

# Opinion

There's a big difference between telling us what to believe and reporting what we need to know.



ROBERT

**A FEW** decades ago in a downtown Toronto bar, Ross Howard taught me the basics of print journalism. The deal was simple. I would buy the beer. Ross, then of the *Globe and Mail*, would give

me the basic rules of news writing and a set of story materials. I would draft a short piece with a tight deadline (before Ross drank all the beer). Then I could have some beer while Ross tore my story to shreds. Subsequent rounds involved similarly quick scribbling and shredding.

My news writing skills did not rise as quickly as my blood-alcohol, but the basic rules stuck. The essential story had to be in the first paragraph and gradually expanded for readers not likely to get to the end. The writing had to be concise. And the story had to present the perspectives of the relevant parties; any commentary was to come from the parties in the story, not from the writer.

Those were good rules. They emphasized accuracy and impartiality, and they respected readers' abilities to draw their own conclusions.

Admittedly the rules were more heroic than realistic. No commitment to well-informed and even-handed reporting could deliver unbiased stories. The whole idea defied the complexities of newsworthy life, the machinations of power and influence, and the essential slipperiness of facts.

The effort, however, was noble and necessary. Impartiality may be a chimera, but a press corps that does not aim for it is sliding into the pit of mere opinion.

In the news media today, the rules I learned from Ross are increasingly out of fashion. The reporter has become the expert. Opinion pieces, once confined to editorials, op-ed comments, reviews and columns, now squawk everywhere. Gradually they are displacing the

indigenous occupants of the news pages.

The evident rationale involves competition. Unable to keep up with the faster, more ubiquitous and more confident blogosphere, the press has assumed that its value to readers must be in providing analysis.

That seems sensible; we all need help making sense of competing assertions in a dauntingly complex and perplexing world. And we can all point to seasoned

the climate change deniers of the coal lobby are equally reduced to advocates for particular positions.

There are good reasons for profound doubt about the concept of facts – not only in the old news story tradition but in general. The past hundred years have done a pretty thorough job of kicking the props out from under the idea of Truth. Schooled by the brutalities of totalitarian regimes, the puzzles of sub-atomic physics,

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journalists with as much breadth of vision and depth of understanding as officially learned authorities.

Unfortunately, the pressures of daily publishing leave little time or space for demonstrations of analytical brilliance, and it is a short slide from useful analysis to mere opinion. The old news story, for all its flaws, was built on the premise that there are facts to report, situations to grasp, competing views to recognize and grounds for weighing them. In contrast, the opinion piece, however well-informed, open-minded and carefully argued, presents one viewpoint among an evident multitude.

When virtually all we see, hear and read are positions, our reality easily dissolves into a cacophony of voices, deafening us to the possibility of, and grounds for, choosing sensibly among them. The climate change scientists of the IPCC and

the incompatibilities of true believers and the courtrooms of credentialed experts supporting opposing sides for pay, we are properly suspicious of claims to accuracy and certainty.

But a retreat to mere opinion will not do. That ship sails to paralytic indecision, cynical manipulation and idiot faith. The more difficult and more hopeful option is a critical but no less determined revival of the old news rules – aware of the uncertainties and respectful of diverse perspectives, but devoted to enriching understanding rather than defending positions, and willing to let readers make up their own minds.

At least that's my opinion. If I send it off to Ross, he will probably tear it to shreds. **AV**

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