



# Don Shelby, Investigative Journalist

Media today are more concerned with getting so-called "balance" than seeking truth

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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## Present

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## Summary

Don Shelby, highly regarded investigative journalist, sees campaign finance as a major threat to civic engagement and democracy, with the media contributing to the problem. The connection between an informed citizenry and the media has broken down. Resources for news coverage have diminished. People are losing faith in their government. News outlets seem preoccupied with being "balanced", irrespective of what the facts say. Civic organizations might be complicit. The younger generation is cynical about politics. He remains optimistic as he reviews the environmental movement.

## Biography

Growing up in the tiny town of Royerton, Ind., just outside Muncie, Shelby was the youngest of three children. A high school basketball standout, he attended the University of Cincinnati but never graduated. Instead, he dropped out in the late '60s and enrolled in the Air Force. He is now completing his degree at Metropolitan State University.

After serving four years in the military, Shelby held TV news jobs in Charleston, SC, and Houston, TX, before coming to WCCO TV in the Twin Cities in 1978.

Shelby was the chief architect behind WCCO's "I-Team" segment, which spotlighted current issues, both local and on a larger world scale, with rigorous investigative journalism. He is particularly well known for his environmental reporting. Shelby retired from television after his final WCCO-TV newscast on November 22, 2010.

He has won three national Emmy awards, the Columbia-duPont, the ScrippsHoward, the National Distinguished Service Award from the Society of Professional Journalists, and has twice won the George Foster Peabody award, regarded as the Pulitzer prize of broadcasting. He was honored in 1983 with the top award for investigative reporting by the International Radio and Television News Directors Association.

Shelby and his wife Barbara have three daughters.

## Background

Today's interview is one of several in the Civic Caucus review of Minnesota's organizations of public policy—its media, foundations, academic organizations, think tanks, political parties, and civic organizations.

## Discussion

**Campaign finance is a major threat to civic engagement and the nation's democracy** . Action of the U.S. Supreme Court that gives wealthy donors the right to make unlimited contributions on behalf of political candidates without being identified represents a major threat to civic engagement and the nation's democracy, Shelby said.

Because wealthy donors often are associated with industries that have a strong vested interest in the outcome of public policy related to these industries the donors use their power to shape public policy to their desires, he contended. Moreover, Shelby said, they have real influence over keeping information that could be damaging to their causes from being made widely available. And through their Washington lobbyists, they end up actually writing legislation the way they want it.

With such a procedure it's no wonder that some critics can cite circumstantial evidence of officials are being bought, not elected, he said.

**Unfortunately, the media unwittingly contribute to the problem** . It's not that electronic and print media deliberately try to mislead the public, he said, because they undoubtedly believe their task today, as it always has been, is to uncover objective truth. Know the facts and proceed. But powerful interest groups are successfully blurring the picture with the use of subjective truth.

Shelby used a mathematical illustration to make his point. On a given issue, objective truth is  $2+2=4$ . But powerful groups not comfortable with the impact that objective truth would have on an outcome, insist that  $2+2=6$ , using what might be called subjective truth. The end result might be  $2+2=5$ , a convenient result but still objectively untrue. Thus public policy too often gets decided based on wrong information, he said.

**It is vital to uncover the facts that power groups don't want others to know.** Shelby said his guiding principle as a journalist always was to find the facts, which very often was information that interest groups didn't want anyone else to know.

**Needing campaign contributions, members of Congress spend enormous time soliciting and serving wealthy donors.** To illustrate the importance of money, Shelby described the process he

followed in evaluating a request he received two years ago to run for the U.S. House of Representatives. He acknowledged the potential prestige associated with being a member of Congress was enticing. Shelby himself had covered Congress in the 1970s. After consulting with many members of Congress urging him to run, he decided against it. He was reminded that a House member must run for re-election every two years and that not more than one of those years is spent on legislative business. The other year the House member must spend 40 hours a week on the phone raising money to get re-elected and, in the process, having to respond to concerns that wealthy donors bring up. Shelby said his age also was a factor in his deciding against running. If he were re-elected to several terms, he'd be 84 years old before he'd be a committee chair.

**People are losing faith in their government** . It's not surprising, he said, that so many people, especially the young, are backing away from civic engagement. They believe the game is rigged and, therefore, is over before it begins.

**Founding fathers recognized the power of factions.** To show that today's problems are nothing new, Shelby mentioned James Madison's **Federalist No. 10** , November 22, 1787, "The Utility of the Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection", which includes the following quote: *"By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adversed to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community."*

**There is an essential connection between journalism and citizenship.** Growing up in Muncie, IN, Shelby recalled that his father, a galvanizer by day and a Ball State University evening teacher, faithfully read every word of the morning and evening newspapers. Don Shelby knew he could not interrupt his father during the hours of newspaper reading. "It's my job," his father replied. But Don, seeing no direct connection to his father's occupations, asked why. His father went on to say that his first job is to be a citizen of this country, and unless he is aware of what is happening every day, he can't perform that citizenship responsibility.

Shelby said that absolutely his father's view guided Don into journalism.

**It has been difficult being a witness-participant to the decline in mainstream media resources.** Thinking over his 32-year career at WCCO, Shelby recalled that in 1978, there were not more than nine media entities (including three TV stations and four newspapers) in the Twin Cities metro area competing for a total advertising revenue of about \$6 billion. When Shelby retired in 2010, the \$6 billion in advertising revenue had not changed, he said, but now there were 1,400 competitors, including websites, competing.

Consequently, newsroom budgets have been cut significantly. He recalled the last major story he requested at WCCO TV was for a \$3,000 budget to cover the newly-opened Bakken oil field in North Dakota. Higher-ups required him to shave the proposal to \$800 and still said no. After later being scooped by another TV station, and after the story became widely covered, WCCO ended up spending a lot more than would have been required by his original proposal.

**Where is citizenship education today?** Time magazine has yielded to Us and People magazines. We have seen the " **Kardashian-ization** " of the news, he said. As a result, many of us have fallen asleep on public policy.

**Media outlets seem to bend over backward to provide balance among contending positions, instead of searching for truth.** It's almost as if getting the facts straight on an issue isn't important, he said. It's not unusual, he said, for the facts to be presented in a news article, but in the interest of "balance" the media will quote someone on the other side of an issue who might totally ignore the facts, but the comments are routinely included, giving the impression they are legitimate. Media executives are more afraid of business or political leaders being angry about their coverage than they are about trying to find objective truth, he said. Therefore, he said, it's impossible for a reporter in this situation to use any language that would inform the listener or the reader that such-and-such is really the right information.

Accuracy, fairness, and balance are three cornerstones of good journalism, Shelby said, but balance does not mean equal weight. Equal weight is a mistaken notion when the preponderance of evidence is on the side of truth.

**Congress is not all that interested in changing campaign finance .** Asked why the U. S. Congress isn't exhibiting leadership in changing campaign finance laws, Shelby replied that 87 percent of members are re-elected. They complain about the system, he said, but their prime interest is in having a good campaign chest for the next election and being reelected.

**Is there more concern for "me" than for the community?** An interviewer inquired about examples where people—whether citizens or elected officials—seem primarily interested in the benefit for the larger community than for their own personal welfare. Shelby replied by relating his experience recently in supporting a local school building program campaign. He repeatedly encountered citizens who said they would be voting "no" because their children no longer were in school. They believed it is now the responsibility of those with children in school, not they. What's missing in that attitude, he said, is that the older people are going to benefit from that campaign, because better education for the young will pay off with more economic benefits for the entire community. Regrettably, he said, too many people have too narrow a view of citizenship today.

**Minnesota Public Radio provides leadership .** An interview recalled that last week we met with Minnesota Public Radio and were astounded to see the size of its newsroom, which has as many reporters as a major Minnesota daily newspaper. Shelby replied that Nancy Cassutt, who was once an intern in "Shelby's investigative I-Team, is now the news director at MPR.

**The best civic organizations are the quiet ones, with "no dog in the fight".** Shelby highlighted those organizations that stress calm, civil discussion, where people listen to one another without shouting, rely on fact, look to what is best for the community, not themselves, and who don't have an advocacy position to defend, i.e., no dog in the fight.


**A listener yells at the TV in frustration over superficial coverage.** An interviewer complained that too often public officials get away with dodging reporters' questions or are able, via a nice-sounding, but non-responsive, comment, to divert a reporter's attention from continuing to pursue the real

question. What's wrong here, the interviewer asked?

Reporters might be discouraged by the culture of corporate ownership of a media outlet from appearing disagreeable, Shelby replied. The media outlet doesn't want to irritate a news source or perhaps be subject to pushing an agenda, he said. Further, given time pressures covering the news, reporters might choose to go with a quote that sounds good, even though non-responsive, without pursuing the matter further. Keep in mind, too, he said, that with the myriad of areas needing coverage in a given day a reporter might be on assignment with very limited knowledge of the subject and isn't well equipped to know the right follow-up questions.

Sometimes a crafty public figure can divert a reporter's question to something else, while appearing to be responsive, Shelby said. For example, a reporter should be on guard when the person being interviewed says, "That's a good question." Instead of really responding to the "good question" the individual says something that goes in an entirely different direction with a different subject. The reporter might then follow up in that area, ignoring or forgetting the original subject being pursued.

**Are well-meaning civic and research organizations failing to recognize that they could do a better job of educating the public, including reporters?** Instead of blaming the media for less-than-satisfactory coverage, an interviewer suggested that groups that supposedly are digging for the real truth about a situation should do more in their reports on public problems to consciously educate the public, which includes news media. That would help equip reporters with needed background information for their questions of public officials, the interviewer suggested.

**Millennial generation has a different approach to the news.** Responding to an interviewer's question about changing  **ways that people of the millennial generation get their news**, Shelby noted that generation is much more inclined to rely upon social media. It's a social populism generation, he said, that, unfortunately doesn't vote in proportion to comparable numbers for older generations. As an illustration Shelby noted that a Wisconsin sign-maker apparently is doing a booming business for lawn signs reading "Everyone Sucks 2016".

Shelby said that to the extent millennials are rejecting the traditional political world, it is because they sense that going into politics is not a public service, but a business opportunity to get rich.

**Optimism warranted by progress on the environment.** Shelby returned to a major point he made earlier in the meeting about the importance of doing what, in capital letters, is Right, seeking and reporting truth. He cited Paul Hawken's book **Blessed Unrest**, which, he said, outlines the largest populist movement in the world with some 100 million people not only working, but getting paid, in the area of the environment. It's a crazy, uncoordinated, conglomeration of all kinds of interests, but they are seeking, he said, what is "Right" based on objective truth.