

“Credibility is a relationship”

By Bailey Thomson

In 1945, Norman Rockwell visited the Monroe County Appeal in Paris, Mo. His assignment was to capture the spirit of this weekly newspaper, as embodied by its 76-year-old editor, Jack Blanton, and his employees.

Rockwell took about 100 photographs before he went home to sketch and paint. His work graced four inside pages of the Saturday Evening Post of May 26, 1946. An accompanying article declared that Blanton probably was the nation’s best-known “country editor” and a worthy successor of the renowned William Allen White of Emporia, Kansas. Both men struggled for the civic souls of their communities and the political souls of their states.¹

An editorial described the typical country weekly newspaper as an ideal symbol for democracy. The readers often knew the editor personally, and he knew human nature intimately. “Character and right purposes” on the editor’s part rewarded the newspaper with influence in the community. “For the editor and his newspaper become more or less identical in the view of its readers,” the writer concluded.²

A local historian recalled decades later that Blanton had a unique style in that no news seemed too small for his weekly paper. The editor would even mount a horse to visit farmers and find out how the crops were doing. Rockwell’s painting captures Blanton at his typewriter finishing one of his trademark editorials, while his printer looks over his shoulder. Meanwhile, a couple check on their subscription at the counter with the paper’s city editor, while a loafer peruses a back issue.

I doubt Blanton and his staff spent much time worrying about whether their newspaper had credibility with their readers. A sense of connectedness flows from Rockwell’s painting between the newspaper and the citizens of Monroe County. It is a relationship that spans generations. On the wall hangs a picture of Blanton’s father, who founded the paper. Another picture commemorates Jack Blanton’s grandson, who died in service with the Army Air Corps before he could take his place in the editor’s chair.

When I consider this story, I am struck by how much it can teach us about community journalism. I say this without nostalgia, because I remember from my boyhood days just how hard

¹ “Norman Rockwell Visits a Country Editor,” Saturday Evening Post, May 25, 1946, pp. 24-27.

² “The Country Newspaper: Symbol of Democracy,” editorial, Ibid. p. 160.

the work can be on a weekly. News has to be gathered and written, advertisements sold and put into type, papers printed and mailed. Once you have finished publishing one issue, you are on to the next without much time for rest or reflection. But there is value in this work – and satisfaction, too, for those who persevere and pursue journalism as a calling as well a living.

When I think about good community newspapers in Alabama, Jim Cox in Grove Hill comes to mind. He studied advertising at the University of Alabama and went home and bought the *Clark County Democrat*. With industry and integrity, he developed a solid business, with an attractive plant, an offset press and computerized typesetting. He employs a half dozen people.

The heart of his success is accurate news and well-considered opinion. On many mornings before daylight, while still in his house slippers, he walks next door to his office, puts on a pot of coffee and shares what he knows and thinks with his readers. Later, he'll probably stop by the local café and listen to the regulars before calling on an advertiser. He may end his day covering a program at the courthouse or dropping by the local garden club's monthly meeting.

If all newspapers approached their communities with such devotion, the public's confidence in the press, along with daily readership, would be much stronger. Both have spiraled downward since 1967, with readership falling at the rate of nearly one percent per year. Newspapers need something more than a consultant's elixir to reverse these negative trends. And continued budget-squeezing only aggravates the problem. The long-term remedy is to promote a relationship between newspaper and citizens that amounts to a marriage of common interests and shared goals. In essence, I am describing the commitment to community that Rockwell's painting immortalizes.

Any good marriage will have its high and low moments. We're not after eternal bliss here. Sometimes readers will fail to appreciate what newspapers are trying to show them. And lots of times, public officials will take umbrage at constructive criticism from editorials. Indeed, newspapers may get it all wrong sometimes. What's important, however, is that newspapers treat their readers as worthy citizens rather than as mere consumers. This relationship builds upon trust, something that too often has slipped away in many places to the detriment of democracy. If newspapers succeed where it counts, they will build a foundation that allows long-term profitability and, equally important, significant influence for the good of their communities.

But where does a paper begin in building trust with readers? What is the essential component of this relationship? For Philip Meyer, who has thought about this question for a long time, first as a professional and later as a distinguished professor at the University of North Carolina, the answer is "quality." Indeed, he offers a simple mantra to express the point: "quality equals credibility equals profits."

Meyer draws upon a model that the late Hal Jurgensmeyer envisioned twenty-five years ago when he was an executive with Knight-Ridder newspapers. Essentially, he argued that investing in the high quality of a newspaper inspired public trust. In turn, this trust led to “societal influence,” something no one can buy. Having societal influence means newspapers can help achieve many good things for their communities, such as better schools, more responsive government and safe places for children to play. But societal influence also leads to another worthy end: profitability for the newspapers. Why is that? Because advertisers want to associate their companies and products with newspapers that people trust and read. In this fashion newspapers create what Jurgensmeyer called “commercial influence,” which they can sell and earn more money to invest in quality journalism.

Meyer and his associate, Yuan Zhang, used regression analysis to look for a correlation between a newspaper’s credibility and the penetration it enjoyed in its home county during the period 1995-2000. They compared data on credibility collected in a study fielded by the Knight Foundation, and they used penetration reports from the Audit Bureau of Circulations. Next, they narrowed their scope to 21 newspaper markets where they felt most comfortable in measuring the two variables. In comparing the markets for this five-year period, they found that circulation increased, on average, about .8 of a percentage point for each one percent increase in credibility.³

Of course, correlation is not the same as causation. The researchers can’t say with certainty that quality sells newspapers. Moreover, follow-up studies suggest that the measure of credibility they used is less stable than they had hoped.⁴ Nevertheless, the findings of their first study resonated with my own personal experiences and that of many colleagues who likewise worry about the long-term prospects for the newspaper industry. So where do we go from here to increase credibility and build trusting relationships?

I suggest four approaches that can help newspapers serve their communities better and make their companies stronger. I distill these one-liners from 37 years of being around newspapers. I also draw heavily upon the observations of two perceptive critics, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel. After conferring with journalists and readers in an extensive series of public discussions across the country, they have summarized in a small volume, The Elements of Journalism: What

³ Philip Meyer Yuan Zhang, “Anatomy of a Death Spiral: Newspapers and Their Credibility,” paper delivered to the Media Management and Economics Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Miami Beach, Fla., August 10, 2002.

⁴ Communication to the author from Philip Meyer, March 19, 2003.

Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect, what they consider to be the best practices and principles.⁵

One bit of caution, however: We are talking about building a long-term relationship. Thus one has to be reasonable with expectations when dealing with a situation where newspapers have squandered the public's trust and confidence. It will take hard work, leadership and probably years to reverse such consequences. So here are what I consider to be the four golden rules of credibility.

First, newspapers have to stand for something.

Quality translates into aggressive news coverage, thoughtful editorials and devotion to the community's well-being. It is no coincidence, then, that strong newspapers often are associated with well-governed cities. The great historian Alan Nevins made this observation long ago, using Louisville, Ky., as an example. To achieve quality and promote civic progress, editors and publishers have to decide how to use their available resources and influence. Will they commit them to the most important things that newspapers do, such as watching the public's purse, informing voters about candidates or explaining important issues? Or will their efforts be timid and minimal? Either way, they are setting the agendas for their newspapers, and that agenda will determine how readers will perceive the job they are doing.

What gave Jack Blanton credibility at the Monroe County Appeal was his tireless reporting on local matters, right down to his weekly column on livestock. He followed up with tough-minded editorials when he thought something needed to be done. Yet he apparently never put himself above the community he served and he identified with his readers' needs. In the middle of a severe drought in 1942, for example, he ran a banner headline that read: "Lord, We Confess Our Sins, We ask for Forgiveness, We Pray for Rain." According to the Saturday Evening Post, rain fell within an hour after the Appeal was off the press.

An editor may not have that kind of influence with the Almighty, but he or she can use what influence is available for improving the community and standing up for what's right. In some places where large groups have bought the local newspaper, I frequently hear readers complain that they just don't have enough reason to pick up a copy anymore. Usually, the complaint is that the paper is too bland and it doesn't reflect the community's distinctiveness. People don't necessarily cuss the paper; they just don't care enough about it to bother reading it. And therein lies a great danger.

Second, newspapers have to be independent.

⁵ Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: 2001).

The most significant development in the American press during the 19th century was the divorce of newspapers from political parties. Until then, editors were little more than spokesmen for the political bosses who subsidized their operations. The reader could never be certain whether he was getting news or propaganda. The rise of advertising provided newspapers with a better way to finance their publication. Meanwhile, increasing literacy broadened the audiences for news, not only in the big cities but in the countryside as well.

Now here's where credibility came to play. The more readers trusted the newspapers to provide them with truthful, unbiased news, the more loyal they became. In turn, this intensity of readership – or penetration, as we call it -- made the advertising space more valuable. To protect this credibility, newspapers learned to segregate the editorial side from the business side to avoid meddling by advertisers. Adolph Ochs at the New York Times even allowed his editors the privilege of throwing out ads when they needed more space for news. Competitors scoffed at that practice, but who can argue now with the Times' success?

A smart editor or publisher will protect this editorial integrity at all costs. The best course is simply to avoid entangling situations. A good journalist needs to be part of the community, especially in smaller markets, but he or she also has to remain at arm's length from people who want to trade on the newspaper's precious influence. It's a tricky act to pull off, especially with politicians and advertisers, but good journalism requires this careful balance in the interest of serving the public good.

As a reporter and editorial writer, for example, I was always friendly with politicians and went to lunch and attended public events with them. But I drew the line at private social occasions. I didn't want a public official calling me and imploring me as a personal friend not to do something that I knew I should do as the readers' servant. The same goes for becoming too involved with organizations that wish to influence public opinion. It's better not to serve than to find one's independence compromised.

Third, newspapers have to be honest with readers.

I mentioned earlier that newspapers have agendas, whether they admit to having them or not. I think it's better to newspapers to be up front with readers and explain where their priorities lie. Readers expect good newspapers to campaign for certain things. They know that editors have to choose what issues and problems they are going to put under the paper's spotlight. What bothers readers, I think, is when they suspect the newspaper has a hidden agenda and is manipulating the news to promote it.

I like to see editors write regularly about the decisions they make. They can explain why they publish certain stories or highlight certain issues. Such columns illuminate what we in the

business call news judgment. That means editors have to make hard choices on what to include and what to leave out of their daily or weekly reports to readers. There is less mystery in this process that some readers might suspect, but they still deserve to know what reasons lie behind the most difficult decisions.

Honesty and good faith also require that newspapers be able to defend the methods they use to collect the news. Objectivity is the process by which reporters and editors try to overcome their biases, look at all the evidence and then present the relevant facts in a transparent manner. This process does not automatically reveal truth, but it can lead to truthfulness if followed faithfully over time. Objectivity also requires that newspapers correct their errors promptly and prominently.

Finally, newspapers have to treat readers as partners in democracy.

Kovach and Rosenstiel write that newspapers made a strategic error when they began viewing readers as little more than potential consumers. That approach belittles journalism's essential role in democracy and reduces proud newspapers to the mentality of shoppers. We're better than that – and so are readers, who as citizens occupy the highest office of the republic. Upon them falls responsibility for electing good people to government and throwing out the bad ones. Often citizens are called upon to decide directly whether to raise taxes, expand local government or change their states' constitutions.

The more seriously we take citizens in this important role, the more seriously they are likely to see the newspapers' mission. After all, our industry is different from other businesses in that we enjoy the protection of the First Amendment. But with that high status comes the responsibility to provide the information citizens need and to guard the public's welfare.

The more newspapers can help citizens make good choices, the more valuable they are for democracy's success. Toward that end, I encourage every newspaper regularly to help sponsor town meetings, neighborhood forums and other participatory events. In particular, as proponents of civic journalism such as Buzz Merritt often advise, newspapers make good referees when communities are trying to decide upon proper courses of action. The important thing is to encourage good deliberation, as opposed to having people shout and talk past one another.

Readers do look to newspapers for leadership. There is no escaping that expectation; no hiding from it behind weak excuses. Therefore, the intelligent approach is to embrace this role with enthusiasm and to employ the newspaper's influence in helping to set a productive and inclusive agenda for the community. By itself, a newspaper probably cannot bring any of important goals to fruition, but it can play a decisive role in choosing what the community will talk about.

I believe these four action items represent the most important things newspapers can do to establish and maintain their credibility. If they can prove to their readers that they are worthy servant-leaders in their communities, then the newspapers have a good future. Our industry is positioned, for example, to capitalize on the Internet's development as a medium for news and information. In fact, no one can beat us now in serving this new market, as one can easily see in reading various newspapers' sites. Moreover, television's slide into sensationalism and its confusion of journalism with entertainment and shouting talk show hosts makes it less reliable. I can't imagine our republic conducting its business if all the news available to citizens came from the networks and local TV.

So let's honor the spirit of Jack Blanton and the democratic symbol he represented for his generation of community newspapers by being worthy successors of a noble tradition. Credibility never comes cheap, nor is it an inexhaustible resource. We earn it one reader at a time, and on occasion we have to spend a lot of what we've earned by taking on controversial issues. But when we do the right things and when we fulfill our special mission in this democracy, then the relationship we build with our readers mellows into a soft glow – just like a good painting that we treasure more with each passing year.

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