

GRADE THE NEWS

How to Distinguish Between Socially Responsible and Junk Journalism

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“**You are what you eat,**” the nutritionists say. A diet of salty, fatty, or empty calories may taste delicious, but harm your health.

Similarly, a self-governing society’s health depends on its news diet. When the majority of a society knows the name of Laci Peterson’s unborn son, but not who their elected leaders at the city, county or state government are, that society’s health is at risk.

Just as junk food is widely appealing and cheap to produce, junk journalism is entertaining to read or watch and inexpensive to report. Junk sells in an uninformed marketplace. But eventually it makes a body — or body politic — sick. Here’s a guide to discerning between socially responsible and junk journalism.

Characteristics of Responsible News	Characteristics of Junk Journalism
Primary purpose: to maximize public understanding of current issues and events (which requires adequate profit to ensure continuing operation).	Primary purpose: to maximize return to owners and shareholders.
News selection priority: The top of the news treats topics that matter most to the long-term health of the community — government, politics, education, public safety, environment, economy, health, etc. <i>What we need to know trumps what we merely want to know.</i>	News selection priority: Whatever generates the largest audience at the least cost — isolated violent crimes, fires, accidents, unusual events, professional sports, celebrity news, popular fads, stories with powerful visual or human interest appeal. <i>What we want to know trumps what we need to know.</i>
Explanation: Reporting focuses on issues more than events. It shows the big picture, trends, causes, solutions. Brevity is a virtue, but complexity is possible.	Explanation: What is learned from the story is unimportant. Emphasis on isolated events. Complexity is avoided out of fear it may bore those seeking news for entertainment.
Accuracy: Stories contain many facts from those in the know. Speculation is rare. Corrections are routinely run.	Accuracy: Facts may slow the story down. Speculation and broad generalization, often from loud, colorful partisans is encouraged. Few, if any, corrections are run.
Fairness: Reporters have only one bias — all stories are slanted in favor of the common good. When issues have multiple sides, all are given a chance to make their best case.	Fairness: Reporters may take the side they believe is most popular with readers and viewers. Getting multiple sides takes staff time and adds unnecessary length to stories.
Context: Events are placed in a context that makes their meaning clearer. Sources representing varying viewpoints are interviewed since they often see the same event differently	Context: To avoid boring readers or viewers, what happened within a short time frame is emphasized — the event itself. Few sources with differing viewpoint are interviewed because it adds length and may bore consumers.

Socially responsible journalism is not required by law. The corporations that own news media face pressure to produce whatever earns the best return. *You can influence their decision by your own news choices.* Use your power!