

Episode 98: "Fact-Free Journalism with Mark Tapscott and Brian McNicol"

Bill Walton ([00:10](#)):

Welcome to the Bill Walton Show. I'm Bill Walton, and today I want to talk about something that's come up a real [inaudible 00:00:18] on an article that was published in Atlantic recently about Donald Trump. As usual with the Atlantic, it was a hit piece on Donald Trump, but the article was most notable because it had all sorts of sources for the story, which the author Goldberg who's the editor, managing editor or editor of Atlantic journal declined to disclose their identities.

So I want to explore whether this is good journalism, bad journalism, and whether things have changed since I took a journalism class in college, 50 years ago. And with me to dig into this is a Mark... two veteran journalists, Mark Tapscott and Brian McNicol. Both of them have over four decades experience in journalism. Most currently Mark covers Congress for the Epic Times. And Brian has been on some other shows with me and he is an independent journalist. And both of them have been writing and thinking about journalistic ethics for years. Brian, would you frame this issue for me, for us?

Brian McNicol ([01:23](#)):

The Atlantic wrote a story. It's based on four anonymous sources that says Trump called the soldiers losers and cowards. And there was a meeting of heads of state at one of the G7 meetings in Europe and they were going to have a side trip to a World War I cemetery or battlefield and our security determined that Trump couldn't do it. It's a two lane road in and out of there. And if they had to get him out that, you could stop traffic and you could stop him from being able to get out. And we don't take those kinds of risks with our president, whoever is president.

So the story says that, "We didn't go because Trump didn't want to go. And he thought these people were losers for dying in this battle." So there were four anonymous sources, supposedly behind the Atlantic story. There are 21 people now on the record saying that is not true including eight, who were eyewitnesses to the events that day, and most of the other witnesses say that not only did Trump not say this that day, he's never said anything that they know of disparaging the military.

Among the people who support Trump's account of it, are a top aid to John Kelly, who was runoff as chief of staff of the White House and John Bolton, who was the national security director who has left the White House on bad terms and written an anti-Trump book. So, people who are not Trump's friends support him on this, on the record and Goldberg has this four off the record or anonymous sources. And then you have the other strange sideshow of this other media outlets "confirming" with anonymous sources that Goldberg's article. Okay?

So I can call you and say, "Gossip, gossip, gossip," and you print it. Then I call all those other people, "Gossip, gossip, gossip," and that's considered confirming the story. There's still no one on the record who's confirms the story.

Bill Walton ([03:39](#)):

So but didn't Bolton say something like, "Look, I was there. And if that had happened, it certainly would have been in my book first."

Brian McNicol ([03:48](#)):

Right? He hadn't written a chapter. He said, "I'd have written a chapter on that."

Bill Walton ([03:51](#)):

Mark, what's your take on this?

Mark Tapscott ([03:52](#)):

The Goldberg story is especially embarrassing to me as an editor frankly, because Goldberg himself is the editor of the Atlantic and he knows better.

Bill Walton ([04:05](#)):

This is Jeffrey Goldberg.

Mark Tapscott ([04:07](#)):

Jeffrey Goldberg, right?

Bill Walton ([04:08](#)):

It's not Jonah Goldberg at AEI. This is Jeffrey Goldberg.

Mark Tapscott ([04:11](#)):

Yeah. Who's has a very different outlook on politics and government and generally does, but it's embarrassing because it's a classic illustration, at least in my view, of how to do bad journalism that destroys the credibility of journalists. I wish we had some kind of informal way of censoring if you will, journalists who do this kind of thing, because our credibility is in the dumps. It has been for some time, and this is the kind of story that just pushes it deeper and deeper.

Brian McNicol ([04:57](#)):

Yeah. The people said that the polling is, only about 20% of the people trust what Trump says about the Coronavirus. Only about 12% trust what the media says.

Mark Tapscott ([05:08](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Brian McNicol ([05:10](#)):

You can't even get trusted on what should be a pretty basic news.

Mark Tapscott ([05:13](#)):

Yeah. And used car salesman are more trusted than most of them.

Brian McNicol ([05:16](#)):

That's right.

Mark Tapscott ([05:17](#)):

I hate to say.

Brian McNicol ([05:19](#)):

I would say they've earned it. To me that this is earned and distrust. You start ticking off the hoaxes, right? Russia hoax, Ukraine hoax, just in the last few weeks. Post office hoax, Trump played down the pandemic hoax. Right? It's just one after the other. And you wait 48 hours and they're all thoroughly debunked, but people keep talking about it.

Bill Walton ([05:47](#)):

So the core issue though, is if it's hostile to Trump and if you've got to name names, the reader can say to themselves, "Well look, this person we know is married to somebody in the..." Who's George Conway? We know he's the Lincoln project. We know George hates Trump, so therefore we're going to recognize he's got an agenda. Whereas if you're naming somebody who may be less obviously anti-Trump, that has some credibility, at least that they're supposed to be neutral. And so, but unless you name the names, you can't know who it is that's saying what.

But I've been interviewed a lot for various things over the years and there's a whole level of attribution. Mark, could you explain how the sourcing rules work? I've gotten into conversations with journalists and I say, "Is this off the record, or is this background, or for attribution or whatever?" What are the rules?

Mark Tapscott ([06:46](#)):

Well, number one, if it's on the record, that means I'm going to quote it. If it advances the story. If it's all background, that means you and I have had a conversation about various aspects of whatever it is I'm reporting on and I may or I may not use quotes that you have given me, but I won't attribute them to you. I will try to tell my readers as much as I can about you so that they can be reassured that you know what you're talking about, even though they don't know your name.

And then of course off the record means I can know it. I can keep it in mind as I talked to other people, but I can't quote it directly in my story. And those are pretty straight forward rules when you think about them and when you use an anonymous source, you are automatically telling the reader, there's something here that you need to be very wary of. Because if the journalist doesn't then tell the reader as much as they can about the anonymous source, you're basically saying, "Hey, trust me."

Brian McNicol ([08:01](#)):

Right. The big issue with this particular story is that you have 21 people saying it's not true. You have eight who were there and who were in on the decision-making. Sarah Sanders, Bolton, others who were actually in on saying, "Oh, we can't do this." Right? So unless they tell us who this is, I mean, I can't imagine who has inside information that could make those eight people, either all lying, and it's unlikely Bolton is lying to help Trump, right, or incorrect. We misunderstood the events. This guy was closer to the events, but they won't tell you who it is and we're getting to the point where it's almost impossible that there's anyone who knew more about this than those 21 people.

Mark Tapscott ([08:52](#)):

Yeah. And the amazing thing about this to me as an editor, 21 people say on the record, "My name is Mark. And I'm telling you, I was in the room and Trump did not say that." Goldberg, it was his obligation as a journalist and to his readers to make the calls to as many people as he possibly could in addition to the anonymous sources, because of the great possibility that there might be somebody who contradicts what the anonymous source is telling him. And if he does come up with somebody like that, he has an obligation to share it with his readers, because here's what this anonymous source, whose name I can't tell you says, but on the other hand, we also talked to these folks and they on the record said X. Then

you've given them the reader enough information that they can make their own decision about who's telling you the straight story. Otherwise, it's a narrative, another word for which it is propaganda.

Bill Walton ([10:02](#)):

I think most people understand this. I mean, as I read through the Atlantic piece and it's obviously a hit piece and he attributes things to entities or people like a four-star general familiar with the matter said, or with senior staff who've been working with the president said, unless you're really paying attention and you're a journalist and you know the rules, you may not really, he did this in a very clever way so that you felt like you were one degree of separation away from the actual name.

Brian McNicol ([10:37](#)):

Right. Mark raises a good point. Why didn't Jeffrey Goldberg call Bolton, right? But Bolton quite likely would have set him straight and avoided some embarrassment. Right. And Bolton, if Bolton knew of Trump saying these things, he wouldn't have held back, right? He would volunteer that information willingly. Because you look at like who was never called or contacted all the people who were there. They have email records of them going back and forth, talking about how bad the weather was and how we have to pull this and the president really wants to do it, but he can't and it's like, why did we find that out after this came out? [crosstalk 00:11:18]-

Bill Walton ([11:19](#)):

Well, that raises another-

Brian McNicol ([11:20](#)):

-that's got to come out.

Bill Walton ([11:21](#)):

That raises another issue, which I guess I'd call selective sourcing. So he had in mind what he wanted to write and he only called the people who would tell him what he wanted to hear.

Mark Tapscott ([11:33](#)):

Exactly.

Brian McNicol ([11:34](#)):

That's right.

Mark Tapscott ([11:35](#)):

Exactly.

Bill Walton ([11:35](#)):

I mean, that's almost the bigger crime.

Mark Tapscott ([11:39](#)):

Well, if you're doing narrative rather than reporting that's exactly what you're going to do. You're going to go find the people in the sources that support the narrative that you're trying to build. Bill, you and I

are old enough to remember the idea of the October surprise from the Reagan campaign, the Reagan days.

Bill Walton ([12:02](#)):

Sure.

Mark Tapscott ([12:02](#)):

What's happened in the last 20 years is it's, instead of one of the campaigns springing an October surprise, it's become the journalist springing these "October surprises" and it's gotten to the point that there's been so many of these stories, some of which probably were mostly accurate. Most of which, who knows, but it's gotten to the point now that there's two things that stand out with Goldberg. There's an election coming up in a couple of weeks and its anonymous sources and it trashes Trump, so that's three strikes right there.

Bill Walton ([12:43](#)):

Perfect if you're the Atlantic.

Brian McNicol ([12:48](#)):

To your question, Bill, do people understand this? No. I've had some Twitter discussions with people since this came out and people haul up Watergate. They're like, "You dummy. Don't you realize Watergate was wholly done with anonymous sources?"

Mark Tapscott ([13:06](#)):

Not true.

Brian McNicol ([13:06](#)):

You have to explain to them, none of the information from Deep Throat made it into the paper. Deep Throat was never quoted. We never said, "According to Deep Throat." Right? They took what he said. And it's like what Mark was talking about the process of this and they went and got people to corroborate it, found documents that supported it. Then you're not reporting on what Deep Throat said. You're reporting on these other things.

Bill Walton ([13:34](#)):

Well, Let's talk about that. That's a good one because it's an investigation that brought down the President of United States. Do you think that if Mark, what was his name? He was with the FBI. Mark...

Brian McNicol ([13:47](#)):

Mark Felt?

Mark Tapscott ([13:48](#)):

Mark Felt.

Bill Walton ([13:49](#)):

Mark Felt. If Woodward Bernstein had revealed the name, Mark Felt would have it resonated the way it did? My guess is it would not, but I'm curious what you guys think.

Mark Tapscott ([14:04](#)):

I think that, I assume you mean if rather than maintaining the anonymity of Felt I had at some point-

Bill Walton ([14:09](#)):

Yeah. Let's pretend we're writing it like this. Woodward Bernstein byline, Washington Post, Tuesday, blah, blah, blah. In conversations recently with disgruntled passed over FBI employee, Mark Felt, Richard Nixon is doing this, that, and the other. Then you're going to say, "Wait a second. Mark Felt here has got a real ax to grind with the administration and with Nixon."

Mark Tapscott ([14:40](#)):

And, Bill, that's exactly what I'm talking about, about the editors and the reporters obligation to tell the readers as much as possible about the source, because the source may indeed have personal animas. There may be reasons why he or she is trying to trash an opponent, an internal opponent in a policy matter, or maybe for a promotion.

There's all kinds of things that can color the credibility that you can attach to a reader. I kind of disagree with you, Brian, in one sense, I think a lot of readers have not a systematic understanding of these things, but you read a story like Goldberg and it stinks. You don't have to be a journalist to know, "Well, this is really thin stuff. This is gruel." I think a lot of people realize that, a lot of readers. That's one of the reasons why credibility of journalism is going down.

Brian McNicol ([15:43](#)):

That's right.

Bill Walton ([15:44](#)):

So in terms of the landscape of the geography of a news page, or newspaper, or a magazine, there used to be a hard line between news reporting and op-ed or columns, rather. And I got into, when I was running my public company, I got into a famous battle with a short seller and we fought for eight or nine years. And he was very good at working the financial press and so I learned a lot about how that world works. But there was one instance where he got to a columnist at The Times he wrote a hit piece. It was absolutely factually wrong. I mean, we went through it.

It wasn't anything in it that could be corroborated, verified, whatever. In fact, it was everything, just the opposite. So I had my lawyer write a refutation of it, send it to The Times and their [inaudible 00:16:40] came back and said, "Well, that may well be the case, but this was a column. It was the writer's opinion. And therefore we don't need to follow the same rules of sourcing and adherence to the facts that we would in a news story."

Brian McNicol ([16:58](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Bill Walton ([16:59](#)):

That was, I don't know, I guess that was 12, 15 years ago. Is that still the case? What are the-

Mark Tapscott ([17:08](#)):

Absolutely. And I just did a story on some related issues on this. Supreme Court Justice, Clarence Thomas recently opined a dissent that it was time for the court to revisit New York Times versus Sullivan, which of course is the classic libel case. And his point was precisely that if you can't prove actual malice and knowledge that what was printed was not correct or had substantial reason to think that it might not be correct.

You have no hope, Bill Walton, of persuading the publication to do a correction because as they can say, "Hey, we did everything we could. It's an opinion piece and therefore we're entitled to publish opinion as we like." You have to prove that, well, it may be opinion, but you have to be able to prove that he also knew that, "Hey, this may not be true, but I don't like Bill Walton, so I'm going to publish this."

Bill Walton ([18:18](#)):

That's very hard to prove.

Mark Tapscott ([18:20](#)):

It's all but impossible to prove. That's what needs to be changed.

Bill Walton ([18:24](#)):

What were the facts of The New York Times versus Sullivan? I'm not familiar with that. What was the-

Mark Tapscott ([18:29](#)):

It was 1964. It's a classic decision because it was generated by a Southern, I believe in Georgia or Kentucky. Brian, correct me if I'm wrong.

Brian McNicol ([18:42](#)):

Yeah, I think it's Georgia.

Mark Tapscott ([18:43](#)):

Yeah. Local officials who were part of the massive resistance to the civil rights movement and they sued The New York Times for a story that had been published that this local official didn't like, and out of all of that litigation came the decision that said, "Well, you've, to this Southern official, he was upset. If you can't prove the actual malice on their part, you don't have a case." Supreme Court justices were very concerned about protecting the independence of the news media at the time. They went too far.

Bill Walton ([19:28](#)):

Well, it seems like the boundary lines or the divisions between an opinion piece and the news have really, they really blurred almost to the point of not being able to tell the difference. I mean, you look at the most egregious example, which would be the Washington Post, which hates Donald Trump and will do everything it can to remove Donald Trump from office. You read their headlines, you read their stories on page one, an awful lot it reads like opinion to me.

Brian McNicol ([20:01](#)):

There's a column on the front of the sports page in The Washington Post today criticizing Trump. It's every section of the paper.

Bill Walton ([20:09](#)):

An opinion column on the sports page.

Brian McNicol ([20:13](#)):

NFL starts tonight. It has to do with the NFL.

Bill Walton ([20:17](#)):

Well, that's another show we need to do, the politicization of sports.

Mark Tapscott ([20:21](#)):

Yes, yes. Yeah.

Bill Walton ([20:23](#)):

Mark, what do you think? Am I being a partisan? I mean, am I wrong? The post is really following all the traditional rules of journalism and it's just because of the way they write it or is it something deeper?

Mark Tapscott ([20:40](#)):

No, it's something a lot deeper. And my first managing editor was Wes Pruden at the Washington Times.

Bill Walton ([20:49](#)):

Oh, he's terrific.

Mark Tapscott ([20:50](#)):

Yeah, he is terrific. And the first thing that Wes taught me... I was at the beginning of my journalism career, this was 1985 after I'd been in the Reagan administration. He said, "Get it first, but first get it right because if it ain't right, it doesn't matter who got it first, except for the fact that you're the one that blew it." It does make any difference whether it's an opinion piece or a news piece, there has to be a factual basis for what is published. Otherwise you're asking for trouble.

Brian McNicol ([21:32](#)):

Right. And I don't think that saying something is opinion piece removes much of at all of your obligation to get the facts right.

Mark Tapscott ([21:40](#)):

No, I don't either.

Brian McNicol ([21:42](#)):

You can say, "That guy, he's a dummy." Right? Which you shouldn't say it in a news story. But you want to say, "This guy is dumb because he did this." That's your judgment, that's your opinion. You're free to do that. Right. You don't have to prove he's dumb. Right? But you got to prove he made dumb decisions that... But it would be your obligation to get the facts of those stories right doesn't really change.

Mark Tapscott ([22:04](#)):

Yeah. The Epoch Times has a rule in the newsroom that I really respect, and that the Epoch Times does not publish quotes from people that are personal attacks or ad hominem. And that should be obvious, but unfortunately it's not. And what you're talking about, Bill, with The Washington Post and that headline is perfect illustration.

Bill Walton ([22:37](#)):

Jeffrey Goldberg has his defenders and there is a piece written by Tom Jones for, I guess he was with Pointer who jumps right in to say, "Well, you can't name names because these sources are afraid of retribution and they're acting like whistleblowers. And the power of Trump is such that if their names are out, there'll be all sorts of hell to pay. And so therefore they're justified in staying behind the curtain." What do you think?

Brian McNicol ([23:10](#)):

What is the cost of that? What has happened to Goldberg over this as a result of not releasing the sources? You have 21 people against you, who were there, do know and do understand and there's a question of whether he should be believed, right? And now there's been a two or three pieces out there, looking back at the long history of Goldberg and these type of stories blowing up on him and turning out not to be correct.

Mark Tapscott ([23:38](#)):

Yeah. The idea that every person who comes to a journalist with something to say about somebody else, fears of retribution is nonsense. I've spent 30 years talking to real whistleblowers in government and let me tell you, after about the 50th interview with one who comes to you, you begin to pick up a sense of, there's a lot of these guys, that everything they say may be true, but so what. From their perspective, it's the most important thing in the world, but from a news perspective it's not.

There's others, they come to you and it's pretty clear they are really hacked off at somebody, and they're going to try and use the media to get back at them. And then there's the few that have a legitimate news story that they well may fear, justifiably, some form of retribution. That's a very tiny segment of all of the "whistleblowers".

Brian McNicol ([24:55](#)):

Yeah. What is meant by retribution? Angry emails? Sorry, you're going to pitch dirt then some people are going to write back and say, "You're a jerk and you're wrong." And that's to 2020 right there.

Mark Tapscott ([25:09](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Well,

Bill Walton ([25:14](#)):

We also have the, I guess, with the society, for, with SPJ that you've got an ethics committee [crosstalk 00:25:22] and it's come down pretty hard on you ought to be naming names. How much power does this a society professional journalists have in today's media landscape?

Mark Tapscott ([25:36](#)):

Go for it, Brian.

Brian McNicol ([25:39](#)):

Not all that much anymore.

Bill Walton ([25:40](#)):

I think you answered my question. So we got a couple minutes. Prognosis. Where do we go from here? I mean, it seems to me, this has just been to be a fact of modern life that you've got partisan journalists and they're going to write it and they're going to report it and not source it and let the chips fall where they may because I think they figure that the damage they wanted to do to Trump was accomplished. And in a way they brought the story even more to the front because of the big controversy over sourcing.

Brian McNicol ([26:15](#)):

I think it'll be interesting to see what happens after Trump wins, because the whole purpose of all this since 2016 has been to stop him from winning again. And if he wins, it's over and I say there's a month or so frustration about that, but then there's going to be some looking past it because whatever The Post writes about him going forward. It won't get him thrown out. They're not going to be able to impeach him and they're not going to be able to beat him in an election. So, you may get some people, some cooler heads coming in and saying, "Hey, wait a minute, but quite a lot has been accomplished here."

Bill Walton ([26:59](#)):

Who are the guardian angels here? I mean, one of the things that strikes me that I felt when I was running my public company, is it so many of our institutions have lost their luster, their reputation. Used to be you could write a letter to the board of directors of the company and in its wisdom has decided XYZ or the public accountants have pronounced on this, or various authoritative and moral sources. Most of those seem to have been discredited over the last two, three decades. And I don't know quite who the grownups are here, who are supposed to lay down the rules and enforce the rules. I fear there really aren't any.

Mark Tapscott ([27:43](#)):

I think that's a very valid thing to worry about because we mentioned the Society for Professional Journalists 20, 25 years ago. If you got an award from Society for Professional Journalists from one of your stories that was something [inaudible 00:28:09] because you knew other journalists would recognize it as an indication of your talent.

Brian McNicol ([28:13](#)):

I got one from Jack Anderson.

Mark Tapscott ([28:15](#)):

Oh, really.

Brian McNicol ([28:17](#)):

[crosstalk 00:28:17] It was pretty cool. That's one of those highlight days there.

Mark Tapscott ([28:19](#)):

Absolutely. Absolutely. But today, there's so many faux journalism groups out there and liberal ideas have so infected Society for Professional Journalists and all the rest of the journalism fraternity that the guard rails are just not there.

Bill Walton ([28:44](#)):

Well, I often think of our side of thinking in terms of the process is the point and having a fair process is the means we want to bring about, just liberty for all equal, equal rights under the law. Whereas the other side seems to think the means are justified by the ends. And so if you're promoting the liberal agenda, any means justify that end and I think we've lost a lot of our institutions because of that corruption.

Mark Tapscott ([29:20](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. The narrative is the point. So if you use anonymous sources, but it advances the narrative, that's just fine.

Brian McNicol ([29:30](#)):

That's right.

Bill Walton ([29:31](#)):

That sounds like a final word.

Mark Tapscott ([29:34](#)):

Unfortunately.

Bill Walton ([29:37](#)):

Mark Tapscott and Brian McNicol, let's plan to circle on this topic or related topic in the next few months because I'm sure there's going to be a lot to talk about journalist wise when we get to the time after the November 3rd election, when even if Trump wins, I think the playbook is to follow Hillary's instruction is to no way in any form concede defeat.

Mark Tapscott ([30:04](#)):

Yeah. We're not in Kansas anymore.

Brian McNicol ([30:06](#)):

That's right.

Bill Walton ([30:08](#)):

Well, anyway guys, thank you and thanks for listening to the Bill Walton Show, and you can subscribe to us on YouTube, Apple Podcast, all the major podcast platforms. And we also urge you to take a look at our website and you can subscribe. There's a lot of interesting ancillary material, including webpages about each of our guests. So Brian, Mark, thanks.

Mark Tapscott ([30:33](#)):

Thank you.

Bill Walton ([30:33](#)):

See you soon. Talk soon.

Mark Tapscott ([30:35](#)):

All right.

Speaker 4 ([30:35](#)):

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