No, Brian Williams, Your Job Isn't to Scare People

By Alex Berezow, PhD — August 14, 2017

It's not an exaggeration to say that the American public hates the media.

A poll conducted by Gallup [2] last year showed that merely 32% of Americans had a "great deal" or "fair amount" of trust in the mass media. A Harvard poll, reported by The Hill [3], concluded that 65% of Americans think the media publishes fake news.

Who can we thank for Americans' disgust with the media? Journalists like Brian Williams. You remember Brian Williams. He's the former anchor of NBC Nightly News who was replaced for making up war stories [4]. Now, he's at MSNBC, where he continues to make things up. He even admitted it the other night when hosting a panel about North Korea. (See this YouTube clip [5] at the 2:05 mark.)

"Our job tonight actually is to scare people to death."

No, no, no. No, it's not. Wrong.

The job of a journalist isn't to scare people. It isn't to give them bad news. It isn't to drive any particular agenda. And it isn't even to make the world a better place. The job of a journalist is -- to the best of one's ability -- to tell the truth. That's it. That's the whole job.

If you want to change the world, then be an op-ed writer. Or donate to a charity. Or join a non-profit. Or run for public office. Or start a business. Or be a teacher. But if you want to be a news anchor, your job is different. It's, as Joe Friday (sort of [6]) said, "Just the facts, ma'am."
Why Scaring People Is Terrible (Science) Journalism

Why shouldn’t a journalist scare people to get their attention? Because, almost invariably, "scare journalism" is wildly inaccurate and agenda-driven.

Consider science journalism, a beat which is rife with terrible reporting. Here are some sample headlines from journalists who clearly are trying to scare their readers. The first one is from (where else?) the New York Times [7]:

Traces of Controversial Herbicide Are Found in Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream

By STEPHANIE STROM JULY 25, 2017

Never mind the fact that glyphosate doesn’t cause health problems. And never mind that the concentration of glyphosate in Ben & Jerry’s ice cream is so minuscule that a child would have to eat 145,000 servings in a single sitting to approach a level that might cause concern. (If you want a full takedown of the NYT article, we debunked it here [8].)

The next headline is from the Daily Mail [9].

Could Nutella give you CANCER? Chocolate spread maker embroiled in controversy over report claiming a key ingredient is carcinogenic

We debunked [10] this, too. The real headline should have been: "A European study invented arbitrary safety standards for chemicals found in many different foods and, despite this, found that most people consumed even less than that arbitrary standard."

This little stink bomb was provided courtesy of Canada’s Global News [11]:

Lazy lifestyles linked to common cooking oils

By Blaine Gaffney Global News
In a study that will hopefully win the Ig Nobel Prize someday, a team of researchers claimed that vegetable oil will turn girls into lazy, TV-watching diabetics. It will not.

Why do journalists publish such nonsense? As we wrote previously, the Fear Industry is very profitable. Honesty, fairness, and accuracy matter far less than making money. That's why scaremongers -- both in the media and in fad health industries -- peddle half-truths, distortions, and outright lies.

To make our society better informed, we have to fight back. We can do so by publicly identifying those people who spread misinformation. And then we encourage people to never listen to them again.

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