of the technogeeks in his department. Technogeeks tend to glamorize the Internet and are reluctant to dialogue about it.

When Jane first logged onto the Internet, she reputedly yelled to Tarzan, “Tarzan, it’s a jungle out there!”

The explosion of information and misinformation on the Internet is mind-boggling. The Internet is the new Tower of Babble.

The Internet is also a haven for hatemongers, fearmongers, rumormongers, for anyone with an axe to grind or a lie to tell, a grudge to avenge, or a Looney Tunes opinion to disseminate world-wide.

Columnist Mitch Albom wrote recently in *The Detroit Free Press*: “The American discourse – fueled by the Internet, talk radio, and cable TV – has turned so mean it has nowhere to go but get meaner... Hate breeds hate, and there is money and fame in yelling louder and angrier.”

Ryan Lewis, the editor of the *Allegan (MI) County News*, wrote that many of the anonymous comments that people transmit on the Internet are “the equivalent of road rage.”

There are some decent news web sites on the Internet, but the supermarket tabloids are a paragon of restraint and credibility compared to the Internet.

As Tiger Woods discovered, gossip spreads faster than the swine flu on the Internet. Not even Casanova could have kept up with the hordes of women who popped up on the web sites claiming to have had an affair with Woods.

One preacher recently titled his blog: “Is Obama the AntiChrist?” And it wasn’t until I got to the bottom of his long-winded blog that I learned that Obama was not the AntiChrist, but the “prophet of the AntiChrist.”

The U.S. Secret Services investigated an online survey that asked whether people thought President Obama should be assassinated. The poll, which was posted on Facebook, was quickly taken off.

The Internet is also a playground for conmen, conwomen, scam artists, swindlers, hackers, identity thieves, libelers, slanderers, terrorists, predators, and child pornographers.

Recent headline in *The Kalamazoo Gazette*: “Parents fear for their kids’ safety on Facebook.” The concern is about predators mainly.

Another recent story in *The Kalamazoo Gazette*: Scammers are searching for victims via e-mail, eBay, and Craigslist targeting mortgages, job searches, or government grants.

And as any teacher will attest (like my son, who is a college English instructor), the Internet enables dens of thieves, plagiarists, and copyright violators.

The Internet has made a mockery of copyright law. Any teacher can tell you stories of students lifting large chunks of word-for-word materials from the Internet, inserting them in their papers, and calling them their own. We might have expected that a fast-food society would want to produce fast papers.

A friend of mine, who is a nationally syndicated cartoonist, discovered that some guy was reprinting his cartoons on his web site, and replacing the captions with obscene captions. This went on for several years before the cartoonist located him and forced him to cease and desist.

The First Internet addiction center opened recently near Seattle, according to the AP. Cosette Dawna Rae, a psychotherapist with the reStart Addiction Recovery Program, commented: "Internet addicts miss out on real conversations and real human development, often see their hygiene and homes deteriorate, don't eat or sleep properly and don't get enough exercise."

We've raised a generation of children and young people hooked on the unreality of computer games and TV shows, and doing battle with imaginary opponents, when they should have been outside in the sun and fresh air, playing with real people and building physical fitness and strong healthy bodies.

Describing online, Facebook, and Twitter connections as "perpetually superficial," one prominent Christian blogger recently unplugged from his blog and recommended "periodic fasting from technology."

Parents and others must wonder: How many of these Internet social contacts lead to satisfactory marriages, and how many marriages are broken up by Internet contacts? Surely that's worthy of a study.

Another study might be done on the Internet's role in the nation's epidemic of obesity by promoting a sedentary lifestyle of people sitting on their behinds for hours in front of their computers while gorging themselves on junk foods.

Another study might be done of the Internet's role in promoting a huge credit card debt culture, greatly contributing to the current economic depression.

Still another study might be done of the Internet's and bloggers' role in beating the drums for an unnecessary war.

Finally, there's such an explosion of medical information on the Internet that once was available only to qualified medical doctors, you wonder whether the Internet is creating a nation of hypochondriacs, bedeviling doctors' offices with imaginary ailments.

Where Did Sophia Go?

My friend and tennis nemesis, Prof. Andrew Targowski, an internationally respected computer authority in WMU's Haworth College of Business, has expressed concern about the explosion of misinformation on the Internet and the credibility crisis.

Dr. Targowski, the chair and driving force behind this conference, is a brilliant, fair-minded, and courageous champion of academic freedom and dialogue. "We teach

information and knowledge,” he recently observed, “but what about teaching wisdom? Can we differentiate wisdom from knowledge?”

Wisdom! The Greeks called it “Sophia.” Sophia is a female name derived from the Greek word for “wisdom.”

I have a cousin named “Sophie” and another cousin whose last name is “Sophiea,” both of them very wise women.

But where do you find “Sophia” on the Internet?

I Googled “Sophia” and the first reference I found was “Sophia Loren.”

Across the Internet, except in a few places, there is no guiding hand of wise editors to screen misinformation, slander, and libel, or to assist in verifying the accuracy of an article, or to ensure that two sides, five sides, or 10 sides to a story are presented fairly. No standards of objectivity and fairness. No balance. No Sophia.

Students, especially, need objective and balanced information to reflect on the serious issues of the day. So do professors. The issues we are addressing at this conference are extremely important to the academic community.

If you don’t have ethical standards of objectivity and fairness, it doesn’t matter how technologically sophisticated you and your media are. They will turn off their computers, they will turn off their TV sets and radios, and they will stop subscribing to their newspaper or magazine. Or they will go only to media that buy into their own biases, preventing any possibility of meaningful dialogue.

If people consider you incredible, then it’s hard to recover credibility.

Computers are only as good and trustworthy as the people who put stuff in them. If you’ve lost trust in the credibility of the people who feed computers information, then computers also will be incredible.

Remember Hal, the rebellious computer in “2001: A Space Odyssey”? “Open the pod bay doors, Hal.” Who would have thought that 42 years after that movie, computers would be controlling so many of us and making it a heresy even to question them?

Saving Paper Papers

Roger Plathow is the editors and publisher of the daily *Post Register* in Idaho Falls, Idaho. For seven years, he has been warning newspapers in talks and on his blog not to give themselves away free on the Internet. “To give it all away on a web site is completely and blindly idiotic,” Plathow said.

His secretary told me: “Why give away what you do for a living?”

Sophia!

The Post Register, Plathow said, has held its own in circulation by giving access to its electronic editions on its web site only to people who pay for it. They are given a pin to access it.

The circulation is about 25,000. Only about 5,000 people asked for, and paid for, a pin to access the electronic edition.

In *The New York Review* last September, Michael Massing, a contributing editor to the *Columbia Journalism Review*, noted “the growing recognition of the part that free access to the Web has played in the hemorrhaging of (newspaper) circulation.” He quoted William Dean Singleton, the CEO of MediaNewsGroup, as saying, “When we look at why people quit buying the newspaper, it’s overwhelmingly because ‘I can get it for free online.’ ”

Apparently some paper papers are starting to listen to Plothow’s arguments. A recent survey of newspaper executives by the Associated Press Managing Editors found that 28% of their publications are now considering online fees.

The New York Times announced in January that it will charge readers for full access to its Web site starting in 2011. *The Wall Street Journal* charges for access to its web site.

But the British newspapers have been way ahead of us. Some 70% of English newspapers have been charging for access to their online editions.

Alan Mutter is the former No. 2 editor of the shrinking *San Francisco Chronicle* and a former editor at the *Chicago Daily News*, which closed shop in 1988.

Mutter was the organizer of the “UC Berkeley Media Technology Summit” in Silicone Valley last September, sponsored by Google and held at Google headquarters. It was “an invitation-only” conference for prominent media leaders mainly interested in new technologies.

Mutter told me: “I think it was a big mistake to give away papers free on the Internet, but it will take time to correct it.” He said he believed “the paper papers that will survive are in smaller communities.”

Roger Plothow told me: “There’s no excuse for shutting down a 174-year-old newspaper like *The Ann Arbor News*.”

‘Dear Old Ann Arbor Town’

That remark touched me deeply because for many years I had roots in the Ann Arbor community and still have friends and relatives there. In my student years at the University of Michigan, I was a night editor and editorial director of *The Michigan Daily*, the highly respected and fiercely independent student newspaper. I have some precious memories of those days, doing combat with McCarthyism, bias clauses in fraternity charters, censorship, and the folks who challenged academic freedom and freedom of the press.

I was also the campus correspondent for the Associated Press, and later worked as a reporter for *The Ann Arbor News*, and wrote a light-hearted column called “Around Ann Arbor Town.”

Sadly, *The Ann Arbor News* was closed down last year after 174 years of continuous publication. It was replaced by an experimental digital entity called AnnArbor.com, which offered a paper paper only twice a week and expected people to get the news online from its web site.

But the coverage of the community by AnnArbor.com, which has a small staff, is thin, according to my reliable sources. And a couple of other small paper papers have sprung up to provide more local coverage. And surprisingly, the student newspaper, *The Michigan Daily*, recently announced that they are expanding their coverage of the Ann Arbor community.

A highly respected former reporter for *The Ann Arbor News* told me the community was very upset by the loss of their newspaper, which had gone from a circulation of 58,000 in 1996 to 45,000 at its demise.

Another Ann Arbor resident told me: "It was a terrible loss, and the arbitrary way it was done behind closed doors by an absentee landlord was heartless and reprehensible. There was no dialogue or community feedback on the issues before the closing."

Prior to the closing, it does not appear that the community was surveyed to see how the residents felt about shutting down their newspaper. A newspaper belongs to a community as much as it belongs to out-of-town entrepreneurs.

Incredibility!

Mark Stern, a publisher who has been attempting to launch a new, home-delivered paper paper in the Detroit area, told me: "There's still a huge market for a home-delivered paper paper. People are used to having a newspaper in their hands." He asked: "Why do you have to have eleven vice-presidents on a metropolitan newspaper?"

I agree with Stern. Millions of Americans do not have computers, do not want them, and can't afford them, especially during a Depression (let's call it by its real name).

The Suffering Religious Press

It is not generally known that the huge religious press is experiencing the same problems as the secular press, and is debating the same issues. The editor of a Protestant publication recently lamented that it had lost a third of its subscribers in the past four years. A Catholic publication has lost about 70% of its subscribers in the past 25 years.

There are also lots of technogeeks in the religious press who worship at the shrine of the Internet. However, Lou Jacquet, the editor of *The Catholic Exponent*, newspaper of the Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio, has a different take on the matter. He wrote recently in an editorial:

"Folks like myself who work in journalism know that most of us cannot survive without computers, e-mail, BlackBerrys, and cell-phones. Yet many who work in the media refuse to acknowledge that many millions of Americans will never own a computer because they cannot afford one.

"Others who could afford to buy the computer of their choice will never use one. We are not talking about a mere generational issue here. There are folks in their 80s who love computers and persons in their 30s and 40s who loathe them.

"There is a need among the millions who use computers to be more civil to the millions who do not. I have witnessed enough condescension and cruelty in this regard to last a lifetime (including the Catholic Church at large). Justice and charity demand that we treat

one another with kindness and respect, regardless of what our views on the use of any given technology may be.”

Whatever Happened to Civility?

The American people have a deeply-ingrained sense of fairness, and you’re playing with fire when you violate that sense of fairness.

I think many in the news media have made a grave error in stereotyping people as either “liberals” or “conservatives.” The truth is that the vast majority of people are “conservative” on some issues and “liberal” on other issues, and the “conservative” and “liberal” views they hold vary dramatically with each individual, and include numerous modifications.

Newspapers should foster tolerance and civility in their communities.

Two of my other favorite journalists were both great humorists – G.K. Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw.

Chesterton, the Englishman, was a brilliant writer, a gregarious communicator with a big, loving heart, and a devotion to a traditional Catholic faith.

Shaw, the Irishman, was an agnostic humanist playwright renowned for his wit. It was Shaw’s play *Pygmalion* that was later turned into that magnificent musical, *My Fair Lady*, by Lerner and Loewe.

If you want a lesson in civility and good humor, read the spirited public debates between Chesterton and Shaw during the early part of the last century.

Chesterton and Shaw disagreed on just about everything, philosophically and politically, but their entertaining public debates were models of civility, mutual respect, good humor and crackling wit.

In the course of their public debates, these two literary giants learned a lot from each other and grew to be good friends.

Chesterton was a huge man, weighing nearly 300 pounds, with a hearty appetite and a love for cigars. Shaw was forever lean, a nutrition-minded vegetarian who shunned tobacco and exercised regularly.

Chesterton once remarked to his lean friend: “To look at you, anyone would think there was a famine in England.”

Shaw replied: “To look at you, anyone would think you caused it.”

Shaw mourned when his friend Chesterton died at the comparatively young age of sixty-two. Shaw said of Chesterton, “He was a man of colossal genius.” Shaw, also “a man of colossal genius,” lived on to age ninety-four.

Columnist Kathleen Parker, writing in *The Washington Post*, quoted Alex Jones, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Losing the News*, that “Americans are becoming increasingly aware that newspapers do most of the heavy lifting when it comes to reporting and bearing witness. When the newsroom goes dark, who or what will light the way?”

Jones, like Thomas Jefferson, “believes in the profoundly important connection between quality news and a successful democracy. His nightmare scenario is that current trends eventually produce ‘a yawning disparity in accurate knowledge just as there is in wealth. We could be heading for a well-informed class at the top and a broad populace awash in opinion, spin, and propaganda.’”

Ken Paulson, president of the Newseum in Washington, D.C. and former editor of *USA Today*, told the National Press Club recently:

“It’s important that we not undervalue the power of print... Newspapers remain an extraordinary information bargain and we shouldn’t be selling them short – or lose sight of the qualities that make American journalism so critical to our democracy.”

A Few Suggestions

I believe that paper papers can, and will, survive because there is a great need for them in our democracy. Paper papers are a watchdog and check on the power of government and big corporations.

Paper papers survived the great Depression of the 1930s. They survived radio and television. They survived shoppers. I think they will also survive the Internet.

After many years as a newspaper reporter, I think paper papers are worth fighting for.

Here are a few suggestions which I think might help paper papers survive:

- Newspapers should abandon “advocacy” or “personal” journalism, take columnists off the news pages and put them on the editorial and op-ed pages while seeking a balance of opinions.
- Newspapers should go back to making the news pages as sacred as humanly possible, and adhere to tough standards of objectivity and fairness in news coverage.
- Newspapers should return to the basic reason that people traditionally bought paper papers – to get the hard news, especially local and state news and events that have the most immediate effect on their lives.
- Newspapers should strive for a balance between bad news and good news. People are now bombarded with bad news and ugly news through many media sources. It’s an ongoing assault on the sanity of the human mind. The mind can take just so much of that stuff before it shuts down and turns everything off. There’s a lot of good news out there, too – good people doing a lot of good things in a community.
- And there’s a lot of good humor out there that would be welcome to lift people’s spirits. The public needs comic relief. As Dr. Seuss said, “From there to here and here to there, funny things are everywhere.”
- On the business side, don’t give away the newspaper free on the Internet. Give people the option of receiving the paper edition or the Internet edition, but make people pay for the subscription either way.
- Independent communicators, not technocrats, are the people who should guide the news business, and journalists should be encouraged to treat everyone in a civil manner.

Instead of imitating the Internet, newspapers will survive by producing a better, quality product with balanced objective coverage focused on local and state news.

The paper papers will survive by restoring public trust in them as sources of objective news. They will build a reputation for objectivity, credibility, and civility.

The Reader's Digest Survived the 1930s

I was saddened recently when I received a letter to creditors announcing legal proceedings regarding the bankruptcy of *The Reader's Digest*. In past years, *The Reader's Digest* had purchased some humor and cartoons from our publication, *The Joyful Noiseletter*.

The Reader's Digest had prospered in the 1920s, when it was founded, and went on to survive the Great Depression of the 1930s. In a rare bookstore the other day, I happened to pick up a 1934 copy of *The Reader's Digest*, published in the depths of the Great Depression, and I was amazed that there was not a single ad in the entire issue – not an ad for pills for male enhancement or for female incontinence, not an ad for anything. (Show Copy)

The articles in that 1934 issue were condensed from a variety of publications, and the authors represented the entire spectrum of political, philosophical, and religious opinion. Somerset Maugham was one of them. So was George Bernard Shaw, Kathleen Norris, Arnold Bennett, Will Durant, Henry Ward Beecher, Ben Hecht, and Aldous Huxley. It was a nice balance of liberal, conservative, and nonpolitical opinion. And good objective reporting.

Is that how *The Reader's Digest* survived the Great Depression *without any ads*? Clearly, they had credibility with the American public.

If you don't have credibility, objectivity, civility, and wisdom, all the sophisticated technology in the world won't save you.

Ben Franklin was another great American journalist, among his many other talents. His *Poor Richard's Almanack*, which gave a lot of good enduring advice on financial and health matters, was a best-seller in mid-18th-century America. People trusted him. He had credibility.

If you don't set standards and rules, the same thing happens that Franklin warned would happen in *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Franklin, a skilled horseman, wrote: "When prosperity was well mounted, she let go of the bridle, and soon came tumbling out of the saddle."

That, sadly, has happened to our economy today. And, sadly, it also has happened to the news business.

I don't think anybody killed the newspapers that have folded. I think some of them simply committed suicide.