

THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN A FREE SOCIETY FAKE NEWS, SELECTIVE NEWS; WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

**By Dr. Victor Sternberg
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The First Amendment to the Constitution clearly spelled out the role of free speech in a new nation where democracy was going to replace British rule. Our Founding Fathers felt that freedom of speech was such an important building block for freedom that they made it the First Amendment. Now, more than 200 years after the Constitution was written, if our Founding Fathers were here today they would be disturbed at the distortion that has occurred in this viable building block of our Nation.

In nations where free speech has been suppressed by the government, we saw Joseph Goebbels use government-sponsored speech to spread propaganda in Germany during the Nazi era. In Communist Russia, Stalin called the press the enemy of the people. The comment sounds familiar.

The giant of the internet is severely limited and the New York Times cannot be printed online. The government will not allow open criticism.

Today, hundreds of journalists have been imprisoned.

In the majority of nations across our planet, a truly free press does not exist.

Historically in America, the press has been somewhat adversarial to both the President and other elected officials as it was intended to be. This can be seen most dramatically in recent history by the release of the Pentagon Papers by Daniel Ellsberg in the 70's. These documents were released by the New York Times and The Washington Post. The government vigorously fought the release of these papers because they undermined the rationale for continuing the Vietnam War. They actually went to the Courts to block the release and ultimately the Supreme Court allowed their publication and the rest is history.

The role of our free press was responsible for unearthing Watergate, revealing the Iran Contra fiasco under Reagan, taking Mr. Clinton to task for his lies regarding Monica Lewinsky, castigating George Bush and the rationale for the Iraq War, repeatedly reviewing the promises of Barack Obama (i.e. "if you like your doctor, you can keep him", "if you like your insurance, you don't have to lose it", "your health care will cost less") and keeping the focus on the saga of Hillary Clinton's server. Now the struggle in the press is between revelations of Russian involvement in the election on one side and a vigorous defense of everything the President does on the other side.

A leap backwards to 1978, a movie came out called "Network". It featured a cable-like TV network reporting the news where opinion replaced factual reporting. Not so long ago, the three networks, ABC, NBC and CBS were losing money for the networks but the networks felt a responsibility to have objective news coverage consistent with our belief system and a free press.

The movie was prophetic. The proliferation of cable news and talk radio has dramatically altered how the news is presented. If you haven't noticed, the reporters on the cable news networks are highly paid. We know for instance that Megyn Kelly and Bill O'Reilly made north of \$20 Million per year. Rachel Maddow at MSNBC makes approximately \$10 Million per year.

The cable networks are constantly at war with each other trying to raise ratings so they can increase advertising revenue and hence the large salaries paid to their anchors.

Reporting of the news has been replaced by endless opinions with panel discussions analyzing, criticizing and promoting either Parties or individuals.

One only has to go from CNN to MSNBC to Fox News to realize that you're living in three different universes of news.

Very little news is being reported but what is dominating the airways is either the criticism of the Administration or the defense of the Administration.

Unraveling began during the Clinton Administration, escalated during the Iraq War, reached a crescendo during the Obama Administration and now is clearly over the top during our current Trump Administration.

A dictum that used to rule the airways was "Everyone is entitled to an opinion, but not to their own facts". That dictum has been discarded.

Currently on CNN you will hear endless hours of conversation regarding Donald Trump's involvement with Russia or the latest maneuvering regarding his affair with a porn star.

On the other side of the coin, you will find Fox News spending hours attacking Hillary Clinton and defending Donald Trump.

Talk radio is either more partisan railing for hours against or for a candidate or a cause.

The concept of fake news which we hear more of today than ever before is an attempt to undermine facts with opinion. From this writer's observation, we have what is called "selective news" in which the news outlet will select the stories that support their political viewpoint or candidate or on the other hand, find reason to be critical of the administration.

It would be blasphemy for Fox News to criticize Trump as it would be blasphemy for CNN to praise him.

All the cable networks and radio stations are loath to lose viewership and are careful to cater to their audience.

It's a sad and serious issue where political dialogues and discussions have been replaced by histrionics and partisans positions taken by network outlets and the inability to have serious dialogue on our country.

Presidents come and go but our Constitution and our freedom of the press must not be compromised if we're to remain a thriving democracy.

Money and politics have corrupted the intent of the First Amendment. As Jefferson predicted, democracy is an experiment that can only exist and thrive if we have a well-informed public. This has been the role of journalism. That should be the mantra for journalism.

Please share your thoughts and opinions with me since they are always valued.

Yours truly,
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