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Thoughts on the Role of a Journalist

In the minds of the public, there are sometimes conflicting views of what a journalist is supposed to represent in a society. There is a rift between how the public views the familiar local nightly news anchor or the sportswriter for the local paper and how the public views a national news anchor or a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer for a major periodical. All of these types of journalists, however, represent a familiar aspect of community that ultimately reminds their audiences that they are not alone in dealing with the curveballs life throws at them or in celebrating the more joyous events of life.

When considering the role of a journalist, it is seemingly easiest to look at some examples of famous journalists such as Walter Cronkite, Diane Sawyer, and Joan Didion, among others. In a historical context, the way in which the news concerning major events in history was reported is just as significant as the events themselves, which is why journalists are an integral part of society. In the context of today, in which social media is the most popular source for news and media literacy is such a vital skill, journalists are expected to settle on a sort of spectrum spanning from conservatism to liberalism, with moderation stuck somewhere in between. Perhaps it is only natural that we as an audience seek out news sources that seem to align most closely with our already established personal views.

The role of a journalist is not that of an outsider, merely observing society, but is instead truly connected to the community they report on and for. Walter Dean, of the American Press Institute, argues that the role of a journalist is to “provide citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, their societies, and their governments.” How a journalist communicates this information, however, has been a point of debate in society. A journalist should be concise in their communication of their report, but should not ignore important information for the sake of conciseness or making a report more popular. The ethical role of a journalist is also a topic of debate, but it is important that adhere to and are responsible for following an established code of ethics because journalists often act as a sort of guide for sifting through the immense amount of information that their audience is faced with on a daily basis.

By constantly collecting information about the events in a community, a journalist becomes a guide for that community, but can also act as a conversation starter; They can present and organize new ideas that can kick-start other members of the community into action. It may be true that the role of a journalist, at its core, is to observe and present information, but this does not mean that a journalist is independent from the world they report on. A journalist helps people embrace the chaos of life that we so frequently find ourselves subject to.