NEWS

Making Democracy Work

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Quality Journalism Critical to Healthy Democracy

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

—The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America

In 2017, The Washington Post debuted a new slogan: "Democracy Dies in Darkness." In the age of social media, the slogan was widely debated and the subject of ridicule, suggesting the paper was overreacting to the election of the new president.

But the slogan had been decided upon more than a year earlier, lifted from its use by Post owner Jeff Bezos during a talk in which he said, "I think a lot of us believe this, that democracy dies in darkness."

Bezos had heard the phrase used by legendary reporter and Post associate editor Bob Woodward in a conference. But it wasn't the first time Woodward used it. In fact, it went back to his years investigating the Watergate break-in that led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon in 1974.

Woodward adopted the phrase from the judicial opinion of Judge Damon J. Keith, of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 6th Circuit, who ruled in a pre-Watergate era case that the government couldn't wiretap individuals without a warrant, according to The Post. In his decision, Keith wrote that "Democracy dies in the dark."

The slogan underlies the role of the free press in a healthy democracy and journalism's important function in conveying information to the public in reporting on the government. The goal is to bring transparency and oversight to the process and ensure that the citizenry is informed and not kept in the dark about decisions and policies that affect them.

Journalism and a free press, often called "The Fourth Estate" for its function as a watchdog of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government, is fundamental to democracy as signified by its prominent place in The Bill of Rights.

As journalistic practices evolved since the nation's founding, a code of ethics and credibility have been defined by impartiality, independence from commercial and political interests, and its responsibility to the public. These functions have largely been successfully self-regulated. While the press has sometimes failed in its mission, that has been the exception rather than the rule.

One need not look back long to imagine how democracy might crumble were it not for journalists exposing corruption, deceit and coverups in government and business. The Watergate scandal may be the most famous among these examples, but serious journalism plays an important role at every level of society from local and state government to the halls of power in Washington, D.C.

At no time in history has the reporting of credible, reliable information been more important than now. Since the turn of the century, respected news organizations in the smallest towns to the largest cities have been decimated by the loss of advertising brought on by the internet. During this same period, as newspapers made the transition to digital platforms, the rise of social media and broadcast programs representing political views masquerading as news have confused the American public and brought constant scrutiny upon the motivations and bias of long-respected news organizations.

This confluence of opinions and attacks on the press, the proliferation of fabricated stories and the increasing tendency of people to consume only reports that align with their ideological perspectives illustrates just how important the role of serious journalism is.

Without it, the public's trust in government will continue to erode and our rights and freedoms will be seriously jeopardized. What Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1786 still holds true today: "Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost."

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Journalists Hold Power to Account

Sir John Dalber-Acton, the British historian and moralist, said that power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

He expressed this opinion in a letter to Anglican Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887, commenting on the exercise of authority and influence of those in power on the people they are entrusted to protect.

The founders of the United States understood this concept and enshrined in the Constitution the ideal that authority without transparency would undermine and erode public trust and confidence in the fledgling republic.

That role has been delegated to a free press practiced by journalists who have taken on the responsibility to inform the public of the actions of government and how it impacts the rights and freedoms guaranteed by a true democracy. This important function has held those in power to accountability, exposing corruption and greed, and has become the envy of emerging democracies around the world.

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NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

President Gerald R. Ford Making a Statement in the White House Press Briefing Room Upon Signing S. 622, the Energy Policy and Conservation Act on Dec. 22, 1975.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/LAWRENCE JACKSON

President Barack Obama holds an end-of-year press conference in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room of the White House on Dec. 20, 2013.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/ OLIVER F. ATKINS

Informal press conference following a meeting between Congressmen and the President to discuss Watergate matters on Aug. 7, 1974.

WATERGATE

When a burglary at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate office complex in Washington, D.C., was reported in 1972, few could have predicted it would result in the resignation of President Richard Nixon two years later. But the reporting of a single crime led journalists to uncover a trail of abuses by members of the Nixon administration that eventually resulted in the indictment of 69 people and the beginnings of an impeachment process and Nixon's resignation in August of 1974. The name "Watergate" and the suffix "-gate" have since become synonymous with political and non-political scandals in the United States and other parts of the world.

IRAN-CONTRA

This political scandal uncovered by journalists referred to the sale of arms to Iran, which was subject to an arms embargo, during the second term of the administration of President Ronald Reagan in 1985. The profits were intended to fund the insurgent Contra's war to undermine the government of Nicaragua. The exposure of the affair resulted in the indictment of 14 administration officials, including the secretary of defense. While an investigation resulted in convictions, some were vacated on appeal and others were pardoned by Reagan's successor, President George H.W. Bush, who had been Reagan's vice president during the affair.

CHURCH SEXUAL ABUSE

The long-term, widespread sexual abuses of minors at the hands of Catholic priests came into focus in the United States when the Boston Globe's investigative journalists began uncovering cases in Boston that drew attention around the world. The Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage prompted significant review of the practices by the church, law enforcement and government agencies and was the subject of the Academy Award-winning movie, "Spotlight."

THE #METOO MOVEMENT

The #metoo movement targeted sexual harassment and assault that went viral in 2017. It resulted in widespread allegations against movie producer Harvey Weinstein and others in entertainment. The so-called "Weinstein effect" encouraged the reporting of abuses by all men in positions of power.

Most forcefully, the movement gained widespread media exposure through reporting by The New Yorker magazine on Weinstein's alleged abuses, also detailed by The New York Times. Both organizations shared a 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for their coverage.

Combating Misinformation

Truth in journalism has been suspect for as long as journalism has existed. Because information is inherently corruptible, championing credible, sourced and verifiable news over opinion, exaggeration or fabrications masquerading as news has long been the struggle within newspapers and journalism at large.

The term "yellow journalism," used to describe false, misleading or otherwise exaggerated or sensationalized reports disguised as news arose in the 1890s as highly competitive New York City newspapers battled for readership. Since then, the term had been applied to a variety of "reporting" by organizations and publications intended to take advantage of the public's trust in the media.

In the digital age, the term has largely fallen by the wayside, replaced by the ubiquitous "fake news" tag, which was less about an unscrupulous business or promotion. But the two can be described as having similar characteristics: faked interviews, misleading or scare headlines known as clickbait, and a dramatic sympathy with the underdog against the system.

Misinformation campaigns have been widely employed to infiltrate journalism in newspapers and elsewhere in the media, but were until recently more easily rooted out through the mechanisms of intense fact-checking once widely practiced by journalism professionals.

Because of drastic downsizing and layoffs of these critical newsroom functions, it is easier than ever for falsehoods, lies, propaganda and disinformation to enter the mainstream. Reputable journalists must now spend almost as much time dispelling myths, quashing rumors and calling out mistruths as they do reporting the facts.

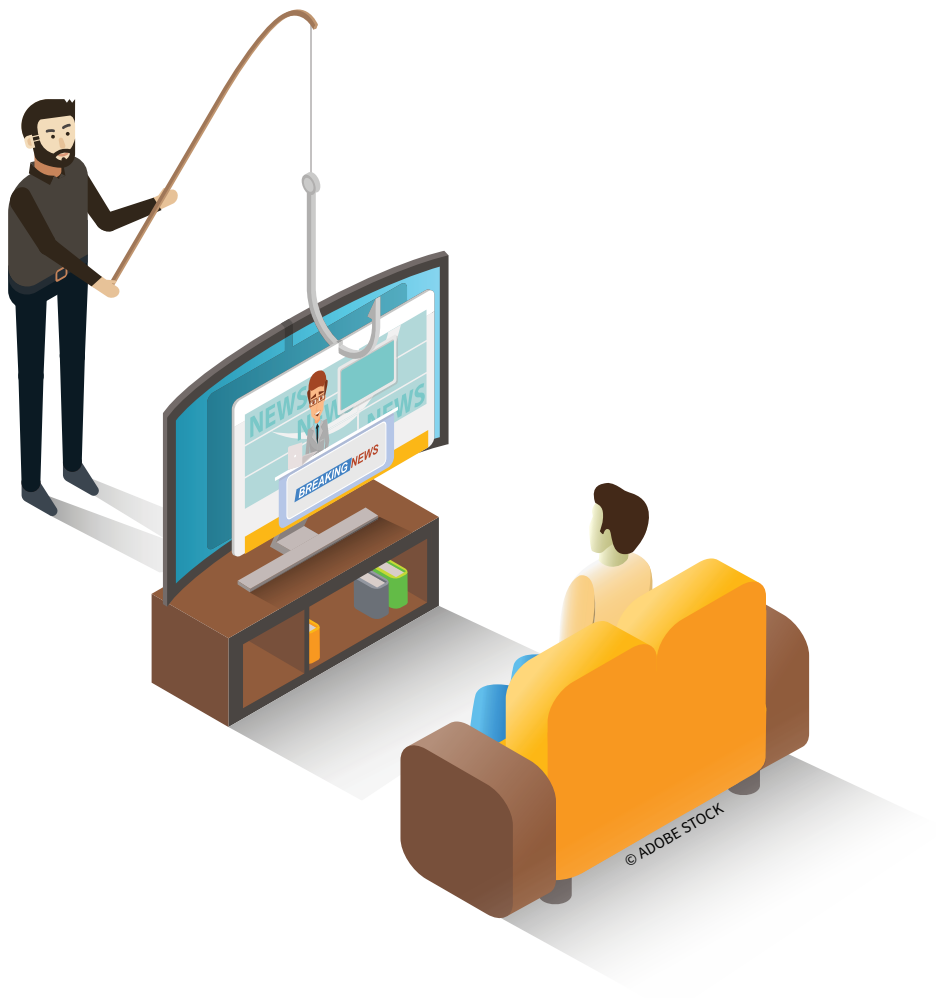
Nowhere has this been more apparent than Russia's efforts to undermine democracy by disrupting U.S. elections through the use of fake social media accounts and bots to routinely spread mass amounts of disinformation to create fear, doubt and sow discord among Americans.

Journalists still use tried-and-true methods to present the most reliable news possible — using multiple sources to corroborate and verify the facts of a story being the most prominent — but they are not enough.

Newspapers and newsrooms have begun waging war against the onslaught of fake news through a variety of means, including investing in media literacy campaigns that root out the causes and spread of lies and disinformation, as well as turning the process inward. By enlisting journalists to discuss their practices and methods with the public on TV programs and public forums, they seek to reinvigorate reader interest, trust and, perhaps more vital, instill in the reader the importance of fact-checking stories themselves.

These include using the internet and free tools journalists use to verify the legitimacy of information, whether that means double-checking domain names, reading mastheads (staff listings) to verify if reporters are actually real reporters and recognizing that people don't share fake news simply because they know better but because if reflects their own belief systems.

Ultimately, it must be a joint effort between the press, which much strive to report accurately and dispel myths, rumors and lies, and its audience, to seek out reputable, reliable sources of unbiased and truthful information.



Journalism in the Digital Age

Not so long ago, print journalism was just about that — the news in print, a physical product that arrived like clockwork on your lawn or doorstep each morning.

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But changing times require changing methods to present information designed to both provide more depth than possible within the confines of limited newspaper space and reach new, younger audiences who've grown up with cellphones and other technology.

To be certain, most newspapers were slow and late-comers to the internet and digital platforms, but they've caught up. Today's reporter is not only required to write and file a story for print, but to post and update that story continuously on a paper's website and social media channels, perhaps even film an accompanying video using their cell phone and maybe later host a podcast on the subject.

This multimedia approach to news-gathering has encouraged a new generation of journalists who are at ease and adept at using digital tools to ferret out stories and report them using the entire spectrum of technology available to them.

Newspapers themselves have largely refocused their efforts on digital platforms. While most still publish print products that serve a defined but shrinking demographic, reporters, editors and those behind the scenes expend much of their efforts toward reaching their readers where they live — and that's increasingly on their phones.

This has also drastically changed how the news is presented. Bringing to life the static layouts and photography of the printed page, news organizations use video, interactive graphics, virtual and augmented reality, as well acting as hosts to their own stories, much as television news reporters do.

This revolution has allowed traditional journalism to explore new ways to present information and to preserve and grow readership lost with declining print readership. Newsrooms are now more nimble, focusing on innovation and are faster to adapt to disruptive technology such as social media.

The newspaper of today and the future recognizes it is not a newspaper, but a media company that produces a newspaper in addition to acting a quasi-technology company — providing apps, websites, social media channels and other tools to meet the rapidly changing landscape of journalism in the digital era.

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An Evolving Business Model

When newspapers first confronted the digital age in the mid-1990s, many assumed that creating a website and publishing the stories available in print for free online would have limited impact on the lucrative business model that had been in effect for the entirety of their existence.

After all, many publishers reasoned, who would spend as much time staring at a computer monitor reading — and seeing their advertising — as they would with a physical newspaper?

That response, of course, proved misguided and devastating. By the turn of the 21st century, newspapers were beginning to see the hazards of their philosophy as the rapid advancement of technology began to encroach upon the model that had previously served them so well.

As once-profitable classified sections disappeared into their new digital home on Craigslist and other free forums and large local and national retailers sought to reach a younger demographic online, newspapers found their profits shrinking and with them the ability to pay for the many journalists, editors, copy editors, designers and printers they employed.

Too late to the game, many observed, publishers scrambled to recoup readers and advertisers with a variety of efforts — all of which failed to match the profits print advertising had once generated. These included, at first, paywalls and digital ads, a reasonable tactic designed to duplicate the print subscription model. But readers rebelled at paying for information online and digital advertising dollars, the price of which was greatly reduced compared to ads in print, could not sustain the high cost of sustaining expensive news-gathering operations.

With declining print subscriptions, further losses resulted in mass layoffs and many newspapers going out of business. Full-blown paywalls initially failed, but metered paywalls in which readers paid for individual stories while others were published free of charge took hold.

Next came discounted digital subscriptions, enticing readers to retain all or portions of their print subscriptions buttressed by access to the full contents of the paper online. Newspapers slowly began to catch up with technology, if not readers, by offering apps and the multimedia tools that enlivened their presentations online and offered extra value for subscription and paywall dollars. Most also published e-editions, or PDF versions of the print newspaper online for those who felt more comfortable accessing the news in the traditional format.

Today, all but the upper echelons of newspapers — The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today — continue to struggle, but the tide seems at last to be turning in their favor.

In some large cities and metro areas, nonprofit foundations have stepped in to fund newspapers, endowing them with the financial resources necessary to pay for quality journalism. Elsewhere, once competitive newspapers have joined forces to foot the bill for collaborative investigations.

American news consumers now understand that quality does not come without a price as readership has predominantly turned online. But many still don't fully financially support local newspapers in the same way they do national newspapers such as The New York Times, which has recently recorded record digital subscriptions and profits that rival or exceed those of their print products.

The vast majority of the nation's existing daily and weekly newspapers continue to struggle with declining revenues. While digital revenues have slowly improved, many have been purchased by publishing conglomerates who have centralized production and printing facilities and cut staff to save money as they continue to experiment with strategies to become profitable online.

National Newspaper Week

"Journalism Matters Now More Than Ever" is the theme for this year's National Newspaper Week, this week celebrated from Oct. 7-13.

The event is sponsored by the Newspaper Association Managers, Inc., a professional organization of executives of state, regional, national and international newspaper associations headquartered in the United States and Canada, in recognition of the service of newspapers and their employees across North America.

As part of the week's events, newspapers around the country will be publishing columns, editorials and cartoons in support of press freedom. These are some comments culled from columns by editors at some of those newspapers on why journalism matters.

"To be sure, the change of bias has been leveled at journalists since the nation began — and was, in fact, welcomed by many in the first 'journals of opinion' and later by media moguls making no pretense at publishing anything but 'news' filtered through their own views.

"But over time, and by dint of the hard work and credible reporting by tens of thousands of journalists — in newspapers, and later in radio, television and now online — readers, listeners, viewers and users gave their loyalty to news operations that brought them what they needed."

— Gene Policinski, a founding editor of USA Today, is chief operating officer of the Freedom Forum Institute and of the Institute's First Amendment Center.

"The founding fathers decided more than 200 years ago that if democracy was to function as they intended, there had to be a means to keep tabs on the people's governments. They adopted the First Amendment to make sure those governments couldn't hinder the people's right to know or silence the opinions that might not please those in power.

"Journalism exists to keep the people informed. It exists to spread knowledge and, yes, it exists to provide viewpoints from many different perspectives, to provide the fuel that people in a democracy need to take part in their governments.

"Journalism matters because democracy matters. The two are inseparable."

— Dave Zweifel, editor emeritus of The Capital Times of Madison, Wisconsin.

"Journalism matters, now more than ever, because people matter. Community journalism matters, now more than ever, because roughly half the world's population lives in small communities, and in the pages of their newspapers, they see themselves and the ones they love."

— Matt Geiger, executive editor, News Publishing Co., Black Earth, Wisconsin

"While we're not the story, the need for our journalism has never been more important to the people and communities we serve.

"It has never been more important for journalists to ask questions, scour public records and investigate malfeasance.

"It has never been more important for journalists to expose corruption, challenge assumptions and shine a light on sexual misconduct.

"It's crucial that we continue to reinforce the importance of our role in society."

— Rusty Cunningham, executive editor, La Crosse Tribune and River Valley Media Group, La Crosse, Wisconsin

"The media must play an important role as the Fourth Estate, hold government in check and shine the light on all the actions of our governors. That is the very intention of the First Amendment."

— Jim Zachary, editor of the Valdosta (Georgia) Daily Times

Small-Town Success Stories

The decline in print newspapers has been a troubling and difficult process to watch. As the Pew Research Center's annual State of the News Media report reiterates, newspapers are critical to the American news landscape, and their shrinking numbers have resulted in some cities and towns lacking in coverage or, worse yet, having none at all. But the news about newspapers isn't all bad.

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In tiny Eastport, Maine, (pop. 1,300) Atlantic magazine national correspondent and author James Fallows and his wife, Deb, found Edward French and Lora Whelan, a husband-and-wife team who own and operate the town's bi-weekly newspaper, The Quoddy Tides. The Fallows have been criss-crossing the country since 2013, visiting and telling modern small town stories that have been collected in "Our Towns," a best-selling book and in a continuing column of the same name in The Atlantic.

Like many small newspapers, The Tides operates on a shoestring budget but fills a niche in the fishing community that would suffer greatly were it not for the paper's deep coverage of city council meetings, water rights, conservation and tax issues. It brings Eastport stories its readers value, the Fallows report — high-school sports, shipping news, gardening and cooking tips, religious news, birth and death notices and puzzles. In other words the comprehensive coverage every city and town deserves but doesn't always get.

Papers like The Tides are perhaps an anomaly in America today, but its owners say the "secret" to its success is really no secret: local news.

"I think it's important for newspapers not to keep cutting," French told Fallows recently. "If you keep cutting, there's less and less reason for people to buy the paper. If you want to keep a healthy circulation, you have to make the investment in reporters and (provide) the news that people can't find anywhere else."

The Fallows have found other small papers surviving and fulfilling this important function in Columbus, Miss., at The Columbus Dispatch, and at Seven Days, a former alt-weekly that became a leading source of statewide news in Burlington, Vt.

They're not alone.

The Philadelphia Inquirer recently profiled The Daily Herald, Pennsylvania's smallest daily newspaper, located in Tyrone (pop. 5,700), with a circulation of 1,700 loyal subscribers.

Like The Quoddy Tides, The Herald is hyper-focused on community news, sending "a writer, sometimes two, to every council and school board meeting in the communities it covers."

Fighting the growing trend of "ghost" newspapers — newspapers purchased by large publishing chains but robbed of the staff they require to cover meetings and community news — The Herald is part of a small Pennsylvania newspaper group that focuses on micro-news, or a paper's immediate surroundings. These kinds of stories are the lifeblood of every small newspaper.

These papers are by no means making lots of money, but they're surviving and providing their communities with valuable information they're willing to pay for. They're also keeping a necessary American institution alive and serving as training grounds for future generations of journalists.