# Is Glenn Greenwald the Future of News?

**Bill Keller-OP ED Columnist for The New York Times**

Much of the speculation about the future of news focuses on the business model: How will we generate the revenues to pay the people who gather and disseminate the news? But the disruptive power of the Internet raises other profound questions about what journalism is becoming, about its essential character and values. This week’s column is a conversation — a (mostly) civil argument — between two very different views of how journalism fulfills its mission.

Glenn Greenwald broke what is probably the year’s biggest news story, Edward Snowden’s revelations of the vast surveillance apparatus constructed by the National Security Agency. He has also been an outspoken critic of the kind of journalism practiced at places like The New York Times, and an advocate of a more activist, more partisan kind of journalism. Earlier this month he announced he was joining a new journalistic venture, backed by eBay billionaire Pierre Omidyar, who has promised to invest $250 million and to “throw out all the old rules.” I invited Greenwald to join me in an online exchange about what, exactly, that means.

**Dear Glenn,**

We come at journalism from different traditions. I’ve spent a life working at newspapers that put a premium on aggressive but impartial reporting, that expect reporters and editors to keep their opinions to themselves unless they relocate (as I have done) to the pages clearly identified as the home of opinion. You come from a more activist tradition — first as a lawyer, then as a blogger and columnist, and soon as part of a new, independent journalistic venture financed by the eBay founder Pierre Omidyar. Your writing proceeds from a clearly stated point of view.

In a [post](http://blogs.reuters.com/jackshafer/2013/07/16/from-tom-paine-to-glenn-greenwald-we-need-partisan-journalism/) on Reuters this summer, media critic Jack Shafer celebrated the tradition of partisan journalism — “From Tom Paine to Glenn Greenwald” — and contrasted it with what he called “the corporatist ideal.” He didn’t explain the phrase, but I don’t think he meant it in a nice way. Henry Farrell, who blogs for The Washington Post, [wrote](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2013/10/17/why-glenn-greenwalds-new-media-venture-is-a-big-deal/) more recently that publications like The New York Times and The Guardian “have political relationships with governments, which make them nervous about publishing (and hence validating) certain kinds of information,” and he suggested that your new project with Omidyar would represent a welcome escape from such relationships.

I find much to admire in America’s history of crusading journalists, from the pamphleteers to the muckrakers to the New Journalism of the ’60s to the best of today’s activist bloggers. At their best, their fortitude and passion have stimulated genuine reforms (often, as in the Progressive Era, thanks to the journalists’ “political relationships with governments”). I hope the coverage you led of the National Security Agency’s hyperactive surveillance will lead to some overdue accountability.

But the kind of journalism The Times and other mainstream news organizations practice — at their best — includes an awful lot to be proud of, too, revelations from Watergate to torture and secret prisons to the malfeasance of the financial industry, and including some pre-Snowden revelations about the N.S.A.’s abuse of its authority. Those are highlights that leap to mind, but you’ll find examples in just about every day’s report. Journalists in this tradition have plenty of opinions, but by setting them aside to follow the facts — as a judge in court is supposed to set aside prejudices to follow the law and the evidence — they can often produce results that are more substantial and more credible. The mainstream press has had its failures — episodes of credulousness, false equivalency, sensationalism and inattention — for which we have been deservedly flogged. I expect you’ll say, not flogged enough. So I pass you the lash.

**Dear** **Bill,**

There’s no question that journalists at establishment media venues, certainly including The New York Times, have produced some superb reporting over the last couple of decades. I don’t think anyone contends that what has become (rather recently) the standard model for a reporter — concealing one’s subjective perspectives or what appears to be “opinions” — precludes good journalism.

But this model has also produced lots of atrocious journalism and some toxic habits that are weakening the profession. A journalist who is petrified of appearing to express any opinions will often steer clear of declarative sentences about what is true, opting instead for a cowardly and unhelpful “here’s-what-both-sides-say-and-I-won’t-resolve-the-conflicts” formulation. That rewards dishonesty on the part of political and corporate officials who know they can rely on “objective” reporters to amplify their falsehoods without challenge (i.e., reporting is reduced to “X says Y” rather than “X says Y and that’s false”).

Worse still, this suffocating constraint on how reporters are permitted to express themselves produces a self-neutering form of journalism that becomes as ineffectual as it is boring. A failure to call torture “torture” because government officials demand that a more pleasant euphemism be used, or lazily equating a demonstrably true assertion with a demonstrably false one, drains journalism of its passion, vibrancy, vitality and soul.

Worst of all, this model rests on a false conceit. Human beings are not objectivity-driven machines. We all intrinsically perceive and process the world through subjective prisms. What is the value in pretending otherwise?

The relevant distinction is not between journalists who have opinions and those who do not, because the latter category is mythical. The relevant distinction is between journalists who honestly disclose their subjective assumptions and political values and those who dishonestly pretend they have none or conceal them from their readers.

Moreover, all journalism is a form of activism. Every journalistic choice necessarily embraces highly subjective assumptions — cultural, political or nationalistic — and serves the interests of one faction or another. Former Bush D.O.J. lawyer Jack Goldsmith in 2011 praised what he [called](http://www.lawfareblog.com/2011/02/the-patriotism-of-the-american-media/) “the patriotism of the American press,” meaning their allegiance to protecting the interests and policies of the U.S. government. That may (or may not) be a noble thing to do, but it most definitely is not objective: it is quite subjective and classically “activist.”

But ultimately, the only real metric of journalism that should matter is accuracy and reliability. I personally think honestly disclosing rather than hiding one’s subjective values makes for more honest and trustworthy journalism. But no journalism — from the most stylistically “objective” to the most brazenly opinionated — has any real value unless it is grounded in facts, evidence, and verifiable data. The claim that overtly opinionated journalists cannot produce good journalism is every bit as invalid as the claim that the contrived form of perspective-free journalism cannot.

**Dear Glenn,**

I don’t think of it as reporters pretending they have no opinions. I think of it as reporters, as an occupational discipline, suspending their opinions and letting the evidence speak for itself. And it matters that this is not just an individual exercise, but an institutional discipline, with editors who are tasked to challenge writers if they have given short shrift to contrary facts or arguments readers might want to know.

The thing is, once you have publicly declared your “subjective assumptions and political values,” it’s human nature to want to defend them, and it becomes tempting to omit or minimize facts, or frame the argument, in ways that support your declared viewpoint. And some readers, knowing that you write from the left or right, will view your reporting with justified suspicion. Of course, they may do that anyway — discounting whatever they read because it appeared in the “liberal” New York Times — but I think most readers trust us more because they sense that we have done due diligence, not just made a case. (I once saw some opinion research in which Times readers were asked whether they regarded The Times as “liberal.” A majority said yes. They were then asked whether The Times was “fair.” A larger majority said yes. I guess I can live with that.) I work now in the realm of opinion, but as a news reporter and editor I defined my job not as telling readers what I think, or telling them what they ought to think, but telling them what they needed to know to decide for themselves. You are right, of course, that sometimes the results of that process are less exciting than a hearty polemic. Sometimes fair play becomes false equivalence, or feels like euphemism. But it’s simplistic to say, for example, unless you use the word “torture” you are failing a test of courage, or covering up evil. Of course, I regard waterboarding as torture. But if a journalist gives me a vivid description of waterboarding, notes the long line of monstrous regimes that have practiced it, and then lays out the legal debate over whether it violates a specific statute or international accord, I don’t care whether he uses the word or not. I’m happy — and fully equipped — to draw my own conclusion.

If Jack Goldsmith, the former Bush administration lawyer, had praised the American press for, in your words, “their allegiance to protecting the interests and policies of the U.S. government” then I would strongly disagree with him. We have published many stories that challenged the policies and professed interests of the government. But that’s not quite what Goldsmith says. He says that The Times and other major news outlets give serious consideration to arguments that publishing something will endanger national security — that is, might get someone killed. That is true. We listen respectfully to such claims, and then we make our own decision. If we are not convinced, we publish, sometimes over the fierce objections of the government. If we are convinced, we wait, or withhold details. The first time I ever faced such a decision was in 1997 when I was foreign editor, and a reporter learned of a dispute between Russia and Georgia, the former Soviet republic, over what to do with a cache of highly enriched uranium left behind after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The dispute was interesting news. But when the reporter checked, it turned out the stockpile was completely unsecured, available to any terrorist interested in constructing a dirty bomb. We were asked to hold the story until the material was fenced and guarded — and we did so. It was not a hard call.

So what would your policy be on publishing information that some would argue jeopardizes national security? (I realize this is not an entirely hypothetical question.) Would you even let them try to make the case?

**Dear Bill**,

Why would reporters who hide their opinions be less tempted by human nature to manipulate their reporting than those who are honest about their opinions? If anything, hiding one’s views gives a reporter more latitude to manipulate their reporting because the reader is unaware of those hidden views and thus unable to take them into account.

For instance, I did not know until well after the fact that [Times correspondent] John Burns harbored some quite favorable views about the attack on Iraq. He not only admitted in [2010](http://www.salon.com/2010/08/31/burns_3/) and [2011](http://www.salon.com/2011/01/04/burns_5/) that he failed to anticipate the massive carnage and destruction the invasion would wreak but also viewed the invading U.S. soldiers as “ministering angels” and “liberators.” Does that make him an activist rather than a journalist? I don’t think so. But as a reader, I really wish I would have known his hidden views at the time he was reporting on the war so that I could have taken them into account.

It is, I believe, very hard to argue that the ostensibly “objective” tone required by large media outlets builds public trust, given the very low esteem with which the public regards those media institutions. Far more than concerns about ideological bias, the collapse of media credibility stems from things like helping the U.S. government disseminate falsehoods that led to the Iraq War and, more generally, a glaring subservience to political power: pathologies exacerbated by the reportorial ban on any making clear, declarative statements about the words and actions of political officials out of fear that one will be accused of bias.

As for taking into account dangers posed to innocent life before publishing: nobody disputes that journalists should do this. But I don’t give added weight to the lives of innocent Americans as compared to the lives of innocent non-Americans, nor would I feel any special fealty to the U.S. government as opposed to other governments when deciding what to publish. When Goldsmith praised the “patriotism” of the American media, he meant that U.S. media outlets give special allegiance to the views and interests of the U.S. government.

One can, I guess, argue that this is how it should be. But whatever that mindset is, it is most certainly not “objective.” It is nationalistic, subjective and activist, which is my primary point: all journalism is subjective and a form of activism even if an attempt is made to pretend that this isn’t so.

I have no objection to the process whereby the White House is permitted to give input prior to the publication of sensitive secrets.

Indeed, WikiLeaks, advocates of radical transparency, went to the White House and sought guidance before publishing the Iraq and Afghanistan war logs, but the White House [refused](http://www.salon.com/2010/08/20/wikileaks_5/) to respond, then had the temerity to criticize WikiLeaks for publishing material that it said should have been withheld. That pre-publication process is both journalistically sensible (journalists should get as much relevant information as they can before making publication decisions) and legally wise (every Espionage Act lawyer will say that such consultation can help prove journalistic intent when publishing such material). For all the N.S.A. reporting I’ve done — not just at The Guardian but with media outlets around the world — the White House was notified by editors before the fact of publication (though in the vast, vast majority of cases, their demands that information be suppressed were disregarded due to lack of specific reasons in favor of suppression).

My objection is not to that process itself but to specific instances where it leads to the suppression of information that ought to be public. Without intended rancor, I believe that the 2004 decision of The Times to [withhold](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/16/AR2005121601716.html) the Risen/Lichtblau N.S.A. story at the request of the Bush White House was one of the most egregious of such instances, but there are plenty of [others](http://www.salon.com/2011/02/21/nyt_16/).

In essence, I see the value of journalism as resting in a twofold mission: informing the public of accurate and vital information, and its unique ability to provide a truly adversarial check on those in power. Any unwritten rules that interfere with either of those two prongs are ones I see as antithetical to real journalism and ought to be disregarded.

**Dear Glenn,**

“Nationalistic,” your word for the “mindset” of the American press, is a label that carries some nasty freight. It is the dark side of the (equally facile) “patriotic.” It suggests blind allegiance and chauvinism. I assume you do not use it casually. And I can’t casually let it stand.

The New York Times is global in its newsgathering (31 bureaus outside the U.S.), in its staffing (for starters, our chief executive is British) and especially in its audience. But it is, from its roots, an American enterprise. That identity comes with benefits and obligations. The benefits include a constitution and culture that, compared with most of the world, favor press freedom. (That is why your editors at The Guardian have more than once sought us as partners in sensitive journalistic ventures — seeking shelter under our First Amendment from Britain’s Official Secrets Act.) The obligations include, above all, holding the government accountable when it violates our laws, betrays our values, or fails to live up to its responsibilities. We have spent considerable journalistic energy exposing corruption and oppression in other countries, but accountability begins at home.

Like any endeavor run by human beings, ours is imperfect, and sometimes we disappoint. Critics on the left, including you, were indignant to learn that we held the N.S.A. eavesdropping story for more than a year, until I was satisfied that the public interest outweighed any potential damage to national security. Critics on the right were even more furious when, in 2005, we published. Honorable people may disagree with such decisions, to publish or not to publish. But those judgments were the result of long, hard and independent calculation, a weighing of risks and responsibilities, not “fealty to the U.S. government.”

By the way, since you mention WikiLeaks, one of our principal concerns in turning those documents into news stories in 2010 was to avoid endangering innocent informants — not Americans, but dissidents, scholars, human rights advocates or ordinary civilians whose names were mentioned in the classified cables from foreign outposts. WikiLeaks’ attitude on that issue was callous indifference. According to David Leigh, The Guardian’s lead investigator on that story, Julian Assange said, “If they get killed, they’ve got it coming to them.” (Assange denies saying this, but David Leigh’s track record earns him considerable credibility.) Google executive Eric Schmidt says Assange told him he would have preferred no redactions. On several occasions I’ve said that Julian Assange and WikiLeaks should be entitled to the same press freedoms as The New York Times. But let’s not pretend they have the same sense of responsibility.

New subject?

Pierre Omidyar, your new employer, thinks he has seen the future of journalism, and it looks like you. In an [NPR interview](http://www.npr.org/2013/10/21/239269429/whys-ebays-pierre-omidyar-bankrolling-a-jouralism-startup), Omidyar said that “trust in institutions is going down” and now “audiences want to connect with personalities.” So he is building a constellation of stars, “passion-fueled” soloists, crusading investigators. I know you don’t speak for Omidyar, but I have some questions about how you see this new world.

First, it has become a cliché of our business/profession/craft that journalists are supposed to build themselves as individual “brands.” But journalism — especially the hardest stuff, like investigative journalism — benefits immensely from institutional support, including a technical staff that knows how to make the most of a database, editors and fact-checkers who fortify the stories, graphic designers who help make complicated subjects comprehensible and, not least, lawyers who are steeped in freedom-of-information and First Amendment law. In the Snowden coverage, you worked within the institutional structure of The Guardian and, for a little while, The Times. So what’s so different about the new venture? Is it just a journalistic institution by another name?

Second, in an [interview](http://www.newsweek.com/glenn-greenwald-and-future-leaks-758) with my old friend David Cay Johnston you said coverage of governments and other big institutions is about to be radically changed because of the pervasiveness of digital content. Governments and businesses depend on vast troves of information. All it takes, you said, is access and a troubled conscience to create an Edward Snowden or a Bradley Manning. But it seems to me it takes one other thing: a willingness to risk everything. Manning is serving a 35-year prison sentence for the WikiLeaks disclosures, and Snowden faces a life in exile. The same digital tools that make it easy to leak also make it hard to avoid getting caught. That’s one reason, I think, the overwhelming preponderance of investigative reporting still comes for reporters who cultivate trusted sources over months or years, not from insiders who suddenly decide to entrust someone they’ve never met with a thumb drive full of secrets. Do you really think Snowden and Manning represent the future of investigative journalism?

And, third, will Pierre Omidyar’s New Thing be a political monoculture, or do you expect there will be right-wing Glenn Greenwalds on board?

Back to you.

**Dear** **Bill,**

To understand what I mean by “nationalistic,” let’s examine the example we’ve discussed: The N.Y.T.’s non-use of the word “torture” to describe Bush-era interrogation techniques. You say that the use of this word was unnecessary because you described the techniques in detail. That’s fine: but the [N.Y.T.](http://www.salon.com/2011/03/09/journalism_11/) (along with other media outlets) [did](http://www.salon.com/2010/06/30/media_258/) use the word “torture” without reservation for the same techniques — when used by countries that are adversaries of the U.S. That’s what I mean by “nationalism”: making journalistic choices to comport with and advance the interests of the U.S. government.

I don’t mean the term pejoratively (at least not entirely), just descriptively. It demonstrates that all journalism has a point of view and a set of interests it advances, even if efforts are made to conceal it.

On the difference between WikiLeaks and The N.Y.T.: The Guardian (along with The N.Y.T.) has a bitter and protracted feud with Assange (now that they’re done benefiting from his documents), so I personally would not assume their inherent credibility in disputes over what was or was not said in private. From everything I’ve seen, neither Assange nor WikiLeaks has any remote desire to endanger innocent people. Quite the opposite: they have diligently attempted to redact names of innocents, and sought White House input before publishing (which was inexcusably denied). Also, the only time a huge trove of unredacted documents was released was, ironically, when the journalist you mentioned (not one associated with WikiLeaks) [published](http://www.salon.com/2011/09/02/wikileaks_28/) the archive password in his book.

But to the broader point: even if one were to assume for the sake of argument that WikiLeaks’ more aggressive transparency may occasionally result in excess disclosures (a proposition I reject), the more government-friendly posture of The N.Y.T. and similar outlets often produces quite harmful journalism of its own. It wasn’t WikiLeaks that laundered false official claims about Saddam’s W.M.D.’s and alliance with Al Qaeda on its front page under the guise of “news” to help start a heinous war. It isn’t WikiLeaks that routinely gives [anonymity](https://www.commondreams.org/headline/2013/03/10-0) to U.S. officials to allow them to spread leader-glorifying mythologies or quite toxic [smears](http://www.niemanwatchdog.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=ask_this.view&askthisid=562) of government critics without any accountability.

It isn’t WikiLeaks that [prints](http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/07/11/how-acceptable-was-anonymous-speculation-about-snowdens-laptops/) incredibly incendiary accusations about American whistle-blowers without a shred of evidence. And it wasn’t WikiLeaks that allowed the American people to re-elect two presidents while knowing, but concealing, that they were eavesdropping on them in exactly the way the criminal law prohibited.

As for the new venture we’re building with Pierre Omidyar: we’re still developing what it will look like, how it will be structured and the like, so my ability to answer some of your questions is limited. But I can address a few of the questions you raise.

We absolutely believe that strong, experienced editors are vital to good journalism, and intend to have plenty of those. Editors are needed to ensure the highest level of factual accuracy, to verify key claims, and to help journalists make choices that avoid harm to innocents.

But they are not needed to impose obsolete stylistic rules, or to snuff out the unique voice and passion of the journalists, or to bar any sort of declarative statements when high-level officials prevaricate, or to mandate government-requested euphemisms in lieu of factually clear terms, or to vest official statements or official demands for suppression with superior status. In sum, editors should be there to empower and enable strong, highly factual, aggressive adversarial journalism, not to serve as roadblocks to neuter or suppress the journalism.

We intend to treat claims from the most powerful factions with skepticism, not reverence. Official assertions are our stating point to investigate (“Official A said X, Y and Z today: now let’s see if that’s true”), not the gospel around which we build our narratives (“X, Y and Z, official A says”).

With regard to sources, I really don’t understand the distinction you think you’re drawing between Snowden and more traditional sources.

Snowden came to journalists who work with newspapers that are among the most respected in the world. We didn’t just have “thumb drives” dumped in our laps: we worked for quite a long time to build a relationship of trust and to develop a framework to enable us to report these materials. How is that any different from Daniel Ellsberg’s decision to take the Pentagon Papers to The Times in the early 1970s?

All that said, you raise an interesting and important point about the dangers posed to sources. But it isn’t just people like Manning and Snowden who face prosecution and long prison terms. American whistle-blowers who went to more traditional media outlets — such as Tom Drake and Jeffery Sterling — also face serious felony charges from an administration which, as your paper’s former general counsel, James Goodale, has [said,](http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/05/21/obama-the-media-and-national-security/only-nixon-harmed-a-free-press-more) has been more vindictive in attacking the newsgathering process than any since Richard Nixon.

And even journalists in this process, such as your paper’s Pulitzer Prize-winning Jim Risen, face the very real threat of prison.

The climate of fear that has been deliberately cultivated means that, as The New Yorker’s Jane Mayer put it, the newsgathering process has come to a “standstill.” Many Times national security reporters, such as Scott Shane, have been issuing similar warnings: that sources are now afraid to use the traditional means of working with reporters because of the Obama administration’s aggression. Ubiquitous surveillance obviously compounds this problem greatly, since the collection of all metadata makes it almost impossible for a source and journalist to communicate without the government’s knowledge.

So yes: along with new privacy-enhancing technologies, I do think that brave, innovative whistle-blowers like Manning and Snowden are crucial to opening up some of this darkness and providing some sunlight. It shouldn’t take extreme courage and a willingness to go to prison for decades or even life to blow the whistle on bad government acts done in secret. But it does. And that is an immense problem for democracy, one that all journalists should be united in fighting. Reclaiming basic press freedoms in the U.S. is an important impetus for our new venture.

As for whether our new venture will be ideologically homogenized: the answer is “definitely not.” We welcome and want anyone devoted to true adversarial journalism regardless of where they fall on the political spectrum, and have already been speaking with conservatives journalists like that: real conservatives, not the East Coast rendition of “conservatives” such as David Brooks. Our driving ideology is accountability journalism grounded in rigorous factual accuracy.

**Dear** **Glenn,**

Your apparent contempt for David Brooks is revealing. Presumably what disqualifies him from your category of “real conservatives” is that he puts reason over passion and sometimes finds a middle ground. As Lenin despised liberals, as the Tea Party loathes moderate Republicans, you seem to reserve your sharpest scorn for moderation, for compromise. Look at today’s Washington and tell me how that’s working out.

We agree, of course, that the current administration’s affection for the Espionage Act and readiness to jail reporters who protect their sources have created a hostile climate for investigative reporting of all kinds. We agree that is deplorable and bad for democracy.

There are other things we agree on, too, but this exchange wasn’t meant to be a search for common ground, so before signing off, I’d like to return once more to what I think is our most essential disagreement.

You insist that “all journalism has a point of view and a set of interests it advances, even if efforts are made to conceal it.” And therefore there’s no point in attempting to be impartial. (I avoid the word “objective,” which suggests a mythical perfect state of truth.) Moreover, in case after case, where the mainstream media are involved, you are convinced that you, Glenn Greenwald, know what that controlling “set of interests” is. It’s never anything as innocent as a sense of fair play or a determination to let the reader decide; it must be some slavish fealty to powerful political forces.

I believe that impartiality is a worthwhile aspiration in journalism, even if it is not perfectly achieved. I believe that in most cases it gets you closer to the truth, because it imposes a discipline of testing all assumptions, very much including your own. That discipline does not come naturally. I believe journalism that starts from a publicly declared predisposition is less likely to get to the truth, and less likely to be convincing to those who are not already convinced. (including Fox News and MSNBC). And yes, writers are more likely to manipulate the evidence to support a declared point of view than one that is privately held, because pride is on the line.

You rightly point out that this pursuit of fairness is a relatively new standard in American journalism. A reader doesn’t have to go back very far in the archives — including the archives of this paper — to find the kind of openly opinionated journalism you endorse. It has the “soul” you crave. But to a modern ear it often feels preachy, and suspect.

I believe the need for impartial journalism is greater than it has ever been, because we live now in a world of affinity-based media, where citizens can and do construct echo chambers of their own beliefs. It is altogether too easy to feel “informed” without ever encountering information that challenges our prejudices.

A few volleys back, you pointed out that polls show the American public has a low opinion of the news media. You declared — based on no evidence I can find — that this declining esteem is a result of “glaring subservience to political power.” Really? It seems more plausible to me that the erosion of respect for American media — a category that includes everything from my paper to USA Today to Rush Limbaugh to The National Enquirer to If-it-bleeds-it-leads local newscasts — can be explained by the fact that so much of it is trivial, shallow, sensational, redundant and, yes, ideological and polemical.

I’ll offer you the last word, and then we can leave the field to commenters, if any have made it this far.

Glenn, I wish you luck in the new venture, and I hope it inspires more billionaires to put money into journalism. I’ll offer one unsolicited piece of advice. There’s very little you’ve said about The Times in this exchange that hasn’t been said before in the pages of The Times, albeit in less loaded language. Self-criticism and correction, and I’ve had considerable experience of both, are no fun, but they are as healthy for journalism as independence and a reverence for the truth. Humility is as dear as passion. So my advice is: Learn to say, “We were wrong.”

**Dear** **Bill,**

I have just a couple of last, quick points.

My “contempt” for David Brooks is grounded in his years of extreme war cheerleading and veneration of an elite political class that has produced little beyond abject failure and corruption. I don’t see anything moderate about him at all. I was just simply pointing out that if you want to pride yourself on hiring conservatives to write for your paper, he is hardly representative of that movement.

I think there’s some semantic game-playing in how you chose to summarize our debate. My view of journalism absolutely requires both fairness and rigorous adherence to facts. But I think those values are promoted by being honest about one’s perspectives and subjective assumptions rather than donning a voice-of-god, view-from-nowhere tone that falsely implies that journalists reside above the normal viewpoints and faction-loyalties that plague the non-journalist and the dreaded “activist.”

Embedded in The New York Times’s institutional perspective and reporting methodologies are all sorts of quite debatable and subjective political and cultural assumptions about the world. And with some noble exceptions, The Times, by design or otherwise, has long served the interests of the same set of elite and powerful factions. Its reporting is no less “activist,” subjective or opinion-driven than the new media voices it sometimes condescendingly scorns.

Thanks for the best wishes and the thought-provoking exchange. I appreciate it.

**Glenn Greenwald and Bill Keller Are Wrong About Objectivity in Journalism**

BY [**JOHN B. JUDIS**](https://newrepublic.com/authors/john-b-judis)

**November 6, 2013**

A debate has been raging for 50 years or more over whether journalists should try to be “objective” in reporting events or describing controversies. It flared up recently in an [exchange](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/28/opinion/a-conversation-in-lieu-of-a-column.html?smid=tw-share&_r=2&) in *The New York Times* between former editor Bill Keller and uber-journalist Glenn Greenwald. And even thousands of miles away, I haven’t been able to avoid it.

At [a conference on the media this week](http://ussc.edu.au/events/Public-Knowledge-Forum) sponsored by the United States Studies Centre of Sydney University, I was asked several times whether I thought journalists should strive to be “objective.” I have a simple answer to this question: yes. And that’s because I reject the assumptions that many people now make in asking this question.

The fashionable answer today is that there is no such thing as objectivity. Greenwald, for instance, writes, “Human beings are not objectivity-driven machines. We all intrinsically perceive and process the world through subjective prisms.” Keller also rejects objectivity as a model. “I avoid the word ‘objective,’ which suggests a mythical perfect state of truth,” he writes. Instead, Keller prefers impartiality as a model.

There is an old philosophical fallacy at work here that. One cannot prove that…If you say that there is no such thing as objectivity because we “process the world through subjective prisms.” …This assertion is nonsense.

If you… use the term “objective” the way that, outside of classrooms, it is usually taken, then it makes perfect sense to talk about some judgments or perceptions or descriptions being more or less objective than others. That’s a tipoff that “objective” does mean something. A judgment that is more objective is one that is less shaped by one’s prejudices, hopes, fears, and wishes, and vice versa for less objective. And every journalist has examples at hand. They come particularly easy to people who cover politics.

When I used to do “man-in-the-street” interviews to judge who was ahead in a race, I often had to recognize afterwards that I had asked questions and picked out people to interview who would confirm my hopes that the Democrat was going to win. It happens all the time, but it’s also not inevitable. You learn to question your assumptions; you write second and third drafts; you listen to a taped interview again; editors ask questions; and so do fact-checkers. And sometimes, as a result, you are able to write things that are accurate—and in this sense, objective—even if they don’t accord with your hopes and wishes. Will they be “perfectly objective”? This is a metaphysical dead horse comparable to asking whether a circle drawn on paper to do a geometry problem is “perfectly round.”

What about Keller’s insistence that impartiality is a better standard than objectivity? As Greenwald suggests, this kind of standard can lead to misleading journalism. Being impartial most often means not taking sides in an argument between opposed opinions. That’s fine when there is strong evidence on both sides, and when the reader is not really interested in what the reporter or researcher thinks. But there are cases where accepted scientific findings are at stake, or where the reporters, or researcher is in a position to know that one side of the argument is false. In that case, a reporter can do a disservice by suggesting that the arguments for or against, say, human-caused climate change or Barack Obama being born in the United States are of equal weight. There is a difference, in other words, between being objective and being impartial.

What about Greenwald’s defense of “activist” journalism? Greenwald writes, “All journalism is a form of activism. Every journalistic choice necessarily embraces highly subjective assumptions—cultural, political or nationalistic—and serves the interests of one faction or another.” Greenwald wants journalists to disclose their “subjective assumptions and political values” in reporting on the news—the assumption being that the reader will then be able to judge better the accuracy of the story.

To evaluate Greenwald’s position, you have to distinguish between normative judgments about what ought to be done and analytical judgments about what is likely to happen, or about what, given accepted ends,  is a viable means of achieving them. Almost all journalism—unless it consists of publishing transcripts or stock quotations—involves making analytical judgments. But the question is whether all journalism implicitly or explicitly involves advocacy, and if or when it does, whether the author’s positions should be disclosed.

I would say something different here from Greenwald. Yes, journalists (or policy experts) usually have a rooting interest in what they write about, but it need not shape what they write. That’s the whole point about objectivity—and the role of editors and second drafts.  On a psychological level, too, a journalist might want to see Al Gore win the election, but he or she might also want to maintain his reputation as a journalist whose reporting can be trusted by Republicans as well as Democrats. One hope might override the other. That’s what professionalism is about.

As for whether writers or television reporters should disclose their political values, I think that depends on whether we are talking about a reporter working for a large newspaper or network or a quasi-independent operator like myself or Greenwald. With a newspaper like *The New York Times*, the credibility of its coverage rests ultimately on the publication’s reputation for objectivity rather than on the reputation of individual authors. It would be tedious and misleading for, say, political reporters to begin each of their election accounts by saying who they would vote for.

Political writers known for their byline more than for the publication they work for have to build trust largely by their own efforts. In these cases, it is sometimes superfluous to disclose what one advocates, because one’s politics are generally known. Most people who read me know that I would be happy if a third or more of American workers belonged to unions, but if they think that everything I write about unions will be designed to buttress this conviction, I will have failed as a journalist and will be seen merely as an “activist” or “lobbyist” for a cause. So I have to be willing to write that the labor movement is in trouble. I even make a point occasionally of saying in an article, “I would like to see X happen, but I’m afraid that Y is more likely.” That is supposed to demonstrate my own objectivity.

In case it’s not obvious, I am defending here—with reservations about Keller’s use of impartiality—the kind of journalism *The New York Times* or National Public Radio practice. It is not a defense of Fox News or MSNBC, which has polluted the waters of American journalism by eschewing objectivity. Standards of objectivity became prevalent, historian Michael Schudson [has written](http://jou.sagepub.com/content/2/2/149.short), in response to the rise of public relations during the 1920s and to the development as journalism as a profession. By imposing this standard, journalists were trying to distinguish their work from those of lobbyists or PR people.

Much the same standards also apply to early policy organizations—now often called think tanks—and to the work of presidential or congressional commissions and of independent agencies. Their work is supposed to be objective—that is, not determined by faction, party, or interest.  Brookings’ work is supposed to be different from the work of groups like Center for American Progress or Heritage Foundation that are linked to political causes or parties or to that of groups like the American Enterprise Institute that is driven by its business funders.

The quest for objectivity was an attempt to carve out an area of public information and judgment that the public (who may not familiar with the Egyptian street or the details of a trade agreement) can rely on. And it’s well worth preserving  at a time when it is under attack from both left and right.