

**Remarks by Bob Woodward  
Accepting The Media Institute's  
2023 Freedom of Speech Award  
October 19, 2023**

**“The Five Principles of Journalism”**  
(as written, not as delivered)

During the many legal skirmishes of the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, Carl Bernstein received a call one day from the security desk at *The Washington Post*. A subpoena server was in the lobby. The Republicans National Committee wanted the notes of Carl Bernstein and myself as part of a civil lawsuit. Carl went to Ben Bradlee, who conferred with Katharine Graham, the publisher and owner of the *Post*.

Bradlee reported that the notes were no longer ours. Katharine Graham had taken possession of them. They were her notes now and she was not going to turn them over.

Bradlee was overjoyed. “Can’t you see Katharine’s limousine pulling up to the District of Columbia Women’s Detention Center and out gets our gal going to jail to protect the First Amendment!”

Ben, who not immune to a little theatre, declared, “That picture would run on the front page of every newspaper not just in the United States but in the world! Katie in the SLAMMER! Katie in an orange jump suit!”

The Republicans backed down.

After Nixon resigned, Mrs. Graham sent Carl and myself a personal note. From a yellow legal pad.

“Dear Carl and Bob, you did some of the stories about Nixon and now he’s gone. Don’t start thinking too highly of yourselves!”

Let me give you some advice: “BEWARE THE DEMON POMPOSITIVITY.” My wife and daughters remind me of that.

Pompositivity stalks the halls of the media, especially cable news. Politics, Wall Street, Hollywood.

Smugness, self-satisfaction, certainty when there should be no certainty.

All the polls show that a majority of Americans have an unfavorable view of the media. What is wrong? When you have a product that is not selling, it’s not useful to blame the consumer.

Have we drifted away from some of the main principles of American Journalism? I thought tonight I’d talk about those principles and the works that best illustrate them.

Some of the best examples that come to mind are Ida B. Wells's 1892 pamphlet on lynching in the South; John Hershey's 1946 long article, "Hiroshima," in *The New Yorker*; Ida M. Tarbell's 1902 *The History of Standard Oil*; *Jet* magazine's publication of the open casket of a brutalized Emmett Till, age 15, in 1955; Seymour Hersh's 1969 expose of the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam; The Pentagon Papers published in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in 1971; the reporting on Harvey Weinstein's sexual assaults in 2017 by Ronan Farrow, Jodi Kantor, and Megan Twohey; *Washington Post* reporters Sari Horwitz and Scott Higham's expose of the drug companies' culpability in the opioid epidemic.

What do they have in common? Five principles, I believe.

The first principle of good journalism is to use firsthand witnesses: people who were there, who have personal knowledge or evidence of something they saw, heard, or experienced. Not hearsay, not supposition.

A witness may be a back-bencher at a National Security Council meeting or a witness to an assault they did not participate in, someone who can testify under oath in a court of law. Their reliability, like in a courtroom, needs to be tested rigorously by the journalist. People lie, they can deceive, and they can simply be mistaken ... misremembering.

Finding multiple witnesses permits a journalist to weigh and evaluate contradictions and establish the best obtainable version of what occurred. A two-source rule can work. Not two people who heard the same secondhand account but independent accounts from two sets of eyes and ears.

The second principle builds on the first: finding participants who had an active role in the event the journalist wants to describe – say the Secretary of Defense at a National Security Council meeting or the victim of an assault. These people are not only witnesses, but those who have an interest, a personal stake in what's going on, what's being decided or discussed or criticized.

Participants can be the best sources because of their investment in what's being described. But their accounts should be checked and verified because of their personal stake.

The third principle is to find contemporaneous notes taken by witnesses or participants. For instance, Vice President Mike Pence's contemporaneous notes are cited in Trump's January 6 indictment. They show Trump's pressure campaign to have his vice president overturn the 2020 presidential election result, and include Trump telling Pence, "you're too honest," according to Pence's notes.

I regularly ask people if they have notes they took at the time. I often ask people to let me read their notes, or to read their notes to me if they are willing to help decipher the handwriting.

The fourth principle is to obtain documents or other records, which can include audio recordings, camera footage, e-mails, or text messages.

Last year, my colleague Robert Costa found a person who had the 29 text messages in a computer showing how Virginia Thomas, a conservative activist married to Supreme Court

Justice Clarence Thomas, repeatedly pressed Trump's White House chief of staff Mark Meadows to pursue an unrelenting effort to overturn the 2020 presidential election. "Biden and the Left is attempting the greatest Heist of our History," Virginia Thomas wrote. "This is a fight of good versus evil," Meadows said.

In 1979 when *The Brethren* was published (my book with Scott Armstrong on the inside of the Supreme Court), a group of clerks from one chambers wrote a letter to *The Washington Post* saying there was a major error. All four said something had not happened that was reported in the book. We had a copy of a memo one of the four had written saying precisely what we had written. The clerks withdrew their letter, and one phoned me to swear convincingly he had forgotten about the memo he had written.

The fifth principle is that the journalist must go to the scene of the events being described if at all possible.

In 1971 when I first had joined *The Washington Post* as a reporter, I had a source from the District of Columbia Health Department who would give me the sanitation reports done on Washington restaurants. One morning he called and said they had just given the worst sanitation score they had ever recorded and it was to the Mayflower Coffee Shop. The City Editor told me to do a draft of a story to run in the paper the next day.

When I turned it in, he asked: "Have you been to the Mayflower Coffee Shop?"

I said I had not.

"Well, get your ass out of the chair and go there. It's three blocks away."

I thought he was being unnecessarily picky but walked to the Mayflower Hotel, one of the landmark buildings in the District of Columbia.

"Where is the coffee shop?" I asked.

"We don't have one. We have a fancy restaurant and a buffet."

I then looked at the report. It gave an address several blocks away for the Mayflower Coffee Shop that was not affiliated with the Mayflower Hotel. I went to the address, which was actually at the Statler Hilton Hotel, right across from *The Washington Post*.

I went back to the *Post* and asked for my draft story back to correct the name of the hotel.

I was too embarrassed to thank the City Editor for his wisdom but the lesson "go to the scene" has always stuck with me.

Today under the pressures of instant publication online, too often some reporters never leave their desk, doing their reporting by phone and the Internet.

Richard Nixon had contempt for the press that is perhaps best demonstrated in one of his tape recordings after he won 49 states in the 1972 presidential election:

“Remember we’re gonna be around and outlive our enemies,” Nixon said during a meeting in the Oval Office with Henry Kissinger. “And also, never forget: The press is the enemy. The press is the enemy. The press is the enemy. The Establishment is the enemy. The professors are the enemy. The professors are the enemy. Write that on a blackboard 100 times and never forget it.”

That was not just Nixon’s view of the press but also former president Donald Trump’s, who regularly said the press is “the enemy of the people.”

Distrust and contempt of the media is widespread. Some of this is valid. The media industry and journalists need to face up to criticism. Reform is necessary and the best reform comes from within. It is essential that we raise the bar on ourselves.

I gave a talk this morning to several hundred defense attorneys. They heavily criticized the new sourcing formulation that is now widespread in the media: “according to people familiar with the matter” or “according to people familiar with the incident.”

I am familiar with many matters and incidents but am dramatically and fully unqualified to speak about them.

A return to the five principles might be a good first step. And we need to tell our readers, viewers, and listeners that these are our standards – firsthand witnesses, participants, contemporaneous notes, documents, and a visit to the scene such as the Mayflower Coffee Shop.