

Who is a journalist? The New Republic tickles but does not tackle the question

Editor's note: This is an opinion column by George Salamon.

"Glenn Greenwald Is Greenwald, and That's Enough," was the headline of Marc Tracy's column on the New Republic website June 25. It should have given readers a clue to stop right there. Tracy suggests that the ongoing story of Edward Snowden's leaks of NSA surveillance to the Guardian's Glenn Greenwald, formerly a First Amendment lawyer and blogger, have ignited a debate about "What is a journalist – and who is one?"

Trying to figure out why such a debate is "raging" in Tracy's column reduces you to feel like the blind pig that finds a truffle now and then. What we do learn in it, citing a variety of sources is that:

1. "The public should remain skeptical of reporters who are also advocates."
2. "Journalism has become something you do rather than something people are."
3. "Greenwald is a reporter ... he is somebody who obtains information from sources and then relates it to readers."
4. That "being a journalist means different things to different people and at different places."

Not one truffle here, but stuff that Hallmark Cards are made of. We don't find out if there is a difference between a "reporter" and a "journalist," and what it might be. (Is "journalist" the job title while "reporter" is the job description?) And what about the old "Ws" of reporting, the

“who, what, when, where, why and how,” followed by enough history and context (“How did things get to be where they are now?” and “Who benefits from this and who is harmed?”) to add understanding to the information provided?

But hey, as they say on the sports pages, “Glenn Greenwald is Glenn Greenwald.” But really, that’s not enough, especially from the New Republic. Maybe we shouldn’t expect more, since Tracy earlier penned a column headed “James Gandolfini Will Always Be Tony Soprano, and That’s Okay.”

“It is What It Is” isn’t good inspiration for a reporter. Not even for a journalist. The New Republic seems to have fallen for covering pop culture of late, since “that’s where it’s at” for most Americans. Laura Bennett and Noreen Malone covered the saga of Paula Deen, celebrity chef and cooking show host who was fired because she used the “N” word years ago, in columns headed, respectively, “After Wendy Davis (the Texas representative who filibustered an abortion bill), the Strangeness of Watching Paula Deen, “ and “What’s the Point of Public Apologies?”

What’s the point of two columns about a “television personality?” (Whatever that may turn out to mean.) I was worried that I might be, well, a grouch about all three columns. But then I spotted two comments from readers about Tracy’s:

1. “Boy, this piece is irksome. I don’t get its existence.”
2. “I was beginning to think I had Alzheimer’s reading this twisted report.”

Thanks, guys. Maybe your responses will nudge the New Republic toward its old self. But I suspect that may not be enough.

Salamon taught German literature and culture at several East Coast colleges, and served as staff reporter for the St. Louis Business Journal and as senior editor for Defense Systems

Review. He has published three academic books and contributed articles to the Washington Post and the American Conservative.