

Journalism's infatuation with Glenn Greenwald

Editor's note: This is an opinion column by William H. Freivogel.

The journalism world's embrace of Glenn Greenwald and his advocacy reporting is now complete with the award of the Pulitzer Prize to the Guardian for Greenwald's disclosure of Edward Snowden's National Security Agency secrets.

As with many youthful infatuations, the journalism world has rushed headlong into this relationship without listening to the alarms that surely went off in the heads of veteran journalists. Some journalists may be ambivalent about Greenwald's ethics, but not ambivalent enough to withhold journalism's top prize – or even to publicly debate whether it should have been awarded to his former newspaper.

The Pulitzer's rules are broad. They require adherence to “the highest journalistic principles,” which are explained as “values such as honesty, accuracy and fairness.”

Did Greenwald live up to the highest journalists principles?

The Society for Professional Journalists' code of ethics requires that journalists “distinguish between advocacy and news reporting.” The Association Press Managing Editors state that “the newspaper should strive for impartial treatment of issues and dispassionate handling of controversial subjects.” The American Society of Newspaper Editors demands “impartiality” and states that “every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly.” National Public Radio demands its reporters adhere to “impartiality as citizens and public figures. ... We are not advocates.”

Yet Greenwald is unabashedly and proudly an advocate who ridicules traditional journalistic ethics, as well as those, such as Bill Keller, the former New York Times editor who espouse those ethics.

As Greenwald put it so very elegantly: “If the U.S. government said you shouldn’t publish this, and you shouldn’t publish that, and you shouldn’t publish this other thing, because to do so will endanger national security, Bill Keller proudly said the New York Times didn’t publish it. He was ... beaming, like a third-grader that had just gotten a gold star from his teacher.”

In addition to ridiculing Keller, Greenwald said he was fundamentally dishonest and “deceitful” for trying to be impartial. Greenwald calls instead for “a looser, more passionate form of new media reporting.”

He is passionate.

At the time his first stories were published a year ago, Greenwald made overblown claims about what he had found. He maintained that the NSA could “monitor every single conversation and every single form of human behavior anywhere in the world.” He also stated that “the claim that current NSA spying is legal is dubious in the extreme.”

In fact, the NSA program primarily collected metadata, not the content of telephone calls – a distinction many critics missed – and it had been approved by Congress, the president and most courts.

Don’t misunderstand. The Washington Post’s Pulitzer was well-deserved. The Snowden revelations printed in the Washington Post and the Guardian were clearly the biggest news story of the year. And that’s what the Pulitzer is supposed to reward.

The Snowden disclosures are more important than the Pentagon Papers. Disclosure of current abuses of privacy is more

significant than a multiple-volume history of the Vietnam War.

The Snowden leaks forced President Obama to admit that the data collection had not been as effective as claimed in stopping terrorist incidents. And it has forced the president to call for reforms – although having phone companies hold onto metadata instead of the government may be insignificant.

All of these are strong reasons to justify giving the Public Service Pulitzer to the Post – and possibly the Guardian.

Nor have many Greenwald critics provided good reasons for denying the Pulitzer to the Guardian. Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., called Snowden a “traitor” and Greenwald an “accomplice,” for example.

Snowden is not a traitor, and Greenwald is not an accomplice. Snowden probably violated the World War I-era Espionage Act by disclosing government secrets he was sworn to protect. But that’s not treason. And Greenwald’s reporting of the government secrets is exactly what the press is supposed to do when it comes upon secret government practices that the American people should know about. In some ways, Greenwald harkens back to such icons as I.F. Stone, the legendary leftist critic of the American military. But Stone never won a Pulitzer for news reporting.

Greenwald, by turning his Rio residence into a repository for Snowden’s documents and parceling them out to news outlets, has skated close to the line of accomplice. But he has taken care to play a journalistic role in connection with the stories based on the documents he was distributing.

Nor have ad hominem attacks on Greenwald been persuasive. Some critics pointed out that he spoke to Socialist groups and took anti-Israeli positions. Tom Hicks, the Pulitzer-Prize winning national security reporter, tweeted recently, “Glenn, any comments from you or Edward Snowden on the recent round of media shutdowns in Russia?” This may be clever, but it has

nothing to do with the substance of the disclosures.

What matters is whether the journalism community, in its crush on Greenwald and Snowden, has forgotten first principles.

Greenwald's call for more transparent, passionate reporting has more emotional appeal than traditional journalism's call for objectivity, impartiality and disinterested observation. Greenwald's are hot words; traditional journalists are stuck with cold ones. He and his fellow advocates, such as Jeremy Scahill and Amy Goodman, may be winning the debate.

But Keller had some good advice for Greenwald last year.

"Humility is as dear as passion," he wrote. "So my advice is: Learn to say, 'We were wrong.' "

Journalists, like everyone else, are in dangerous territory when they believe they have a monopoly on the truth.