

STAND FOR SOMETHING

Let's talk about media bias. BY MONIKA BAUERLEIN

THE OTHER DAY I had a long chat with a veteran editor I admire about what he said was *Mother Jones*' "bias." Just admit it, he said. You're partisan. Otherwise, why would you have so many articles about corruption and malfeasance by Donald Trump and Republicans?

It was around the time that Michael Cohen pleaded guilty, Paul Manafort was convicted, and an anonymous op-ed warned that even the president's own team is scared of what he might do. I thought, "Seriously? How could we not throw everything we've got at this massive struggle for our democracy?"

But I knew that didn't quite do justice to his question, and when the full answer finally crystallized, it was— isn't it always?—too late. So I'm trying to unpack it here.

The last two years have brought some shining moments for journalism, but they've also highlighted some of its persistent failures. One of the most insidious of these is the commitment to what press critic Jay Rosen has called the "view from nowhere"—the approach that casts each story, especially in politics, as a contest of partisan extremes and the journalist as a stenographer of what each side is saying. "It's an attempt to secure a kind of universal legitimacy," Rosen notes, "that is implicitly denied to those who stake out positions or betray a point of view."

This, of course, is not a view from nowhere—it's a view from the middle between whatever you define as the two "sides." When "right" means Steve Bannon and "left" means Nancy Pelosi, that middle is not in the same place as when right is John McCain and left is the Socialist Workers Party.

But the problem is deeper than calibration. It's about the fact that the view

from nowhere does not allow for a moral compass. There is no right and wrong when you are nowhere. There are just very fine people on both sides.

Our starting point at *Mother Jones*, I wish I'd told the editor, is not the view from nowhere. Our journalism comes from somewhere. It comes from a passion for justice, fairness, and a democracy where facts matter and all can participate. That's not a partisan agenda, because these values are bigger than party. But it is a point of view.

Fairness and accuracy are not served by pretending to have no point of view. They are served by acknowledging where you're coming from and using rigorous journalistic methods to follow the facts wherever they lead. You seek out different points of view. You look for evidence that contradicts your assumptions. You fact-check the hell out of every detail.

Using and respecting this method is hard, time-consuming, inconvenient—but it does get you to a place where you can be confident about which claims are factual and which are BS, whereas the view from nowhere simply regurgitates them both.

Why, then, does this fallacy persist? Part of it is history. As *Talking Points Memo*'s Josh Marshall has noted, the more newspapers were consolidated, the more their profitability depended on appealing to everyone. Offending subscribers or advertisers by betraying a point of view, except on the editorial page, threatened those profits. So reporters became prisoners of the he-said-she-said schema, and "both sides do it" became the dominant storyline of political coverage. And soon, bad-faith actors realized that by crying bias, you could gain a platform for your

talking points, no matter their factual legitimacy. (It's called working the refs, and most recently conservatives have gotten a lot of mileage out of tech platforms like Facebook this way.)

This is perhaps the biggest danger of the view from nowhere: It has no defense against manipulation. The only truth you can confidently articulate is that "Person A made Claim B." Because journalism couldn't afford to make enemies, it gave up its moral compass.

Which brings us, in a roundabout way, to Trump's lie about the press being the enemy of the people. The truth is, the press is the enemy—of secrecy, corruption, and manipulation. And it should be the enemy of white supremacy and other anti-democratic lies. When one "side" throws out the rule book of democratic norms, both-sides-ism becomes worse than useless; it's dangerous.

At *Mojo*, we can afford to acknowledge our moral compass because readers keep us independent and strong. We don't have to pretend Nazis and "white nationalists" are a necessary part of public debate, as platform chiefs like Twitter's Jack Dorsey have insisted for too long. We don't have to elevate them to the pantheon of Big Ideas. What we do need to do is explore, accurately and fairly and even with empathy, what people who espouse these beliefs think, and why. (You may recall, for example, Arlie Hochschild's cover story about the five years she spent listening closely to white conservatives in Louisiana.)

For 42 years, we have tried to demonstrate what journalism can look like when it is fair and accurate and stands for something. But we haven't always talked about why. We're doing it now because the two most important elections of our lives—2018 and 2020—are ahead, and it's time to ditch the view from nowhere for good. ■



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