

735 words

We are not the enemy: Time to stand up for freedom of the press

Enough already.

The last couple of years have been an unending barrage against the freedom of the press and the practitioners of this noble trade.

From being called “liars,” “fake,” and “sick” by irate politicians to enduring capricious and punitive tariffs that are an existential threat to newspapers, the landscape for journalists today may be as inhospitable as it has ever been in the 242-year history of this great union of ours.

All this while the public at large seems unable to break free of the social media echo chamber. We retreat there to endlessly bicker with those who don’t agree, or to bolster the confidence of our own positions by seeking solace from those who do. We’ve devolved into a nation of people who simply don’t want to hear it.

And that’s incredibly dangerous.

The bipartisan testimony of 20 members of congress last month before the International Trade Commission in opposition to tariffs on Canadian imported newsprint is a good indicator a lot of talk about journalists being “enemies of the people” is utter hogwash. These men and women know the importance of community newspapers and their imperiled status in modern culture where too many marketers prefer digital analytics and too many readers prefer daily affirmation.

They know the men and women who work at the local paper are most definitely not the enemy — nor the problem.

But in a society where talk of the wicked media is hurled relentlessly on Twitter or cable “news” channels, all of us who take part in the honorable, Constitutionally protected trade of reporting news and ferreting truth get amalgamated into a cynical act of political theater that’s threatening to the very fabric of democracy.

And that’s what this is really about.

We’re arguing over political philosophies and cultural divides — not about whether news is biased. I bet you a week’s pay and a dozen donuts the people who use the argument that news is “fake” don’t any more believe that than they think the Space Force is coming soon to a quadrant near us.

But the damage is being done. We as a nation are beginning to give a collective shoulder shrug the fundamental freedoms in the Bill of Rights.

And we’ve got to snap out of it.

We’ve got to accept that not all news is happy or affirming. We’re not always going to get what we want. I vaguely remember being taught that as a preschooler.

Aaron Blake, a correspondent for The Washington Post, asked in a recent column if the media should go to war with the President.

“Trump seems to want a war with his ‘enemy,’” Blake wrote. “But should the media oblige him? And if it doesn’t, isn’t it unilaterally disarming?”

No, we should not go to war with the President. But it's long past time to end the naval gazing and stand up for what we do. It's our job to provide the best obtainable version of the truth and to champion the freedoms of the First Amendment.

To that end, The Boston Globe is encouraging newspapers across the country to editorialize on the importance of journalism in democracy — and to the communities we all serve — in their editions on or around Aug. 16.

“This dirty war on the free press must end,” Globe editors wrote in their call to action.

Thomas Jefferson — who had a notably tempestuous relationship with the press — was a president who still often rose to defend it.

He once wrote while serving in Paris as Minister to France:

“The people are the only censors of their governors: and even their errors will tend to keep these to the true principles of their institution...

“Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.”

If we're unwilling to accept news that upsets us, or if we're indifferent to differing views simply because we don't want to deal with them, we're essentially giving up on the notion we can ever truly be “one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

Ironically, I don't believe we've given up because I don't want to believe it.

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