



# [The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect](#)

**Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel**

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**By Peter William Warn**

People who doubt that vigorous, unrestrained and trusted journalism is vital for protecting against abuses of public and private power will find little of interest in *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*.

Everyone else will find much to help them frame their thinking about fundamental freedoms of expression. Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, who also wrote *Warp Speed: American in the Age of Mixed Media*, provide thought-provoking guidance for anyone trying to navigate a media landscape that is changing because of business pressures and technological advances.

Ownership of major news outlets is becoming increasingly concentrated among a few mammoth corporations that don't have as their primary purpose the dissemination of news. This places on journalists corporate pressures with which their predecessors were largely unfamiliar. And it forces publications and television programs to become more entertaining, even at the expense of informing. The authors point out, for example, that *Time* and *Newsweek* are about seven more times likely to run the same cover story as *People* than they were about 20 years ago.

While mass media are becoming more concentrated, computers and the Internet are opening unprecedented fields of expression for people who do not control printing presses or broadcast facilities. Almost anyone who wants to is able to toss any manner of unsubstantiated rubbish into the unmanageably vast expanses of cyberspace.

A danger underlying these trends is that we will end up with countless sources for diverting material but very few sources for important information. We'll be so swamped by the junk that we can't find our way to the reliable outlets for the good stuff. The authors contend that we can avoid that danger by relying on aggressive, reliable journalism.

Kovach and Rosenstiel propose that several guiding principles should define both journalism and our expectations of those who provide it. The most important, they suggest, is that journalists have an obligation to

personal conscience. Adhering to that principle can provide a solid foundation for all of the others:

**The primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing;**

**Journalism's first obligation is to the truth;**

**Journalism's first loyalty is to citizens;**

**The essence of journalism is a discipline of verification;**

**Journalists must maintain an independence from those they cover;**

**Journalists must serve as independent monitors of power;**

**Journalism must provide a forum for public criticism and comment;**

**Journalists must make the significant interesting and relevant;**

**And journalists should keep the news in proportion and make it comprehensive.**

Kovach, who is chair of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, and Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, base these principles on the ideas articulated in various writers' recent articles about journalism and in hundreds of their own interviews with reporters, editors, readers, listeners and viewers. They lace their engaging prose with relevant examples from news coverage ranging from the earliest newspapers that developed in 17th century English coffeehouses to broadcasts on CNN and Fox News. No reader will agree with all of the assertions that Kovach and Rosenstiel make, but all readers will find something to challenge their assumptions and help shape their thinking.

Having liberties means not having to think about them very much. In the United States, for example, voting is free and easy, and voter turnout routinely falls below that in nations where citizens must overcome considerable obstacles to cast their ballots. It usually isn't until something unusual happens, as in the 2000 U.S. presidential election, that we pay much attention to freedoms we otherwise take for granted.

In *The Elements of Journalism*, Kovach and Rosenstiel suggest that paying a bit of attention now to media freedoms could be a valuable investment in protecting fundamental liberties.

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