

Geneva Overholser, journalist and educator



Geneva's career has included stints as the Pulitzer Prize-winning editor of the Des Moines Register, ombudsman at the Washington Post, member of the editorial board at the New York Times, journalism professor at the University of Missouri, and director of the School of Journalism at the University of Southern California.

Conversation with Nancy Pappas Metcalf

Talk a bit about how or whether Wellesley influenced your career.

At a basic level, journalists are by definition generalists and it serves you well to be broadly educated. Also, going to a women's college where everybody—the jocks, the nerds, the president—is a woman affirmed my sense of myself, that anything was possible. Throughout my life, I have always felt I was both a feminist and a journalist. Often the two came into conflict but when they were together it produced some of the most important work I've done. I remember at the Times doing a signed piece about the mommy track at law firms and asking why we didn't have a daddy track. I was on the Commission on the Future of the College and I'm embarrassed to admit I voted that it should go co-ed. Clearly, Wellesley remaining devoted to women's education is the right choice.

Your hair has been on fire about the future of quality journalism for a while now. Why?

The fundamental question is whether in our democracy we're going to continue to have reliable information. The Pew Research Center found that seven of 10 people think their local news outlets are doing fine financially, which is laughably incorrect. Over the last 15 years 2,100 newspapers have died. The ones that still exist typically have 10 percent of the reporters they used to. The most comprehensive explanation is that they used to rely on advertising, which supported a public good—reliable information and the expensive team it took to put together. Subscription income never paid more than a fraction of the operating cost of newspapers. Almost all ad revenue has migrated to the internet or elsewhere. There is nothing that anyone has found that comes near to replacing it, and there have been many attempts. We could see it coming, but we are not good at change. There was this absolutely relentless pressure to get higher and higher profits. When I was editor of the Register (from 1988 to 1995) the paper had just been bought by the Gannett chain. We were pressed to cut off readers who didn't live in areas that advertisers wanted most. We proposed an online agricultural product that farmers would have paid for. They were really early users of computers and quite adept technologically. Gannett said, show us a 60 percent return on investment and we'll do it. That wasn't going to happen.

Ah, yes: the web

Newsrooms did so many things wrong at the beginning. Journalists just didn't really believe in it. When we finally dumped our print product online (hardly a successful technique), we didn't even try to get people to pay. The public had never paid much for news, and now people thought, "Why should I pay for news online when I can get free information?"

The trouble is, you have to be the curator of your own information diet now. We used to wake up and read the newspaper, and turn on the tv and see three local news channels. It was way too white and male and straight but it was reliable information for the most part. We don't have that now, and people have a hard time finding out what's nutritional and what isn't. The public should be scared to death that we are losing the ability to discern what is true and what is false, and to understand what is happening in our community. That's horrifically scary and a huge contributing factor to the utter, utter demolition of our democracy. The troubles didn't start with Trump. We paid too little attention to the growth of right-wing media who were presenting themselves deceptively. It has grown from Fox and Limbaugh to even more harmful outlets.

How is this playing out with respect to President Trump?

We have a president who is lying, and surrounds himself with liars, and our media are not up to dealing with it. Trump drives the news way more than is healthy for our democracy. For many people, just seeing Trump standing there behind the seal does it; he's the president. For those horrible COVID-19 briefings, I think we should send science writers to report on what Fauci and Birx say. As for Trump, we ought to put him in proportion. I remember the day that Bernie Sanders endorsed Biden. It was the same day the Wisconsin primary results were reported. I couldn't find a story on either one of them in the New York Times until I scrolled to the bottom of the home page. There must have been twelve stories about Trump being completely irrational before I got there.

Presidents always drive the news, but he is not a normal president in any manner of speaking. He is not grounded by morals or ethics and is surrounded by toadies. But mainstream media are accustomed to operating by a set of ethics that they have found impossible to adjust to this completely different landscape. They hate being called "the liberal media." They are desperate to be seen as fair and balanced. When I was at the New York Times writing editorials, I saw during the introduction of the Strategic Defense Initiative how a president pulls newspapers to the left or right. Early press coverage of global climate change was egregiously inaccurate because of its allegiance to "bothsidesism." The coverage of Hillary Clinton's emails was clearly disproportional, but few editors can open their minds to hearing that.

The old business model for serious journalism isn't coming back. What comes next?

Many interesting and hopeful things are going on. Report for America is a nonprofit that is placing hundreds of reporters into local newsrooms around the country. They include a component which is near and dear to my heart, which is asking for community support. I firmly believe our news supply will be only as good as what we are willing to pay for it. The Salt Lake Tribune has had a wonderful fundraising effort that's based on specific reporting projects. Google is funding, with the McClatchy chain, a series of news outlets across the country. It's about time Google did more to support reliable information. There are lots of good nonprofit publications like ProPublica. And local owners are buying newspapers—back to the future!