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# Lies, Journalism and Objectivity

David Leonhardt JAN. 6, 2017

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Gerard Baker, the editor of The Wall Street Journal, created enough of a stir on television last weekend that he decided to explain himself more fully with an Op-Ed published in his newspaper yesterday.

It was an unusual move. Newspapers like to keep their news and opinion sides separate, which means that the boss of the news side doesn't often write for the opinion pages.

In the piece, Baker defended the idea that newspapers should largely avoid using the word "lie" to describe the actions of politicians, including Donald Trump. As he said on "Meet the Press" on Sunday (and quoted in his Op-Ed):

"I'd be careful about using the word 'lie.' 'Lie' implies much more than just saying something that's false. It implies a deliberate intent to mislead." Paradox

I think Baker is mostly right about this: The media should be cautious about ascribing motive and should use the word "lie" rarely for that reason. The word "untruth" or a version of it works just fine, and it's far easier to know whether someone spoke an untruth than to know if the person deliberately did so.

parallel structure

Of course, we often do ascribe motive to people in other contexts. We analyze the decisions of movie directors, business executives, sports coaches and, yes, politicians based partly on what their motivations appear to be. It's impossible to analyze the world without considering motive.

Straw man

Sometimes, the evidence is overwhelming that a person is aware of the truth and still stating untruths. When that's the case, we should be willing to consider the L-word, as Baker also said Rare doesn't mean never.

The part of his "Meet the Press" interview that bothered me, however, wasn't the part that he defended in his Op-Ed. Later in the same answer, Baker said: "I think if you start ascribing a moral intent, as it were, to someone by saying that they've lied, I think you run the risk that you look like you are, like you're not being objective."

The reality is, media organizations sometimes have to decide between the risk of *looking like* they're not being objective and the risk that they're actually not being objective. (Hat tip to Adam Serwer of The Atlantic, who made this point on Twitter.)

Each of the following factual statements, to pick a few disparate examples, runs the risk of appearing subjective to large numbers of readers: Appeal to the Audience.

Capitalism has worked better than any other economic system.

Tax cuts generally fail to pay for themselves and cause the budget deficit to increase.

Human actions are warming and damaging the planet.

There is no escaping this tension at times. News organizations have to decide whether they place a higher priority on seeming subjective to some readers or on stating the facts.

The Wall Street Journal is one of the world's great newspapers, and I dearly hope that Baker will choose honesty over timidity when the two conflict.

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