

# Mission-Oriented Journalism

By Jim Tarbell, Andy Roth, Nancy Price, David Delk

**In their own way, with heart and soul these mission-driven journalists are providing their truth as accurately, fairly, honestly and courageously as they can.**

All news outlets have a mission including: informing the public, making money; promoting democracy; advocating for a political, philosophical or financial perspective; and on and on. Often the mission is hidden, while journalists all have unacknowledged biases.

News outlets will frequently say they are being objective. But how can they be objective if they have unacknowledged biases? The flamboyant journalist Hunter S. Thompson used to say, "There is no such thing as objective journalism. So why try?"

The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics does not mention objectivity. Instead, they have a long list of advisory protocols. Basically they say that journalists should:

- Seek truth and report it by being accurate, fair, honest and courageous;
- Minimize harm by treating sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving respect;
- Act Independently with the highest and primary obligation of serving the public;

## Power & Money at Fox News

Roger Ailes' and Rupert Murdoch's missions for Fox News are laid out in Gabriel Sherman's book, *The Loudest Voice in the Room*. Ever since the entertainment TV prodigy, Roger Ailes, in his late 20s, turned Dick Nixon's 1968 Presidential campaign around, he knew that television could manipulate the public. He also realized that TV could replace the political Party. In 1996 when Murdoch hired him to run his startup Fox News channel, Ailes embraced a mission of turning Fox News into a political operation to take over the Republican Party.

In the process, he fulfilled Murdoch's money-making mission. Within a decade, Fox News was the most profitable division of News Corp and within another decade was making a billion dollars a year.

Ailes did this by turning mundane and often fictional news stories into national sagas of sex, violence, money and power that captivated American audiences. These included Monica Lewinsky, Whitewater, the Iraq War, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, Obama's birth certificate and the Tea Party.

Ailes went to war against his opponents. Favored Republican candidates received wall-to-wall news coverage, while Ailes told his Fox News minions that their rivals "Hate America. They hate Capitalism...Beat the shit out of them...Fuck these guys, kick them as hard as you can."

- Be accountable and transparent by taking responsibility for one's work and explaining one's decisions to the public.

Obviously not all journalist live up to these standards (See the sidebar on Fox News). But most journalists try, even though they no doubt harbor many unacknowledged biases themselves.

One way to get around this problem is for newsrooms to publicize their biases and missions. This is a major advantage of the burgeoning world of Mission-Oriented Journalism. They all put their missions right out in front.

The Alliance for Democracy (AfD) that publishes *Justice Rising* declares, "The mission of the Alliance for



Ida B. Wells, journalist, Civil Rights hero and Pulitzer Prize winner

graphic: msmagazine

Democracy is to free all people from corporate domination of politics, economics, the environment, culture and information; to establish true democracy; and to create a just society with a sustainable, equitable economy."

Some will say that AfD is only providing one side of the story and that depending on such venues to provide our information skews our perspectives. On the other hand, most of the media in this country are owned by for-profit corporations and have a huge interest in never letting the public entertain the question of what harms corporations are doing to our democracy, environment, culture and economy.

Or more famously, consider Ida B. Wells' writings in the *Memphis and Headlight*. She certainly had a mission and it changed the world for the better.

Others will say that such journalism keeps people in their interest silos and increases our divisiveness and failure to collaborate in building a better world. But there is strength in diversity, and the more Mission-Oriented Journalism moves away from the comforting aphorism of Walter Cronkite, who ended his nightly newscast with "and that's the way it is," or the New York Times' "all the news fit to print" the better for all of us. How could anyone ever believe that they were getting all the news in a few short minutes, or in one news source.

The reality is that no one can get a complete view of what is happening in the world from one news outlet. Mission-Oriented Journalism is a solution to that problem. It is creating a broad-based media landscape providing the information we all need from a panoply of news sources that declare their mission and bias up-front. It is the actualization of the concept "we provide, you decide."

One of the fascinating aspects of Mission-Oriented Journalism is that many of the journalists involved in these outlets never went to journalism school. They never learned the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists. But in their own way, with heart and soul, these mission-driven journalists are providing their truth as accurately, fairly, honestly and courageously as they can.