

Letter from the Editor – The issue of even-handedness

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Hollywood, MD – Several years ago when I was working in local radio I attended an evening meeting in Hughesville about the proposed reconfiguration of Congressional districts in Maryland. Stalwarts from both political parties plus many concerned citizens attended and expressed opinions. I don't remember much about what I reported on the next day but I do remember a female listener called the radio station after the recap on the meeting was aired. She asked who wrote the story and I admitted I had. "Well thank you," she said. "That was very even-handed." I thanked her and then I wondered if I had just been insulted. News people don't hear the word "even-handed" very often. It's possible I may have grabbed a dictionary to look the word up. I don't recall. I do know, however, that I came to realize that although it's not a superlative being called "even-handed" is the highest compliment someone can give you.

It's a challenge to be even-handed or to even be thought to be even-handed, especially in the political climate we find ourselves in today. These are cynical times and people tend to generalize when speaking about "THE Media," like everyone works for "Mr. THE"—the "Evil Mr. THE," who in turn is working with Satan and members of a certain political party, the one you don't belong to. Whether it's been well-earned or simply a by-product of paranoia, this mistrust is there and it's not a good thing.

This week we saw at least two more stories—one nationwide and one statewide with a chance of going nationwide—that will surely challenge newshounds everywhere to report in the fairest manner possible. First came the lawsuit filed against President Trump by the attorney generals of Maryland and the District of Columbia. Time will tell if the suit has merit but the fact that Trump is a Republican and the two attorney generals are Democrats make reporting the matter the equivalent of walking on hot coals. The second story, of course, was the shooting incident in Alexandria, VA Wednesday in which a Republican House leader was shot and seriously wounded. As soon as the gunman—who was killed by police—was identified, it became known he was active in Democratic politics last year. The Democratic candidate he worked for was the source who broke that news. Although everyone agrees violence is not the answer, some conservatives are using the incident to admonish liberals and liberals are using it to bring up the gun control issue. In all likelihood, we will still be talking about both of these stories in September. Add in the other ongoing stories and this figures to be a brutal summer for members of the press.

One of the first lessons taught in a college history course is that the scribes who documented history were—surprise!—biased. It was a challenge for the student to determine what those biases were. Even the Holy Gospel was written by four individuals who focused on different details or gave slightly different interpretations of quotes.

It's nearly impossible to prevent an individual, who also happens to be trying to earn a living as a writer and reporter, from having opinions or feelings about the people who are making news and the events that transpire. Hiring writers generally does not involve a "bias test." The truth is that news services—especially newspapers—have often flaunted their biases in their very names.

Still, it ought to be the goal of every news reporter to seek the even-handed label. The reader, like the college history student, should be challenged to try to determine the biases. Anyone who covers current events and then writes about it carries some personal baggage that might tilt the story in a certain direction. Reflecting on your own biases, too, might create some empathy with a writer who is seeking to maneuver a balance.

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