

### Case 13: Objectivity to Truthiness

The turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century brought with it what some call the death of traditional journalism. Indeed, the development of cheap and instant recording devices, satellite transmission, and a world-wide web of publication points potentially makes every person an information-giver. Social networks and news aggregators allow those browsing the web to find information on their own, without the gatekeeping associated with traditional news media. Hybrid television shows that linked information and entertainment such as magazine shows like *Dateline*, reality shows like *To Catch a Predator* and *Cops*, along with Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* gained credibility as news sources, particularly among younger viewers. Even network news shows have somewhat given up the idea of telling the same, homogeneous truth and have accepted or marketed their appeal to audiences with particular political points of view. Advertiser dollars drained from traditional platforms like newspapers to digital media, resulting in inevitable layoffs, with fewer staff providing what used to be called "professional" coverage.

Some who grieve the loss of traditional journalism in the lives of citizens believe that the greatest loss is the idea of journalism as the "Fourth Estate" of government. In this view, journalists play an essential role in maintaining democracy. Citizens depend on journalists to give them the truth, as objectively and as dispassionately as possible. The President, Congressional statespeople, and the Judiciary (who comprise the other three estates of democratic government) know that the journalists' job is to keep watch on how they do their work and independently report back to citizens. As citizens do not have the time to attend the meetings in which government leaders are making decisions on their behalf, journalists do that work for them. Without journalism, and the credibility of a profession that reports events and issues with no interest other than helping citizens know the facts and make up their own minds, some think that democracy cannot function long or well.

Yet others put trust in what is now called the "Fifth Estate"—information generators and givers who broadcast their own beliefs with the news and who are not beholden to a paycheck from a corporate media owner. They argue that the wide collection of voices available from independent and often "cause-motivated" news-givers provides a higher likelihood that citizens will be able to gather the many perspectives necessary to understand complex social and governmental events. Citizens can learn from or add to collaboratively-developed truths, such as Wikipedia. Or they can get a sense of what many individuals and groups believe and decide what they choose to believe, accepting "truthiness" over the archaic belief in one objective truth.

But the Fifth Estate lacks a common set of values that kept the Fourth Estate a credible source of news. Too much information with no good way of separating fact from fiction can make it difficult for citizens to participate in self-governance.

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