**From “Six Roles, or Job Duties, of Modern Journalism”**

By Howard Owens

Here are six roles the modern journalist should serve:

* **The Ethical Role**. Yes, journalists get bashed about because of real and imagined lapses in ethics, but the challenge now is to raise the bar on professional ethics, and then provide ethical guidance to today’s participatory audience. We should deal more swiftly and transparently with ethical errors within the profession, but we should also provide teaching tools on information ethics, what ethics means and why it’s important, and how to spot compromised ethics.
* **The Guide/Filter Role**. Editors and reporters should assume some responsibility for providing their audiences with pointers to the best stuff on the web, be it the best-reported of the important news or the most interesting and entertaining articles and videos. In a command-and-control environment, we cared only about directing people to what we ourselves did. Now our role is to help audiences sift through the glut of information assaulting them daily by providing pointers. This is the value-add role, and if done right it can help overcome the digital-age tendency for people to focus too narrowly on their own interests. If done well, it will bring more people to your site or publication.
* **The Understanding and Context Role**. Why should the best bloggers get to have all the fun? The best journalists should become the best bloggers. I know many really, really smart reporters and editors. These people should have blogs, and they should serve readers better by taking the news of the day and putting it in context, combing articles for the tidbits that need to be weaved together to make a bigger whole, and explaining what it all means.
* **The Conversation Leader Role**. Already, our news reports start a lot of conversations with our without our consent. The conversation-starter role should become explicit in our job descriptions. Once started, we should guide it. We should thank and encourage the good contributors, and depreciate the bad contributors We should highlight the smartest things people say. We should provide our own insights and supplemental knowledge to any conversation we find. We should be full participants, not just the lurking overlords of top-down media.
* **The Aggregator Role**. We should aggressively gather data related to the communities we serve. We should make sure that anything that is knowable about a community we serve is findable through resources we provide. While in the Guide/Filter Role we might provide pointers, in the Aggregator Role, we make data available and let people find it for themselves. This is a role that serves the long tail of information, because we never know what other individuals might find useful, important or necessary.
* **The Straight News Role**. We cannot, even if we wanted to, and should not, cede our professional responsibilities to uncover news. We must know about everything important going on in the communities that we serve, and we should strive to be the first to tell our communities about the important news of the moment (note: no longer of the day, but of the moment). We must still be out in our communities gathering facts and organizing them in a way that is relevant and useful and then reporting the most important facts to our communities.

# Olbermann suspended after donations

By Simmi Aujla 11/05/10 06:00 AM EDT Updated 11/07/10 02:45 PM EST

MSNBC host Keith Olbermann has been suspended indefinitely without pay after POLITICO reported that he made three campaign contributions to Democratic candidates.

MSNBC President Phil Griffin said in a statement Friday: “I became aware of Keith's political contributions late last night. Mindful of NBC News policy and standards, I have suspended him indefinitely without pay."

Olbermann made campaign contributions to two Arizona members of Congress and failed Kentucky Senate candidate [Jack Conway](http://topics.politico.com/index.cfm/topic/jackconway) ahead of Tuesday’s election.

Olbermann, who acknowledged the contributions in a statement to POLITICO, made the maximum legal donations of $2,400 apiece to Conway and to Arizona Reps. Raul Grijalva and [Gabrielle Giffords](http://topics.politico.com/index.cfm/topic/gabriellegiffords). He donated to the Arizona pair on Oct. 28 — the same day that Grijalva appeared as a guest on Olbermann’s “Countdown” show.

NBC has a rule against employees contributing to political campaigns, and a wide range of news organizations prohibit political contributions — considering it a breach of journalistic independence to contribute to the candidates they cover.

The network originally announced that Chris Hayes, the Washington editor for The Nation, was going to fill in for Olbermann. But the network announced late Friday that Hayes would not be the substitute host, after Hayes’ previous donations to two Democratic candidates in 2008 and 2009 came to light.

[Hayes said](http://twitter.com/chrislhayes/status/666757572329473) on Twitter that his decision not to fill in for Olbermann tonight had nothing to do with his donations – which he notes were made before he became and MSNBC contributor, but because he “did feel comfortable doing it given the circumstances.” MSNBC anchor Thomas Roberts is filling in tonight.

Olbermann is one of MSNBC’s most recognizable faces, and has emerged as one of the country’s most prominent liberal commentators. A former ESPN star, Olbermann’s “Countdown With Keith Olbermann” started in 2003 as a traditional news show but evolved into a left-leaning opinion program – and in some ways, led the network into its new identity as the cable-news voice of the left and an attempt to be a counterweight to Fox News.

In his statement to POLITICO, Olbermann said he wasn’t using his influence to solicit any donations for the candidates.

“I did not privately or publicly encourage anyone else to donate to these campaigns, nor to any others in this election or any previous ones, nor have I previously donated to any political campaign at any level,” Olbermann said.

Inside MSNBC, employees were shocked at the news of Olbermann’s suspension. Despite a reputation for a prickly personality off-air, Olbermann was given wide berth inside the network because of his stature – and his ratings.

Insiders were stunned that Griffin moved so swiftly to yank one of the network’s true stars off the air, and some suspected that the recent tensions with NBC News, which has grown increasingly uneasy with its sister network’s more ideological stance, contributed to the swift decision. Some have even speculated that Comcast’s coming merger with NBC Universal has heightened sensitivities about MSNBC’s ideological profile.

MSNBC has branded Olbermann as a prominent face in its new “Lean Forward” marketing campaign. He tripled MSNBC’s ratings at 8 p.m. In the past two years, MSNBC’s more opinionated hosts have helped propel it past CNN in prime time, and even lately during the daytime, too.

Despite MSNBC’s embrace of a more opinionated format, NBC News has a policy against its employees making political contributions – and it appears that Olbermann ran afoul of that policy, even by contributing to candidates he gave a platform on his show, like Grijalva.

In addition, Olbermann has been a [critic of the political donations](http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0910/42989.html) made by Fox News’s parent company, News Corp., which contributed $1 million each to a pair of organizations trying to defeat Democratic candidates.

Griffin also tweaked rival network Fox over the contributions. “Show me an example of us fundraising,” Griffin told The New York Times last month.

[A 2007 MSNBC.com](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19178161/) story laid out the rules for the network regarding such contributions:

"Anyone working for NBC News who takes part in civic or other outside activities may find that these activities jeopardize his or her standing as an impartial journalist because they may create the appearance of a conflict of interest. Such activities may include participation in or contributions to political campaigns or groups that espouse controversial positions. You should report any such potential conflicts in advance to, and obtain prior approval of, the president of NBC News or his designee.”

Voices from both the left and the right have questioned the decision. Bill Kristol, the editor of the Weekly Standard, came out with a blog post titled “Keep Keith!” that argued: “He’s not a reporter. It’s an opinion show. If Olbermann wants to put his money where his mouth is, more power to him.”

Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) also criticized MSNBC. “At a time when the ownership of Fox news contributed millions of dollars to the Republican Party, when a number of Fox commentators are using the network as a launching pad for their presidential campaigns and are raising money right off the air, it is absolutely unacceptable that MSNBC suspended one of the most popular progressive commentators in the country. “

Media Matters for America quickly pointed out that Fox News hosts Sean Hannity and Neil Cavuto had contributed to Republicans in the past. Former Republican Rep. Joe Scarborough, co-host of MSNBC’s “Morning Joe,” contributed $4,200 in March 2006 to Derrick Kitts, Republican candidate for the House from Oregon.

At the time, a spokesperson for NBC, Jeremy Gaines, replied to questions sent to Scarborough. "Yes, he did make a donation to Derrick Kitts. Kitts is an old friend of Joe's. Joe hosts an opinion program and is not a news reporter." Scarborough recently began writing a column for POLITICO.

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**Fox News and MSNBC at odds over political donations by hosts**

[**Blog**](http://mediamatters.org/blog)**››› November 5, 2010 4:11 PM EDT ››› ERIC HANANOKI**

[60](http://mediamatters.org/blog/2010/11/05/fox-news-and-msnbc-at-odds-over-political-donat/172963#disqus_thread)http://mediamatters.org/layout/icon-comments.png

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Today, MSNBC [suspended](http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1110/44734.html) Keith Olbermann indefinitely for violating NBC News' policy and standards. As *Politico* first [noted](http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1110/44734.html), Olbermann donated $2,400 apiece to three Democrats and "NBC has a rule against employees contributing to political campaigns."

While NBC News has a policy prohibiting employees from contributing to political campaigns, its cable news competitor Fox News apparently does not. Indeed, Fox News hosts such as Neil Cavuto, Sean Hannity, and Mike Huckabee have donated to political campaigns and organizations, and a Fox News executive previously said he would not prohibit the practice.

During the 2009-2010 election cycle, more than 30 Fox Newsers have [endorsed, raised money, or campaigned](http://mediamatters.org/research/2010/10/27/report-more-than-30-fox-newsers-support-gop-in/184095) for Republican candidates or organizations in more than 600 instances.

**Neil Cavuto**

In 2004, the *Washington Post*'s Howard Kurtz [noted](http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A26386-2004Jan17?language=printer) that Neil "Cavuto, the network's managing editor for business, [gave](http://www.opensecrets.org/DIYkit/indivs/search.php?name=cavuto%2C+neil&state=&zip=&employ=&cand=&old=Y&sort=N&capcode=5zbnc&submit=Submit) $1,000 to a fundraising dinner for President Bush in 2002." (The [joint fundraising committee](http://images.nictusa.com/cgi-bin/fecimg/?22991470069) distributed the contribution to the [National Republican Congressional Committee](http://images.nictusa.com/cgi-bin/fecimg/?22991317086) and [National Republican Senatorial Committee](http://images.nictusa.com/cgi-bin/fecimg/?22020512737).) At the time, Fox News vice president John Moody said of Cavuto's donation: "I wish he hadn't ... I hope our people will follow the advice I've given to them voluntarily. The potential perception is that they favor one candidate over the other." Kurtz added that Moody "said he wouldn't ban the practice" and "responded by circulating a policy Friday that discourages such contributions."

Cavuto, of course, regularly covered the Bush administration as host of his own Fox News show and as ["managing editor of business news."](http://www.foxnews.com/bios/talent/neil-cavuto/)

**Sean Hannity**

More recently, primetime host Sean Hannity donated $5,000 to the political action committee of Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-MN). Salon.com's Justin Elliott [wrote today](http://www.salon.com/news/politics/war_room/2010/11/05/olbermann_suspended/index.html) that Hannity did not disclose his donation to Bachmann, despite Fox News senior vice president Bill Shine's reported statement that he would:

Sean Hannity of Fox [gave](http://www.salon.com/news/politics/war_room/2010/09/23/bachmann_hannity_donation) $5,000 to Rep. Michele Bachmann's PAC over the summer, as Salon [reported at the time](http://www.salon.com/news/politics/war_room/2010/09/23/bachmann_hannity_donation). In response to that reveleation, Fox [told](http://blogs.twincities.com/politics/2010/10/hannity-puts-money-on-bachmann.html) a Minnesota newspaper:

Fox News programming head Bill Shine said there's no company policy against talk show personalities giving to candidates, but said Hannity would disclose the donation when Bachmann appears.

"It always good to remember that he's not a journalist, he's a conservative TV host," Shine said. "If he wants to donate to a candidate, he certainly can."

Now, as it turns out, Hannity had Bachmann on after the donation and [*did not* disclose](http://www.salon.com/news/politics/war_room/2010/11/05/olbermann_contributions) it. Fox's policy, if they followed it, actually makes a lot of sense here. Hannity's entire show is about promoting conservatives candidates and ideas. Olbermann's show is about promoting progressives. Olbermann, however, did not disclose his $2,400 donation to Rep. Raul Grijalva (D-AZ) on the same day he interviewed him. That seems more problematic than the donation itself.

Hannity also [donated](http://mediamatters.org/research/2010/10/27/report-more-than-30-fox-newsers-support-gop-in/184095#hannity) $4,800 to the unsuccessful congressional campaign of [childhood friend John Gomez](http://mediamatters.org/video/2010/09/28/i-donated-and-my-wife-donated-hannity-helps-gop/171240). As *Media Matters* has [repeatedly](http://mediamatters.org/blog/2010/10/07/fox-news-democrat-schoen-to-do-fundraiser-for-a/171650) [documented](http://mediamatters.org/blog/2010/10/05/foxs-continuing-ethics-problem-hannity-reported/171526), Hannity reportedly promised New York Republican and Conservative Party leaders he would "do all he could" to promote Gomez, help him fundraise and bring in headliners for events if they gave Gomez their party nods. [Hannity made good](http://mediamatters.org/blog/2010/07/17/hannity-uses-fox-news-to-fulfill-reported-behin/167845) on his promise by reportedly bringing in fundraisers for Gomez and using his Fox News program as a [promotional tool](http://mediamatters.org/blog/2010/10/05/foxs-continuing-ethics-problem-hannity-reported/171526) [for Gomez](http://mediamatters.org/blog/2010/07/17/hannity-uses-fox-news-to-fulfill-reported-behin/167845).

As *Newsday's* [reporting suggested](http://mediamatters.org/blog/2010/05/11/game-changer-hannity-launches-gop-candidates-ca/164516), had Sean Hannity not had the media platform he has today, political neophyte Gomez might have had a tougher time winning his party's nomination.

Hannity has also [endorsed and held fundraisers](http://mediamatters.org/research/2010/10/27/report-more-than-30-fox-newsers-support-gop-in/184095#hannity) for [other](http://mediamatters.org/research/2010/04/21/report-fox-newsers-rally-for-gop-in-more-than-3/185903) Republican candidates and organizations.

Fox News also [reportedly](http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2010/04/no-heads-roll-at-fox-news-over-sean-hannity-tea-party-incident.html) took no "serious disciplinary measures" after they yanked Hannity from [trying](http://mediamatters.org/research/2010/04/15/under-fire-furious-fox-news-execs-yank-hannity/163317) to tape his show at a Cincinnati Tea Party event which charged admission and had "all proceeds" benefiting the organization.

The article continues to detail contributions

**Ted Koppel: Olbermann, O'Reilly and the death of real news**

By Ted Koppel  
Published in the Washington Post Sunday, November 14, 2010;

Ted Koppel, who was managing editor of ABC's "Nightline" from 1980 to 2005, is a contributing analyst for "BBC World News America."

To witness Keith Olbermann - the most opinionated among MSNBC's left-leaning, Fox-baiting, money-generating hosts - [suspended even briefly](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/05/AR2010110504496.html) last week for making financial contributions to Democratic political candidates seemed like a whimsical, arcane holdover from a long-gone era of television journalism, when the networks considered the collection and dissemination of substantive and unbiased news to be a public trust.

Back then, a policy against political contributions would have aimed to avoid even the appearance of partisanship. But today, when Olbermann draws more than 1 million like-minded viewers to his program every night precisely because he is avowedly, unabashedly and monotonously partisan, it is not clear what misdemeanor his donations constituted. Consistency?

We live now in a cable news universe that celebrates the opinions of Olbermann, Rachel Maddow, Chris Matthews, [Glenn Beck](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/30/AR2010093005267.html), Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly - individuals who hold up the twin pillars of political partisanship and who are encouraged to do so by their parent organizations because their brand of analysis and commentary is highly profitable.

The commercial success of both Fox News and MSNBC is a source of nonpartisan sadness for me. While I can appreciate the financial logic of drowning television viewers in a flood of opinions designed to confirm their own biases, the trend is not good for the republic. It is, though, the natural outcome of a growing sense of national entitlement. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's oft-quoted observation that "everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts," seems almost quaint in an environment that flaunts opinions as though they were facts.

And so, among the many benefits we have come to believe the founding fathers intended for us, the latest is news we can choose. Beginning, perhaps, from the reasonable perspective that absolute objectivity is unattainable, Fox News and MSNBC no longer even attempt it. They show us the world not as it is, but as partisans (and loyal viewers) at either end of the political spectrum would like it to be. This is to journalism what Bernie Madoff was to investment: He told his customers what they wanted to hear, and by the time they learned the truth, their money was gone.

It is also part of a pervasive ethos that eschews facts in favor of an idealized reality. The fashion industry has apparently known this for years: Esquire magazine recently found that men's jeans from a variety of name-brand manufacturers are cut large but labeled small. The actual waist sizes are anywhere from three to six inches roomier than their labels insist.

Perhaps it doesn't matter that we are being flattered into believing what any full-length mirror can tell us is untrue. But when our accountants, bankers and lawyers, our doctors and our politicians tell us only what we want to hear, despite hard evidence to the contrary, we are headed for disaster. We need only look at our housing industry, our credit card debt, the cost of two wars subsidized by borrowed money, and the rising deficit to understand the dangers of entitlement run rampant. We celebrate truth as a virtue, but only in the abstract. What we really need in our search for truth is a commodity that used to be at the heart of good journalism: facts - along with a willingness to present those facts without fear or favor.

To the degree that broadcast news was a more virtuous operation 40 years ago, it was a function of both fear and innocence. Network executives were afraid that a failure to work in the "public interest, convenience and necessity," as set forth in the Radio Act of 1927, might cause the Federal Communications Commission to suspend or even revoke their licenses. The three major broadcast networks pointed to their news divisions (which operated at a loss or barely broke even) as evidence that they were fulfilling the FCC's mandate. News was, in a manner of speaking, the loss leader that permitted NBC, CBS and ABC to justify the enormous profits made by their entertainment divisions.

On the innocence side of the ledger, meanwhile, it never occurred to the network brass that news programming could be profitable.

Until, that is, CBS News unveiled its "60 Minutes" news magazine in 1968. When, after three years or so, "60 Minutes" turned a profit (something no television news program had previously achieved), a light went on, and the news divisions of all three networks came to be seen as profit centers, with all the expectations that entailed.

I recall a Washington meeting many years later at which Michael Eisner, then the chief executive of Disney, ABC's parent company, took questions from a group of ABC News correspondents and compared our status in the corporate structure to that of the Disney artists who create the company's world-famous cartoons. (He clearly and sincerely intended the analogy to flatter us.) Even they, Eisner pointed out, were expected to make budget cuts; we would have to do the same.

I mentioned several names to Eisner and asked if he recognized any. He did not. They were, I said, ABC correspondents and cameramen who had been killed or wounded while on assignment. While appreciating the enormous talent of the corporation's cartoonists, I pointed out that working on a television crew, covering wars, revolutions and natural disasters, was different. The suggestion was not well received.

The parent companies of all three networks would ultimately find a common way of dealing with the risk and expense inherent in operating news bureaus around the world: They would eliminate them. Peter Jennings and I, who joined ABC News within a year of each other in the early 1960s, were profoundly influenced by our years as foreign correspondents. When we became the anchors and managing editors of our respective programs, we tried to make sure foreign news remained a major ingredient. It was a struggle.

Peter called me one afternoon in the mid-'90s to ask whether we at "Nightline" had been receiving the same inquiries that he and his producers were getting at "World News Tonight." We had, indeed, been getting calls from company bean-counters wanting to know how many times our program had used a given overseas bureau in the preceding year. This data in hand, the accountants constructed the simplest of equations: Divide the cost of running a bureau by the number of television segments it produced. The cost, inevitably, was deemed too high to justify leaving the bureau as it was. Trims led to cuts and, in most cases, to elimination.

The networks say they still maintain bureaus around the world, but whereas in the 1960s I was one of 20 to 30 correspondents working out of fully staffed offices in more than a dozen major capitals, for the most part, a "bureau" now is just a local fixer who speaks English and can facilitate the work of a visiting producer or a correspondent in from London.

Much of the American public used to gather before the electronic hearth every evening, separate but together, while Walter Cronkite, Chet Huntley, David Brinkley, Frank Reynolds and Howard K. Smith offered relatively unbiased accounts of information that their respective news organizations believed the public needed to know. The ritual permitted, and perhaps encouraged, shared perceptions and even the possibility of compromise among those who disagreed.

It was an imperfect, untidy little Eden of journalism where reporters were motivated to gather facts about important issues. We didn't know that we could become profit centers. No one had bitten into that apple yet.

The transition of news from a public service to a profitable commodity is irreversible. Legions of new media present a vista of unrelenting competition. Advertisers crave young viewers, and these young viewers are deemed to be uninterested in hard news, especially hard news from abroad. This is felicitous, since covering overseas news is very expensive. On the other hand, the appetite for strongly held, if unsubstantiated, opinion is demonstrably high. And such talk, as they say, is cheap.

Broadcast news has been outflanked and will soon be overtaken by scores of other media options. The need for clear, objective reporting in a world of rising religious fundamentalism, economic interdependence and global ecological problems is probably greater than it has ever been. But we are no longer a national audience receiving news from a handful of trusted gatekeepers; we're now a million or more clusters of consumers, harvesting information from like-minded providers.

As you may know, Olbermann returned to his MSNBC program after just two days of enforced absence. (Given cable television's short attention span, two days may well have seemed like an "indefinite suspension.") He was gracious about the whole thing, acknowledging at least the historical merit of the rule he had broken: "It's not a stupid rule," he said. "It needs to be adapted to the realities of 21st-century journalism."

There is, after all, not much of a chance that 21st-century journalism will be adapted to conform with the old rules. Technology and the market are offering a tantalizing array of channels, each designed to fill a particular niche - sports, weather, cooking, religion - and an infinite variety of news, prepared and seasoned to reflect our taste, just the way we like it. As someone used to say in a bygone era, "That's the way it is."

