

## PRO TIPS

for media advisers

Comments from Jack Kennedy

# The 11 Suggestions: An antique mirror on journalism's craft and values

September 24, 2019 / Roy Peter Clark

**Roy Peter Clark has been** one of the nation's preeminent writing coaches for decades, and he still writes occasional posts for Poynter, as well as writing books on writing that help shape the thinking of professionals. His ideas are equally important for high school journalists (or any high school or college writer?).

**Student journalists rarely** run afoul of the law – it *can* happen, but most problems students and advisers run into have more to do with ethical decision-making than breaking privacy or libel laws.

That is why we recommend spending much more time discussing ethical situations than studying cases of libel. Did you know that there are *no cases* of a student journalist libeling someone that have ended in a legal decision? Charges have been made and settlements tend to result. But no students or parents of student journalists have been made to pay some large monetary fine.

Imagine these **Eleven Suggestions** placed prominently on every journalism classroom wall and shared widely with the entire staff.

I can imagine an entire curriculum based on these "suggestions," rooting a media program in solid ethical practices.

The cool thing about the Ten Commandments is that there were 10 of them. That means they could fit on two tablets. Handy if you have to carry them down a mountain.

I've argued that old codes of ethics were too negative. They lingered too long on what not to do instead of what professionals should do to fulfill their mission and purpose. The old codes were filled with flashing red lights: Don't do this. Don't do that.

I prefer green light ethics. "Love thy neighbor" — as exemplified in the parable of the Good Samaritan — does not require the reminder "Thou shalt not kill."

I recently discovered in an old journalism textbook a list of 11 suggestions to young journalists on how they might live upright, professional lives. The list amazed me. I could not recall any similar list where journalism values were expressed so well, so succinctly and with such enduring relevance.

The list appears as the last words in the book "Newspaper Writing and Editing," written by Willard G. Bleyer, perhaps the outstanding journalism educator of his day, and published in 1913.

*Here then, for all to share, are, not the Ten Commandments, but the Eleven Suggestions:*

1. Remember that whatever you write is read by thousands.
2. Don't forget that your story or headline helps to influence public opinion.
3. Realize that every mistake you make hurts someone.
4. Don't embroider facts with fancy; "truth is stranger than fiction."
5. Don't try to make cleverness a substitute for truth.
6. Remember that faking is lying.
7. Refer all requests to "keep it out of the paper" to those higher in authority.
8. Stand firmly for what your conscience tells you is right.
9. Sacrifice your position, if need be, rather than your principles.
10. See the bright side of life: don't be pessimistic or cynical.
11. Seek to know the truth and endeavor to make the truth prevail.

Not sure I have seen a better list of journalism standards and practices. More remarkable, it was published in 1913 by Willard Bleyer, the final words of his college textbook. He was chair at Wisconsin. This is where craft meets mission and purpose. 1913!

I was surprised and delighted at how many of my Twitter followers found this list interesting and valuable, and in some cases, prescient. That is, the Eleven Suggestions seemed relevant to the education and socialization of journalists more than a century after they were compiled.

There is much to be learned from this list, its maker and the crises of journalism that inspired its formulation. Before I get to what I have learned about Bleyer himself, I want to attend to my own reactions to the Eleven Suggestions, that is, why I find them extraordinary.

If you distill from the list its dominant themes, they reveal most of journalism's key concerns:

- Not writing and reporting to please yourself or advance your career, but with a keen sense of service to an audience.
- An understanding that the audience turns to you for information that will enrich them as citizens in the process of self-government.

- That accuracy is a practical virtue and that the failure to achieve it can have negative consequences.
- Truth seeking and truth telling are at the heart of the discipline.
- Your ultimate loyalty cannot be either to special interests or even to your employer. It must be to the public interest.
- Cynicism corrodes the soul of the journalist and erodes the trust of the public in institutions that sustain civic life.

Who was this guy?

Willard G. Bleyer was born in 1873 into a newspaper family that became prominent in Milwaukee and the state of Wisconsin. His grandfather, his father and his uncles worked all aspects of the newspaper business, and it's fair to say that young Willard grew up in the newsroom. It's also fair to say that his scholarly instincts inspired him to explore the intellectual underpinnings of the family trade, especially one so closely associated with democracy and civic life.

He would earn a doctorate in English at the University of Wisconsin and became a preeminent academic in the emerging profession of journalism and mass communications, his theories always grounded in the habits and protocols of the publishing business. A clumsy and dull teacher — some high school students drove him out of that venue by playing tricks on him, such as stealing his galoshes — he was gifted in the art of newsroom gab and in debates about journalism practice and news judgment. Childless in his family life, he was known as “Daddy” to his Wisconsin students, who referred to themselves as his “children.”

His association with the University of Wisconsin and with the journalism practiced in that state would last until his death in 1935 at the age of 62. By then, Bleyer was the among the most revered champions of responsible journalism on the planet. Lawrence Murphy, a student of Bleyer's at UW who became director of the journalism program at Illinois, eulogized that Daddy was “the greatest single influence in journalism that the world has known.”

As a teacher and scholar, Bleyer expressed the most altruistic notions about the role of journalism in a self-governing democracy. However, his efforts to elevate journalism met resistance on two fronts: newsroom hacks spit on any talk of “responsibility” coming from academia; and the pointy-heads in the university looked down on uppity reporters and editors who might venture to join their ranks.

Perhaps because Bleyer had the vantage point of an educator — rather than that of an influential owner such as Joseph Pulitzer or an author and public intellectual such as Walter Lippmann — his influence, while monumental in his time, is less enduring. (In that respect, perhaps Bleyer deserves a spot in the Hall of Fame next to Nelson Poynter.)

A 1998 monograph on Bleyer's life and influence, written by Carolyn Bronstein and Stephen



## THE 11 SUGGESTIONS

*By Willard Bleyer, presented by Poynter's Roy Peter Clark*

1. Remember that whatever you write is read by thousands.
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Vaughn, make a point that feels even truer in 2019 than it did in the last years of the 20th century. In a foreshadowing of our current conversations, Bleyer saw the journalism of his day — especially the business of newspapering — as in an existential crisis. It was not just journalism that was at stake, it was the system of democracy itself.

The culprits of 1913 have a familiar ring to them: publishers who put profit above purpose; sensational stories that were a staple of the yellow press; competition for audience created by the advancing technologies of photography, newsreels, motion pictures and radio; an underpaid class of reporters and editors who were not up to the task of working in these disruptive environments; a political and business class antagonistic to even the best efforts of the working press.

#### #12 is about transparency

and below is a model of what we *might* include both in print and online to help our readers understand our process and to be open about our sources and our observations. Not for briefs, of course, and some might object to this, saying that a careful reader could glean most of this information from a well-written story.

But are we OK with putting that on our readers, or should be more explicit?

Bleyer even worried about the muckrakers. Yes, it was crucial for journalists to shine a light on corruption, but not in such a lurid manner that it turns citizens into cynics, giving up all hope of achieving real reform. In his day, Bleyer was playing ball with a team of intellectuals, political figures and journalists who thought of themselves as part of a Progressive movement. He was a strong advocate, even in 1913, for women's suffrage, for opening doors for women into the newsroom, for some forms of unionization of journalists, creating for them better working conditions and higher wages.

My New York friends might call him a *mensch*.

I could argue that the list is necessary but not sufficient to fulfill the journalistic mission in the 21st century. I might be tempted, immodestly, to add a couple more points in the spirit of transparency and diversity.

#### FULL DISCLOSURE

Story reported and written by Ernie Kenerski, staff reporter, over 10 days beginning Sept. 7. Sources included senior setter Alice Fay, junior outside hitter Mary Stovall, junior libero Beth Bumpit, manager Ellen Post, and varsity coach Rota Boatashore. Ernie also observed practice on Sept. 10, and the varsity volleyball match with Roosevelt HS on Sept. 12. Photos were taken by Ernie at the practice and by staff photographer Heather Aperture during the match. Sports editor Grace Olson designed the package and edited the text, sidebars, and headlines.

12. As much as you can, be transparent in your methods, revealing what you know, how you know it, and what you still need to learn.

13. Remember the limitations of your own experience and point of view. Gather the perspectives of others, especially those too often excluded from public life.

OK, 13 is unlucky. Let's add two more.

14. Be aware of the dangers of false balance in news coverage. Strive for proportionality, submitting key claims to the discipline of fact-checking.

15. Understand that while a particular story may be true and useful — coverage of a crime — the cumulative effect of such repeated coverage may give a distorted view of the world we live in.

There you have them, the Eleven Suggestions, or the Fifteen Suggestions, or add a few of your own.

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