



NurPhoto / Contributor

1

## AUDIENCE-CENTRIC JOURNALISM

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- Understand what makes today's readers different from news consumers in prior generations and how best to serve them based on those differences.
- Identify the tools you can use to define your audience and how each tool will provide specific value for you as a reporter.
- Examine the various aspects of "fake news" as it is discussed in the public as well as why audience members are often misled.
- Understand what we owe our audiences above all else, including accuracy, value, fairness and objectivity as well as why these matter to both us and them.
- Know and apply the interest elements that attract readers: fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact.

## THINKING AHEAD: UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE

Why do you want to be a journalist?

If your answer was "Because I'm good at writing" or "I enjoy talking to people and hearing their stories" or even "I'm nosy," that makes sense. People who have these skills often find long and prosperous careers in various media fields. Good writing, good reporting and good nosiness are all crucial elements of being great in this field.

The main thing you need to understand about all of those skills is how to use them to benefit other people. If you just rely on those skills for your own interests, that is akin to stating that you want to be a famous chef at a top-flight restaurant because you enjoy eating.

No matter what area of this field you enter or on what platform you work, you won't be writing for yourself, speaking for yourself or even being nosy for yourself. You will be doing your work for an audience, a large group of specific individuals who seek information from you on a daily basis. Just as the famous chef should enjoy cooking great food for other people, you should receive joy when you find important things that matter to specific readers and viewers. You should also want to convey that information to them in a way they can use and in a form they understand.

Meeting the needs of the audience is the core of everything journalists do today, whether it's when they use social media to send out important breaking news or cameras to capture gripping video. However, journalists these days must also understand that not every reader or viewer uses the same platforms for the same reasons or wants the same information in the same ways. This is why understanding your audience is crucial to your job.

In this chapter, we will explore who uses the media today, how they use it and what they expect from their media sources. In addition, we will outline the ways in which you can use the tools outlined in the rest of this book to give your audience members what they crave in the way they want.

## MEDIA AND MEDIA USERS TODAY

For decades, newspapers were the standard source of information. Reporters used a series of news values to define what was and was not news. Then they wrote the content in a way they felt best met the needs of the sources, the readers and the newspaper. As radio and television became

important news outlets, audience members sought information from trusted professionals like Walter Winchell, Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite. In each of these cases, the journalists chose the content and presented it to a mass audience in whichever way they deemed best.

Today, social media has become a dominant force in the field of news, with new platforms and new sources supplanting traditional journalists.

According to a 2023 study from the Pew Research Center survey, half of U.S. citizens rely on social media for news at least some of the time. The study also revealed that nearly six in 10 people reported preferring to get content from a digital device, compared with about three in 10 who preferred using television.<sup>1</sup>

Journalists no longer have the luxury of providing “all the news that’s fit to print” and assuming people will gratefully consume every last word. The idea of a mass medium has gone away and been replaced with fractured audiences and a glut of information. News consumers today have so many choices that they can afford to be picky, and they can decide which sources best serve their interests. They often turn to **niche** media outlets, which provide detailed content on narrow topics of intense interest to certain groups of people. Here are some things that make these audience members different from those readers and viewers of previous era:

### Information However, Whenever and Wherever

Generations of journalists were taught in “**silos**” based on the fields they saw themselves entering. Students with an interest in newspapers went down one path, while those interested in broadcast went down another. When they became professional journalists, they became biased toward their own areas of the field and saw their competition as inferior. Even as digital media became a force within the field, research has shown that both professionals and students in the field of news see themselves in terms of their **platform** choices.<sup>2</sup>

These days, this approach to journalism makes no sense, as the audiences we serve aren’t as tied to platform-based biases as we can be. A study by the Media Insight Project found that audience members of all generations are essentially platform neutral when it comes to how they get their news.<sup>3</sup> The once-held beliefs that older generations rely solely on print, while middle-aged media users prefer TV and young people gravitate to digital devices, don’t hold water. The survey found that most Americans take more of a buffet approach to their media use, relying on upward of six devices, including television, newspapers and radio, to get their news. In addition, it is the content that drives their choices, with users turning to print publications for news about education and their local government while using mobile devices to keep up with breaking news.

These and other research findings drive home an important and yet uncomfortable point for up-and-coming journalists: It’s not about you or what you like. The audience members are driving the bus now, and you have the choice to either present your information in a way they want in an engaging format or accept that they will go elsewhere. Journalists have to adjust their own perceptions when it comes to their platform-based biases and focus more on what audience members want.

### The “Infotainment” Phenomenon

The idea of “**infotainment**,” the melding of information and entertainment, has gained traction in the past half decade and continues to be an issue for journalists. **Listicles**, which is a writing format that merges lists and entertaining information, like those on BuzzFeed and humorous news accounts like those on “The Daily Show” and “Last Week Tonight,” draw people into the news. On the other hand, the line between serious news and sarcastic commentary has continued to blur, much to the detriment of news providers.

Just because news journalists must now think more about an audience than they once did, it doesn't necessarily follow that they have to pander to the audience's basest desires. The wide array of platforms has made it possible for people to post almost any kind of information they want, ranging from fan fiction to videos of cats falling off of TV sets. Although these bits of information show up on the same platforms as coverage of tensions in the Middle East or the president's State of the Union address, it doesn't follow that these items are news.

A clear example of news-meets-entertainment exists in the "Florida man" phenomenon. The concept began in 2013 with a Twitter (now X) account, @\_FloridaMan, that catalogued various odd news stories that involved someone from Florida. The headlines referred to various Florida men, but the use of "Florida man" as an opening in headline parlance led the account's creator to refer to this person as "the world's worst superhero."<sup>4</sup>

Over the next five years, the "Florida man" concept grew virally, with everything from a day-by-day calendar that outlined whatever crazy thing a Florida man did on that day to a "Florida Man Night" promotion at a baseball game, in which a law would be broken every inning.<sup>5</sup> The "Florida man challenge" also emerged, in which people were encouraged to do an internet search with the term "Florida man" and their birthday to see what odd thing a Floridian did on that day. The website [floridaman.com](http://floridaman.com) is still being updated with current stories like "Florida Man With 'All Gas No Brakes' Neck Tattoo Crashes While Fleeing Police" and "Florida Man Robs CVS, Demands 'All Bottles' of Viagra or 'I'll Shoot.'"

Although each of the individual stories had merit for people who were geographically tied to the area in which they happened, the stories became more of a form of amusement for people outside that region. Journalists also questioned to what degree this phenomenon denigrated the homeless or those with mental illness as a way of amusing readers and driving web traffic.<sup>6</sup>

In serving an audience, journalists can walk a fine line between stories that stress oddity as an interest element and those that contain actual impact. (See a full outline of audience-based interest elements later in the chapter.) If a story is boring, readers won't spend enough time on it to understand how it affects them. However, if a story is nothing but hot air and buzzwords, the readers find themselves consuming nothing but empty calories of news content. As you develop your skills as a journalist, you will need to know how to make a story engaging to the reader without resorting to infotainment.

### Too Many Choices, but Also Too Few Choices

American entrepreneur and computer developer Mitchell Kapor once noted, "Getting information off the internet is like taking a drink from a fire hydrant." Media users today can understand that concept fairly well, as they deal with a glut of information flowing rapidly at them from thousands of sources.

For generations, people who wanted to get the news were stuck with one or two newspapers, three TV channels, a few radio stations and a handful of news magazines. The lack of choices made for a homogeneous understanding of what was going on in the world and a limited view as to how we define news. Although the number of dead-tree newspapers that can land on your doorstep today hasn't increased, the web has opened up a vast expanse of text-based news options for you. Multiple streaming services provide you with hundreds upon hundreds of television channels, many of them serving small-interest niches, including home repair and history. Satellite radio gives audiences access to not only a vast expanse of musical choices but also a number of talk radio stations and news outlets. Websites and social media outlets that aren't affiliated with traditional media also offer readers and viewers a wide array of perspectives on everything from "Star Wars" to knitting.

The sheer volume of choices can create significant problems for media consumers. The American Psychological Association noted in 2022 that information overload was harming people's mental health, as psychologists were seeing patients who reported an increase in news-related stress. During the coronavirus pandemic, a phenomenon known as "doomscrolling" became prevalent, with people feeling that things in the world were getting worse and worse as they were inundated with negative content.

Conversely, many media consumers lack a significant local media outlet that can provide them with content about things happening in their backyard. Researchers at the University of North Carolina found that more than 200 counties in the United States lack a local newspaper. The scholars also found that about half of all counties in the United States have but one, understaffed news publication to serve their area. This concept is known as a news desert, which the researchers define as an area of the country "with limited access to credible and comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grassroots level."<sup>7</sup> People who lack a strong, reliable local media outlet find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to making decisions about things happening near them, such as whom to vote for in a citywide election or whether to support a countywide initiative. This is why many people find themselves so much more attuned to what is going on at the national or global level, but less aware of what is happening at the local level.

### Shorter Attention Spans

If you have ever seen a bird chasing a foil gum wrapper across the yard, you know how "shiny-object syndrome" works: Something bright and shiny grabs the bird's attention, and the bird goes after it. When something else shinier comes along, the bird becomes distracted by that thing, forsaking the original target. Although researchers have debated how long the human attention span actually is, research is demonstrating that it continues to shrink, in large part thanks to digital devices and multitasking behaviors.<sup>8</sup>

This means that readers no longer will spend several minutes reading the overly long narrative lead you used in the city council meeting story. They also aren't going to sit still for a two-minute video of a person standing at a podium, droning on about parking regulations. The stimulus must be strong and steady over time, as you use concise writing or valuable video to grab the audience members' attention and keep it until you are finished. In addition, you must continue to find new and novel ways to grab the attention of your readers, for fear of losing them to other trends that will spike up quickly. This is why a 280-character post on X can have a greater impact than a 1,000-word story on a news website or a 30-second TikTok video can reach more people than a 10-minute YouTube video.

### Audience Participation and Spiraling Viral Coverage

With two words, a 7-year-old boy went from anonymous to a viral sensation: "It's corn!"

In 2022, Tariq was enjoying a cob of his favorite food when social media creator Julian Shapiro-Barnum asked him to talk a little bit about why he liked corn. The host of "Recess Therapy" then published the video of Tariq's reactions to Instagram, which is where things really took off.

The video, in which Tariq explained his love for the "big lump with knobs" and told viewers to "have a corntastic day," went viral, with more than 27 million views.<sup>9</sup>

Tariq, whose last name remains a mystery, became an internet sensation known as "The Corn Kid" after a musical version of the encounter went viral on TikTok.

In short order, bookers from television shows were seeking his presence, brands were reaching out to use his words in advertising and South Dakota declared him a “cornbassador,” giving him his own official day.<sup>10</sup> A year later, Tariq said he is still enjoying his fame, helping people and, of course, corn.<sup>11</sup>

As a journalist entering the field at this time of viral content and heavy audience interest, life can come at you pretty fast. The ways in which you approach stories that go viral, how you cover these kinds of pieces and what the overall impact of this work can be rest within your ability to give the readers content they value and enjoy.

You can no longer dictate to the readers what matters, as writers and editors could many years ago when the printing press ruled the news. However, you can use those news values to help you ascertain when an audience’s interest has reached a critical mass that demands coverage. You can also use those values to your advantage as you repackage information and disseminate it to your readers.

### CONSIDER THIS → HOW DOES KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE SHAPE YOUR WORK?

Quality reporters see themselves as helpful conduits of content from sources that have important information to readers and viewers who need to know and understand it. In doing this on a daily basis, reporters often become keenly aware of what matters to their readers and why it should matter to them.

Newer reporters can struggle at this initially, as audiences are more than data points on a survey or web analytics on a screen. To fully reach the readers, they need to develop a deeper understanding of what matters most to the audience and why it does. That said, even the best of reporters need to take time out to really evaluate who is in their audience, what those consumers need and how they want to be reached.

How often you think about your audience and its needs can determine the level of success you have in reaching the people in it, but it needs to be more than driving traffic or gaining followers. If you put some deep thought into who reads your content and what they gain from doing so, you can best shape your approach to what you report and how you tell your stories.

Some audiences, for example, might want the horse-race coverage of elections and the minutiae of governmental meetings. Others, however, might find a need to see the long view of projects and proposals presented to these governmental bodies to better understand their area more holistically. Some readers prefer school coverage that highlights the successes and shortcomings of sports teams and educational endeavors, while others want a deeper look at budgets and testing.

Thinking about those readers as you ply your trade can better help you shape your approach to coverage, the amount of coverage you provide on given topics and the ways in which you provide it. It will take a little more effort at the front end of your journalism journey, but it will pay off handsomely in the long run.

### DEFINING YOUR AUDIENCE

Far too often, journalists make incorrect assumptions about readers based on ill-conceived notions or outdated data. To make sure they don’t fail their audience members, media organizations often solicit reader feedback to help them refocus their coverage. Here are a few ways you can get information about your audience:

## Readership Surveys

A readership survey allows a media organization to examine who is paying attention to its content, what content is most appealing to the readers and to what degree readers' wants and needs have changed over time. Media industry expert Simon Owens offers a few reasons why you might want to do one<sup>12</sup>:

- **You need to get a sense of who is out there:** Just because you intend your content to reach a specific type of reader, it doesn't always follow that those are the people you are reaching. A readership survey gives you the chance to better conceptualize who is in your audience, which is great for content and even better if you are pitching your work to advertisers.
- **You're not sure where you stand:** The desire to "take the temperature" of your readers is natural if you want to know how best to keep readers happy. A survey can help you determine if the information you are providing is relevant and engaging to your readers.
- **You aren't sure if your approach is working:** News reporters occasionally assume that new ideas will be interesting to their readers because those ideas worked in other markets. Before you launch a whole new approach to your work or shift toward new content ideas, a survey can help you determine if that approach will work or if your previous approach was working. A survey of readers will help a media outlet to confirm or reject those assumptions.

Most organizations have conducted surveys like these at some point, and it is important for reporters to look at them and see what the audiences really want.

## Website Analytics

It's not always who is reading the news that is the most interesting aspect of **analytics**, but instead what those people are reading. Either as part of website surveys or through the use of third-party web analytics, journalists can determine what brings people to a site. These analyses can examine specific **key performance indicators (KPIs)** that allow you to use specific metrics to measure the performance of your site against your objectives. Cameron Conaway, the director of marketing communication at Solace, outlined a number of key metrics journalists and marketers should see as valuable when rating their work on their websites.<sup>13</sup> These include:

- **Unique visitors:** These are measured based on the time frame under analysis. For example, if a reader visits a website at 9 a.m., noon, 7 p.m., and 11 p.m. during a single day, that reader would be counted as one unique visitor if the unit of measurement is "daily unique visitors." However, if the unit of measurement is "hourly unique visitors," that one person would count four times. Some analytics can now track whether individuals have made multiple trips to your site and what they viewed.
- **Total pageviews:** This measures the loading of a single page as well as any reloading of that page. A single viewer could visit 10 pages on a single website for a total of 10 pageviews, or that viewer could continually refresh a single page 10 times for the same total. One area Conaway notes as important in terms of pageviews is the bounce rate on the site. This is the number of single-page visits users make to your site divided by all the visits you receive. This should help you figure out how much you are building an engaged and loyal audience as opposed to the one-hit wonders who look at a single story and then leave.

- **Visits:** This is the single time a viewer enters the website and navigates it until the viewer leaves. This information can be further parsed to determine where the person is coming from, what parts of the site accounted for the majority of the reader's visit and other similar bits of information.
- **Source:** Every visitor to a website has to come from somewhere. Source data can include things like the name of a search engine, a specific referring URL or whether the visitor came directly to the site using a bookmark. Source data will help you determine what got your readers to show up, which can help you with marketing or promoting your information to them. Conaway notes that it is important to distinguish between organic visitors, who arrive at your site via search engines or social media, and those who show up based on paid opportunities so you can see what really motivated the visitors' actions. Understanding page referrals will also help you ascertain what platforms are driving the most traffic to your site.
- **Overall engagement:** This takes into account multiple measurements, such as **session duration** (how long readers spent on a given site as well as how long they spent on any particular page), recirculation (how many people read one piece and then another on your site) and reader feedback (comments, shares and similar activities). These individual metrics can work in tandem to help you better assess what draws your readers' attention, keeps their attention and drives them to participate with your content.

Reporters can use these and other analytics to assess what stories drew the most people, held people's attention the longest and led to additional reading on the site. Just like any other tool, web analytics can be misused or overinterpreted, but for the most part, reporters should look at them to determine what mattered the most to the readers.

### Demographic, Psychographic and Geographic Information on Your Readers

Identifying trends or interests within a large group of readers can seem daunting. The tools listed in this section will help you better understand who your readers are and if they enjoy what you created for them. Here are some ways to break your audience into some simple, useful chunks:

#### Demographic Information

**Demographics** usually include things like age, gender, race, education and relationship status. These categories can then be broken into more useful segments, such as age brackets and specific educational levels. When coupled with those other "check-box items," demographics can help determine the types of people who use the content you create. Even more, you can refine your coverage approach based on what those demographics tell you. For example, if your readership is predominantly men and women ages 25 to 36 who have one or more children under the age of 10, you can tailor your coverage toward the interests most normally associated with that type of individual. This could be early marriage, young parenthood and early education.

#### Psychographic Information

Demographic information alone isn't enough to determine common ground among readers. **Psychographic information** allows you to examine an audience based on personality traits, values, interests and attitudes. This type of data includes things like strength of opinion on political issues and social ideologies.

For example, sporting traditions might dominate the social identities of some universities, while other universities have half-filled stadiums for every home game. Certain towns may profess a conservative sense of local politics, even though the people there treat the town like a



“bedroom community” and rarely vote. Other towns may have a wide range of political views, but have a serious dedication to the local high school’s events and to shops run by local merchants and vote in every town election.

### Geographic Information

People care greatly about things happening near them, making **geographic information** a crucial element in understanding an audience. When someone robs a gas station in a small town, people want to know what happened and who is responsible. When a reader’s school district considers a bond referendum, that person wants to know how much taxes will go up if the effort is successful.

Traditional newspapers know the circulation of their publications, including where distributors deliver the print copies. Webmasters can use analytics to determine where people are when they log in and engage with content. This is helpful for journalists who want to know if an event is too far outside of the audience’s geographic interests or if readers in certain areas might have an interest in the publication’s reaching out farther into their territory.

### Real People

Surveys can give you a broad array of information from a large group of people, while web analytics can help you ascertain where people spend their time while on your site. However, neither of these can replace actually interacting with your audience members.

For years, reporters built their stories around the thoughts and angles of **official sources**, people who serve as authoritative representatives of a larger group or organization. A number of logical reasons existed for this approach: Officials are easy to find, they carry a certain level of authority and their comments are “safer” for reporters than those that come from average citizens. (See Chapter 12 for more on the issues associated with absolute privilege and qualified privilege.) In addition, journalists often developed patterns with regard to what merited coverage and how best to cover it. As scholar Warren Breed noted while reflecting on his own time in a newsroom, older reporters passed down expectations and values to younger reporters, thus leading to a self-perpetuating cycle of repetitive content.<sup>14</sup>

## THOUGHTS FROM A PRO → EMILY BLOCH, REPORTER, PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

In 2018, Emily Bloch was working her dream job, community reporter for the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, when she was laid off as part of a restructuring effort.

“I was a year-and-a-half into my journalism career and I was devastated at the time,” she said.

Rather than mope about her misfortune during her final two weeks on the job, she broke a major story for the publication that had just let her go about three politicians having possibly broken the law.

The reason was simple, she said. She was dedicated to helping her audience.

Bloch began her journalism career in high school, covering local bands for a youth-themed alt-weekly newspaper, while her current job has her covering trending news for the Philadelphia Inquirer. She also has written for Teen Vogue, Cosmopolitan, Eater, The Daily Beast and The Lily.



© Emily Bloch

At each stop, she said **audience centrality** has been vital to her success as a reporter and writer.

“So much of being a good journalist is understanding your audience and what they’re looking for,” Bloch said. “The way I write for Teen Vogue is going to look different from how I write for The Inquirer....The point of journalism is to be conversational and answer people’s questions. The trick of it all is to cut through all the noise and be able to explain in as few words as possible to your readers what’s going on and why they should care. That goal doesn’t change.”

To meet the needs of her readers, Bloch said she spends a lot of time researching topics that might matter to them. This requires her to talk to sources, lurk on social media and check Google search trends.

“I value my ability to answer readers’ questions in my stories without unnecessary fluff,” she said. “That same sentiment also translates to how I promote my stories on social media. Not every story is going to be for every person and that’s OK. I’d rather lean into a specific angle and do it well than try to be something for everybody and land with no one.”

One thing everybody seems to have an interest in these days is the impact of artificial intelligence on the field, Bloch said.

“I’m excited about these conversations about AI in news,” she said. “I’ve already written about AI extensively while at The Inquirer—the good and the bad. I also use it constantly in my job with services like Otter.ai—an app that instantly transcribes my interviews for me. Of course, I’m not OK with any publishers that are trying to replace actual writing with chat-bots....New tech is always something journalists are going to be faced with. It makes sense to lean in and get acquainted now. I’m excited to see how it can help automate more parts of my job down the line.” (See Chapter 2 for more on AI.)

In reflecting on the changes in life that landed her in Philadelphia, Bloch said she is happy how things worked out for her.

“It ended up being the best thing that could have happened to my career,” she said of her firing. “It pushed me, and I’ve become such a better and more self-assured writer and person since that happened. This industry is fickle and it’s OK if your career path doesn’t look exactly how you thought it would.”

### One Last Thing

**Q:** If you could tell the students reading this book anything you think is important, what would it be?

**A:** “I think something this industry is still working on is how we talk about mental health. It is not normal to go out every day, cover trauma and come home. Even in a student newsroom, we see this happening. It’s OK to not be OK and good leaders and editors know this and will help you manage a real work-life-balance. There are also so many resources out there to help, like The Dart Center for trauma. There are also dozens of specialty journalism groups out there to help with any beat of journalism you’re looking into or to find solidarity with others who identify in the same way as you. From The Education Writers Association to The Transgender Journalists Association, there are tons of groups who want to help make you better and feel supported.”

What no one really spent a lot of time thinking about in the newsroom, however, was the degree to which stories about robberies, city council meetings or formal speeches mattered to “**real people**,” namely individuals who lack an official role but are affected by newsworthy events. In the days of limited media outlets, reporters didn’t have to worry that they would lose readers to other publications. Even if there was competition, most journalists ascribed to a standard set of news values that would essentially guarantee that if a robbery occurred or a city council met, every media outlet would be there, dutifully covering it. Now, with a wider array of media options, understanding your readers becomes more important than ever.

To help you reach your readers and understand what real people want to see, consider both traditional and digital options. As you work on standard stories, such as meetings, speeches and news conferences, you might take time out to ask audience members what they like to read or what things they think matter. When you cover **lite-brite** stories, which are feature pieces such as Fourth of July parades or the opening of a local library, you could spend more time talking to people about what they would like to know and why they read (or don't read) what your media outlet produces.

In a digital realm, you should read through reader comments at the end of your stories and other outlets' stories. Social media platforms often have ways for you to keep track of a topic as well as the people most directly interested in it. This will allow you to strike up conversations with these interested parties via email or through a social media app and find out more about what matters to them. Always look for ways to find out from "real people" what they think matters and see if it merits additional attention from you and your media outlet.

## THE RISE AND IMPACT OF THE "FAKE NEWS" PHENOMENON

A major concern for journalists and their readers is the rise of "**fake news**" and its impact on how people perceive the things they see in the media. The term gets thrown around the way the word "internet" used to be thrown around: Everyone is using it, dealing with it and thinking it's something it's actually not.

For the sake of this discussion, we'll define "fake news" as content whose authors know it to be false, posted with the intent of fooling readers into believing it to be real. To understand your audience, you need to know what drives people to fake your readers out and why your readers tend to fall for fake news.

### Who Writes These Stories and Why They Do It

To better understand the fake-news phenomenon, it helps to determine who is driving the movement and why these people feel compelled to lie to the public. The people who post this kind of content include those with strong ideological positions they hope to propagandize and others who have no stake in what their readers believe or learn. Let's look at who posts this stuff and why they do:

#### Ideologues Who Want to Advance an Ideology

People often have a strong interest in a given topic and want to feel secure in that position. To make that happen, a lot of ideologically driven individuals will post content whose aim is to get more people to support a specific way of thinking about a given topic. We tend to think of this as a political issue, mainly because of how the term "fake news" rattles around in the world of politics.

The truth, however, is that ideologies can be anything: a position on faith, science, health or anything else. When people want to have "their side" seen as right, they will often push the envelope to get other people to see things "their way." That includes creating or sharing fake content.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a great amount of misinformation was shared on social media regarding the source of the virus, the number of people who had died from it and the potential harms associated with vaccination. Even in 2023, misinformation on this topic continued, with social media reports claiming that people who received the shots were showing signs of "VAIDS" (vaccine acquired immunodeficiency syndrome).<sup>15</sup>

When unscrupulous people really believe in something and they want other people to believe it, there is little they won't do to force the issue. Thus, we get some false stories that emphasize what people perceive to be larger truths.

### People Like Money

Many people who create fake news, especially the highly partisan content, do so with no real interest in our political system. A number of journalists and scholars investigated the people responsible for many of the fake news stories and found that they write them because those stories drive traffic to their sites, and all those clicks add up to serious cash. CNN found that a town in Macedonia builds websites with the intent of inflaming U.S. partisans for cash.<sup>16</sup> The ethical and ideological standards for their content producers start and stop with the almighty dollar.

A 2022 investigative report by The Guardian found that scammers all over the world had set up groups to use fake or hacked social media accounts to make money by creating turmoil. The article noted that in 2021 alone, Facebook removed more than 50 fake news operations that were set up to make money by freaking people out.<sup>17</sup> Whether it is the snake-oil salesmen of the Old West or the Ponzi scheme hustlers of the financial world, scammers often see dupes around every corner and an opportunity to profit from those people. As the line erroneously attributed to P.T. Barnum states, "There's a sucker born every minute." And there is always someone looking to make money from them.

### Some People Are Jerks

Not to put too fine a point on it, but some people just like being idiotic. If they can be idiots and get a lot of attention for it, all the better.

After the 2017 attack in Las Vegas in which a gunman killed more than 50 people and injured several hundred others, a social media post appeared in which a young man said he was desperately seeking information on his missing father. It turned out that this was a fraud. The profile photo on the young man's Twitter account was the same one used elsewhere to pull the same stunt during an attack in Manchester. In addition, it's an internet meme.

The "lost dad" in the photo? He's porn star Johnny Sins.

When a reporter from Mashable reached the troll and asked why he used a national tragedy for his own amusement, he replied, "I think you know why. For the retweets."<sup>18</sup>

He also said he'd probably do it again.

### Why Do People Fall for Fake News?

It's hard to think of many things that can make you feel dumber than falling for a news hoax, especially if you shared the content and then got called out for it. As journalists, we know that we should evaluate sources and research content before buying into a story. However, in many ways, we often get tricked into thinking fake news stories are true, just like our readers do. Here are a few reasons why:

#### More Weirdness, More Chances for Errors

It's not clear if society is weirder now than it was at previous points in time, or if we just know more about the weirdness because we have access to a wider array of news sources. It used to be, we had a few local weirdos and that was it. Now, we have access to a world of weird, and there are some real hot pockets of weird out there. Thus, when we think about all these strange stories, we start to think, "Yep, that sounds like something I've heard before."

People who wish to mislead us will take advantage of our willingness to suspend our disbelief as they write things that sound similar to other wild stories we've heard.

Consider the following headlines:

- Florida man turns himself in for murdering imaginary friend
- Florida man arrested after recording himself having sex with dog
- Florida man arrested for hanging on traffic light and s—ting on cars passing underneath
- Florida man uses nuclear weapon to power his home

Two of these are actual headlines for real stories that ran in local media outlets, while the other two are hoaxes that went viral on the internet. Here's the question: Can you figure out easily which two are which?

These stories all seem completely ridiculous and appear fake on one hand, and yet they also seem totally plausible, thanks in large part to the “Florida man” phenomenon, as we discussed earlier in the chapter. People will often simply pass along these stories rather than checking to see to what degree each is factually accurate and which ones are con jobs.

### Confirmation Bias

Another reason people fall for fake news comes down to the idea of stereotyping and the concept of confirmation bias. With so many of us finding ways to sit in our news bubbles and not look elsewhere for content that might not align with our points of view, it becomes easy to create stereotypes and look for things that confirm them.

If you think the president is a great leader and you read nothing but news about how great he is, it stands to reason that you might get sucked in by a fake news story that says he was endorsed by the pope. On the other hand, if you dislike the president, you might be swayed by a fake story that said he threatened to launch a nuclear strike against a local McDonald's for shorting him an order of fries.

In 2017, Scott Pelley investigated the fake-news phenomenon for “60 Minutes” and found a frightening world of news scams bent on pitting people against each other for sport and profit. One website garnered an audience of more than 150 million viewers publishing headlines like “Hillary Clinton Has Parkinson's Disease, Physician Confirms.” (The story was based on the claims of a doctor who never met Clinton and was later denied by Clinton's own doctor and officials from the Parkinson's Foundation.) The people who published this site tended to lean toward political fakery because they found that more people were willing to click on stories like the Clinton one. A large part of this was because people disliked the politicians who were the subjects of these stories, and thus they were willing to read anything that painted the pols in a negative light.<sup>19</sup>

Con men, shysters and other peddlers of hoaxes are nothing new in this world. People swore they had seen the Loch Ness monster and Bigfoot. Others claimed they could sell you a medicine to cure your ills or a controlling stake in the Brooklyn Bridge. What makes today's cons more problematic for us is the volume of lies purporting to be truths and the speed at which they spread throughout society. Partisan bickering and digital aids have helped create a lucrative field of fake news that can give real journalists incredibly painful headaches.

Not every story that readers disagree with should fall into the category of fake news. Just because you don't like a political figure or a societal movement, it doesn't follow that positive

stories about these things are fake. However, scammers are taking advantage of media users who enjoy having their worldviews confirmed as they rake in cash based on click-driven advertising.

As a journalist, you need to find a way to break through this wall of fake news and illegitimate content if you want to reach your readers. Even more, you will need to find ways to convince these people that you aren't just one more carnival barker, crying out for attention with exaggerated claims and false promises.

## WHAT DO WE OWE OUR AUDIENCE?

With all of this in mind, the job of the journalist can appear a lot harder and a lot more involved than it did at first glance. Although the discipline seems more complicated than you originally thought, some basic elements of journalism remain crucial. As we noted earlier in the chapter, you don't have to pander to an audience to drive readership. Here are a few basic things news consumers need from you:

### Accuracy Above All Else

No matter how fast you get information to someone or how incredible your mind-blowing visuals are, if your work lacks **accuracy**, nothing else matters. The first and foremost expectation audiences have of journalists is that we have put forth information that is factually correct.

This means you should go back through everything you write and make sure your facts are solid, your writing can't be misconstrued and your quotes are accurate. This might require one edit or it might take several, but spend whatever time you need to make sure you've verified everything. We will spend much more time on this throughout the book, but always remember that this should be your prime directive.

### Clarification of Value

One of the bigger mistakes journalists make is to get into a rut when they report and write. This often emerges when city government reporters cover too many meetings or sports reporters rely on "who beat whom" coverage to fill their story quotas. The idea of "we've always covered X" rears its ugly head when journalists forget that they're not covering meetings or games for the sake of covering meetings or games. They need to go back to the basic premise of this chapter: Write for the audience.

Journalists have often relied on who, what, when, where, why and how—the 5W's and 1H—when they write. When writing a story, it becomes imperative that we look at the idea of not only what happened but also why it matters to our readers. The lead will capture the core elements of who did what to whom, but the "why" element of the 5W's and 1H will drive home the value of the piece. Here's an example:

*Brown County firefighters responded to a fire at 123 E. Smith Drive late Wednesday night.*

The core of this sentence picks up on four of the W's, but it lacks value because this essentially tells the readers that firefighters fought a fire. That's what they are supposed to do, and thus there's not a lot of value in that. The lack of an answer to "Why should I care?" leaves the readers without a sense of importance. A stronger lead can create improved value:

*A fire at 123 E. Smith Drive killed three people Wednesday and caused \$280,000 in damage to Brown County's oldest historic home.*

That shows value in terms of a sizable impact (death and damage) as well as an additional bit of insight regarding the importance of the house (oldest historic home in the county).

When you write for your readers, be sure you can clearly answer the question “Why should I care?” for them.

## Fairness and Objectivity

Accuracy goes a long way to improving trust, but **fairness** and **objectivity** also contribute greatly to trustworthiness.

Journalists often hear that fairness means getting “both sides of the story,” but in many cases, issues have more than two sides. A fair journalist gives stakeholders an opportunity to make their positions known. In some cases, those stakeholders may be less than genuine or may have their own agendas, which is why you need to be prepared with research and information when you speak to them. Fairness does not mean parroting your sources. Fairness means giving people the opportunity to put forth a viewpoint, which journalists have every right to question and challenge.

However, this leads to the idea of objectivity. Being objective is not akin to being blind to reality. The term “fake news” has taken over as a one-size-fits-all term for any news certain people dislike, leading to diminished approval ratings of the press and media credibility. However, objective journalists will examine statements presented as fact and push back against those that fail to pass muster.

For example, while running for Congress, George Santos stated that he not only attended Baruch College, but starred on the school’s volleyball team. Reporters dug into this statement and found that Santos, who was eventually elected in 2022, didn’t attend the school or play for its volleyball team. A New York Times investigation dug into piles of public documents and records to reveal numerous inaccuracies and fabrications that Santos had proclaimed as facts, including that he worked for Goldman Sachs, lost coworkers in the Pulse nightclub shooting and ran an animal rescue group.<sup>20</sup>

What objectivity requires of a journalist is to approach each topic and each source with an open mind. Even journalists who research a topic well might not know everything about it. You have to be able to put aside your personal views and biases when covering stories and give your sources the opportunity to provide you with information on the topic. You also have a duty to your audience to be as informed as possible, so that sources don’t pull the wool over your eyes, and to push back against sources when they present falsehoods.

## WHAT ATTRACTS AN AUDIENCE?

Don’t be discouraged when you realize that audiences now determine what matters most to them. Instead, realize that you still have a lot of input when it comes to how you can meet their needs while still maintaining your own set of best practices. To do this, you need to understand what attracts an audience to your content and then use those items as starting points to drive your coverage.

The book “Dynamics of Media Writing” outlines a series of **interest elements** that can help you attract an audience.<sup>21</sup> To remember them, you can use the mnemonic **FOCII**, like the plural of focus, but with two I’s. Here is a brief examination of those elements:

### Fame

This interest element relies on the idea that important people will draw the attention of readers. As noted in “Dynamics of Media Writing,” it isn’t always what someone does, but who is doing

the deed that matters. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the United States sees more than 800,000 marriages end each year with little fanfare. However, when musical icon Britney Spears and her husband Sam Asghari split up in 2023, it became fodder for entertainment magazines, tabloids and social media.<sup>22</sup>

**Fame** falls into two main categories. The first category includes people who are famous for an extended period of time, like heads of state, actors and singers. The second category includes those people who are living out their “15 minutes” of fame, such as Powerball jackpot winners and internet sensations.

### Oddity

People value rare things, which can be anything from the Hope Diamond to the kid in third grade who can belch the alphabet. Journalists often focus on oddities and present them to their readers as being different from the everyday elements of life.

News organizations occasionally highlight **oddity** with positive superlatives, such as the “largest ball of earwax in North America” or “the longest filibuster in state history.” In other cases, oddity could come from negative outcomes, such as the 45-year-old Muncie, Indiana, woman who was arrested on suspicion of stabbing a fellow partygoer in the eye with a fork. The reason? The stabbing victim took the last barbecued rib.<sup>23</sup>

### Conflict

If two or more people or groups seek incompatible goals, conflict will emerge. Whether it is two people who want the last barbecued rib at a party or two political parties seeking dominance in the House of Representatives, when mutually exclusive endgames present themselves, you will see conflict.

As we will discuss in Chapter 2, reporting on **conflict** requires more than getting side A of an issue and then assuming there is a side B that you need to even things up. When it comes to a particular conflict, you can see its various facets if you put in some effort to examine the issue. For example, any building project could have financial, societal and environmental ramifications for the area and your readers. You need to understand those various facets and explain how each outcome can be good or bad for your readers.

### Immediacy

People don't like to feel out of the loop, and news journalists understand this. To best serve their readers, journalists attempt to provide audience members with valuable information as quickly as possible.

When journalists “break” news or get a “scoop” on the competition, they demonstrate the importance of **immediacy** as an interest element. Digital outlets like websites and social media outlets can provide journalists with 24/7 access to their readers, meaning that immediacy takes on a whole new level of importance. Prior to these ever-present platforms, journalists measured immediacy in increments of days or hours.

Newspapers published multiple editions each day, with the final edition bringing a close to their day of information dissemination. Journalists working for the publication then had to wait to see what competing papers and broadcasters discovered that they didn't. Television journalists had three nightly broadcasts, with the final version of the news airing just before midnight, depending on the time zone. However, once those windows closed, the news went dark until the morning newscast.



Today, immediacy is measured in minutes and seconds, which leads to a hypercompetitive market in which speed dictates a lot of what we do. However, as immediacy becomes a primary issue in the field, we all have to make sure that speed doesn't trump accuracy. Fast is great, but fast and wrong is horrible.

## Impact

As noted earlier in the chapter, people want to know “Why should I care?” Good journalists can answer that question when they focus on the **impact** of a story. In some cases, you can demonstrate impact with simple stories, such as pieces on tax-rate increases or business closings. In other cases, you need to go much deeper to show a longer range impact, such as the continuing impact of COVID-19 on the lives of people who became deathly ill from it or how changes in environmental laws will affect the quality of water in an area.

You can demonstrate the impact of a story in a quantitative or qualitative sense. Quantitative impact measures the degree of the impact, such as how many people contracted the coronavirus in a city, a state or a nation. Qualitative measurements show the severity of an impact, such as the death of one student at your school.

## THE BIG THREE

Here are the three key things you should take away from this chapter:

1. **The audience matters most:** You aren't writing for yourself. You are writing for your readers, and they have specific wants and needs that you must address. The better you understand this, the more connected you will become with your audience members, and the better you will be able to serve them.
2. **Journalists owe the audience:** When it comes to your readers, focus on what you owe them each and every time you ply your trade. You have to be accurate. You need to show them value in what you write for them. You need to be fair and objective. If you do these things, you will grow and retain a strong and loyal audience. If you don't, the readers can always go somewhere else for their information.
3. **Focus on the interest elements:** Fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact serve as crucial interest elements for all media writers, but they are particularly valuable for news reporters. Each time you sit down to write a story, consider each of these elements and see which ones you think apply. This will help you focus your work and build strong and valuable content.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The first question this chapter asked is “Why do you want to be a journalist?” What is your best answer to that question? What makes this field worthy of study in your mind?
2. What is the source of most of the media you consume? Think about not just the platform (newspaper, magazine, TV, the web, apps) but the sources of media on those platforms. What makes that media valuable to you? How did you find the sources, and what made them a part of your consumption habits? What similar media did you reject or decide not to continue using? To what degree do you think the media provides you with audience-centric content?

3. Of the five interest elements listed in the chapter, which one drives you to consume media? Why do you think this is? Which one matters the least to you? Why do you feel that way?
4. Of the information you consume on a daily basis, how much of it do you think would fall into the category of “infotainment”? What draws you to this material, and how much does that bother you now as a reporting student?

### WORK IT OUT

1. Examine the following sentences and determine which of the five interest elements would most likely apply to them:
  - a. Taylor Swift accuses Selena Gomez of stealing one of Swift’s unpublished songs and recording it as her own.
  - b. A baseball player on a south Florida high school team had his fastball clocked at 123 mph, the fastest ever on record.
  - c. Members of the local city council will vote today on whether to allow a developer to build condominiums on land that is sacred to a local tribe of Native Americans.
  - d. More than 1 million people in the United States have contracted the coronavirus over the past three months, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention stated today.
  - e. Residents of a Pittsville, Wisconsin, neighborhood reported seeing a man wearing clown makeup while hang gliding naked over a city park.
2. Read the following headlines and determine which ones you feel meet the standards of fairness and objectivity as outlined within the chapter:
  - a. Poll shows president’s approval rating at 51 percent; citizens report slow economic growth, international tensions as main concerns
  - b. President is pointlessly arguing against statistics—and it’s going about as well as you would expect
  - c. Local restaurant revises menu, brings back “Garbage Burger” after customers protest in parking lot
  - d. Why is the city council unable to accomplish anything?
  - e. Senator defends her position on same-sex marriage, argues critics “purposefully misunderstand” her vote on bill
  - f. Citywide poll reveals Chicken Hut’s wings best around
  - g. Environmental Global Conference issues warning that eating Tide Pods can kill you; Soap Eaters Anonymous president disagrees
3. Research the following stories online, based on the summary information provided below, and determine which ones are fake and which ones are based in truth:
  - a. A Pennsylvania man sued a stripper and her employer for severely injuring him during a “special performance.” The man suffered a ruptured bladder and nerve damage.
  - b. A member of the U.S. government wished “Happy Birthday” to the U.S. Navy via social media. To make the message more powerful, he included an image of a warship. Unfortunately for him, it turned out to be an image of a Russian battle cruiser.
  - c. As part of an antismuggling sting, officials found a child frozen alive in a small box. He turned out to be one of nearly 300 children frozen alive for the purposes of selling their harvested organs for transplantation on the black market.

- d. A man in South Korea died after a robotic arm used in a produce distribution center mistook him for a crate of vegetables. The robot crushed his face and chest against a conveyor belt.
- e. The FBI conducted a raid on a Virginia retirement home, acting on a tip about illegal activity. The investigators found that the elderly residents were being forced to participate in a “Fight Club” activity. Nurses and other staff members placed wagers on who would win the hand-to-hand combat events. Seven employees were arrested as a result of the raid.

### WRITE NOW!

1. Explore the demographic details of your school in terms of age, gender, race and the in-state/out-of-state gap. Look for specific details you think define your school. Then, select another institution within your state and examine the same elements. Use these findings to write a two-page essay that outlines the similarities and differences between these schools. Also, include your opinion regarding the degree to which those elements accurately reflect the similarities and differences between your two schools.
2. Select three articles that interest you from the media you consume. Look through them to identify the elements of interest outlined in this chapter. Write up a few paragraphs on each article, explaining why you found that these articles were of interest to you and which elements most and least factored into your interest.
3. Select an issue of your student newspaper (or online publication, depending on your campus) and compare it with the coverage of an issue of your local publication from that same day and time as well as an issue of a national publication from that same day and time. Write a short essay on each one of these publications to outline what audience(s) you think they serve and how well you think they are serving them. Use examples of stories that illustrate the points you are making regarding the quality (or lack thereof) of the coverage.
4. Conduct a short content analysis of one of your social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.). Which of the people you chose to follow shows up most in your feed over the past 24 hours? What topics are “trending” in your feed, and how well do you feel those things represent your overall interests? To what degree would you say these items qualify as “news,” and how do you think this reflects on you as a media consumer? Write a short paper that outlines your thoughts and findings.
5. Reflect on a time when you became an active participant in a social media phenomenon. It might have been your choice to tweet about an election or to post articles about a topic that you thought others should read. What drove you to do so, and how much thought did you put into your approach? Does this differ in any way from how you see yourself as an upcoming journalist, or is this part of a different way you see media usage?
6. Reflect on the issue of accuracy and how you feel it is or isn't present in the media today. As allegations of media bias, “fake news” and other similar issues come to the forefront, how do you see this overall field, and why do you perceive it this way? Write a short essay that clarifies your outlook.

7. Select a news piece from a local publication and assess it for audience centrality. How does it do in addressing the 5W's and 1H, and how well does it tell you why it should matter to you? If you feel it has done well, explain what works. If you feel it hasn't, explain what doesn't work and how you would go about fixing it.

### BEST OF THE BLOG

*The author maintains an active digital media presence at the “Dynamics of Writing” website, where he posts reactions to the news, helpful hints on media writing and additional exercises for readers. Here is one post that captures the essence of this chapter, with a few minor edits for context and clarification. For the original version of this post and others like it, visit [DynamicsOfWriting.com](http://DynamicsOfWriting.com).*

#### Two Simple Ways to Determine if You Are Doing Audience-Centric Journalism or Pandering to Your Audience (Published Feb. 23, 2023)

*EDITOR'S NOTE: In an attempt at “less is more,” we're trying out the Axios approach to working through some of the more “event-based” posts. Tell us what you think in the comments. — VFF*

**THE LEAD:** As part of its \$1.6 billion defamation lawsuit against Fox News, Dominion Voting Systems filed court papers earlier this month that included emails, text messages and other communication at the network, clearly stating Fox's leadership knew Trump's election fraud claims in 2020 were untrue.

Hosts like Laura Ingram, Tucker Carlson and Sean Hannity privately acknowledged many of the election-denying guests were “lying” or “insane” but continued to support them because they didn't want to upset their audience.

*The brief shows that Fox News stars and executives were afraid of losing their audience, which started to defect to the conservative cable news alternatives Newsmax and OAN after Fox News called Arizona for Mr. Biden. And they seemed concerned with the impact that would have on the network's profitability.*

*On Nov. 12, in a text chain with Ms. Ingraham and Mr. Hannity, Mr. Carlson pointed to a tweet in which a Fox reporter, Jacqui Heinrich, fact-checked a tweet from Mr. Trump referring to Fox broadcasts and said there was no evidence of voter fraud from Dominion.*

*“Please get her fired,” Mr. Carlson said. He added: “It needs to stop immediately, like tonight. It's measurably hurting the company. The stock price is down. Not a joke.”*

Making things worse for Fox, Rupert Murdoch admitted as part of a deposition that he knew his hosts were falsely promoting this stuff and chose not to stop them from doing so.

*Dominion's filing casts Mr. Murdoch as a chairman who was both deeply engaged with his senior leadership about coverage of the election and operating at somewhat of a remove, unwilling to interfere. Asked by Dominion's lawyer, Justin Nelson, whether he could have ordered Fox News to keep Trump lawyers like Ms. Powell and Mr. Giuliani off the air, Mr. Murdoch responded: “I could have. But I didn't.”*

**BACKGROUND AND RECAP:**

- We covered the suit here when Dominion first filed it back in March 2021, in which the company stated Fox folks knew Trump was lying, but refused to say so on air.
- Dominion's suit for defamation noted Fox's actions were reckless and created true harm to the company and its workers. Not only did the company stand to lose about \$600 million over the next eight years, but it stated that many Dominion workers received threats from people who believed what Fox was selling.
- Fox responded that the company was attempting to be fair and balanced and did not knowingly lie to its audience.

**DYNAMICS OF WRITING FLASHBACK:** When we first pitched the “Dynamics of Media Writing,” the idea of audience centrality was at the core of the model we were pushing. One of the earliest reviewers of the book pitch took us to task for essentially “pandering to an audience” instead of doing actual journalism. In having to “sell” the book to the powers that be at Sage, we had to address this issue both in the response and in the front of the book, so that people better understood what we meant.

The key point we wanted to make was that people have choices on where to go for their information and we can't just tell them whatever it is we want to say and figure that's good enough anymore. We need to understand who is out there using our content, what makes them connect with us so we can better connect with them and how best to present the information to them in a relevant, useful and interesting fashion. That's helping your readers, not pandering to them.

**TWO KEY WAYS TO KNOW WHICH ONE YOU'RE DOING:** If you aren't clear on how to tell the difference between catering and pandering, consider a couple thoughts below:

**Seek Balance Within Reason:** One of the things that protects journalists in presenting information that might turn out to be incorrect is the fair reporting privilege. In short, courts have held that if reporters are telling both sides (or however many sides are clearly present) in a fair and equal fashion.

If you have Group A telling you Group B is trying to kill the environment with its housing project, did you talk to Group B about those accusations and give those folks a chance to respond? If you are told a police report shows the mayor of your town is running a cocaine ring out of the back of the local thrift store, did you make every reasonable attempt to get that report and interview the mayor? These are all reasonable things.

The “within reason” portion is where we provide kind of a buffer against the need to interview people who think the reason the Supreme Court reversed *Roe v. Wade* is because they're Illuminati Lizard People who are attempting to turn humans into a colony of breeders whose offspring will feed the reptile race on their home planet. There is a limit, but letting people blather on about things you know not to be true (especially any person you call “a nut job” behind the scenes).

**Tell People What They Need to Know, Not What They Want to Hear:** The key aspect of audience centrality is knowing what the audience needs to know and making sure you deliver that content. People don't always LIKE to hear things they NEED to know, like if taxes are going up, why eggs now cost more than Taylor Swift tickets or how many more months the highway they take will be under construction. The most popular part of the news around here is the weather, which pretty much sucks from about late October until God shows mercy sometime

around Memorial Day. Still, people NEED to know if they should plan extra time for a trip, plan to put away a little more money for the IRS or switch from eggs to something less pricey, like lobster.

The pandering folks at Fox were more worried that if they told their audience things they didn't want to hear, the audience would go somewhere else where a different group of hairdos would. Fox knew instinctively that they didn't have an audience that loved them. Instead, they were basically "sugar dating" a group of people who would dump them once they no longer got what they wanted.

I'm quite certain Walter Cronkite wasn't all that thrilled to tell the country that JFK had died or that it was clear the Vietnam War was unwinnable, but he did it anyway, because people needed to know these things and he felt an obligation to his profession and viewers to say them. And I'm sure more than a few people weren't thrilled to hear these things, but Cronkite had built up enough credit at the Bank of Credibility that those folks stuck with him.

As my first journalism teacher once told me, "If you want to be loved for doing your job, go teach kindergarten, because you're not going to get that here in journalism."

## KEY TERMS

accuracy	key performance indicators (KPIs)
analytics	Listicles
audience centricity	lite-brite
conflict	niche
Demographics	objectivity
fairness	odddity
fake news	official sources
Fame	platform
FOCII	Psychographic information
geographic information	real people
immediacy	session duration
impact	shiny-object syndrome
infotainment	silos
interest elements	