Twitter Thread by Laura Helmuth

Laura Helmuth
@laurahelmuth

Journalism has an elaborate code of ethics, but most people outside of journalism don't know that, and that's a problem. Sorry to "a thread" at you, but: a thread.

I spoke with a group of MDs who also have MBAs or PhDs and who work in hospital administration or public health or some other big-shot positions. They were in town for a workshop on how Washington works.

Educated, middle-aged, inquisitive people who told me they have been reading newspapers their whole lives. These were some of their questions.

"How much do advertisers influence your coverage?" Um, not at all. "Seriously, how much." Seriously, not at all. The advertising department has nothing to do with the news department. We don't know what ads they're selling and they don't know what stories we're writing.

"How much does your owner influence your coverage?" Not at all. This isn't the case at some news organizations, especially TV news, but major newspapers are not mouthpieces for their owners. Wonder where they got that idea.

"How much does your editorial page influence your coverage?" Not at all. Ideally our news coverage informs editorials, but they're separate. I explained that the Wall Street Journal has some of the best journalists, but their editorial page is driven by different demands.

"Why do you run so many opinion pieces? Why don't you just run news?" We have both kinds of stories, from different departments, and they're labeled. (Clearly not labeled clearly enough.)

"Why do you only give one side of an issue?" In news stories about policy differences or other debates, we give the strongest arguments on all sides.

Caveat: We've gotten a lot better at avoiding false balance, especially for health and science stories. We wouldn't quote a creationist in a story about evolution, an anti-vaxxer about vaccines, or a climate denialist in a story about climate science.

"How do you know what you're publishing is right?" We report deeply and have multiple sources and documents and data and lots of checks. Sometimes we get it wrong and then we correct ourselves and publish the corrections.

They also wondered how often newspapers leak confidential information about their sources. (I had shown them how to share information confidentially and securely.) Never. N-E-V-E-R. Journalists have gone to jail rather than reveal their sources.

These people weren't stupid or hostile – they simply didn't know how we do what we do. It was a shocking reminder to me that we have to keep explaining our methods and professional standards in very simple and direct ways, repeatedly.

Does anybody have other ideas?
We have a video series at the @WashingtonPost on "How to be a journalist" that explains some of these things. (End of thread) https://t.co/P0B9R1EiDZ