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Marty Baron, Executive Editor, Washington Post **“When a President Wages War on a Press at Work”**

Over the past few years -- during the U.S. presidential campaign and then after, during the first year of a new administration -- many of us in the press came to wonder why the old rules of journalism no longer seemed to apply.

How was it that when we reported that what a candidate said -- and then what the *president* said -- was false, much of the public shrugged it off?

How was it that so many people believed things that were untrue, even though we could document that they were false?

How was it that websites created overnight could successfully disseminate falsehoods and crackpot conspiracy theories, suffering no consequences for deliberate deceit but instead gaining audience?

I got what I believed to be *some* answers when I was directed to the late Neil Postman's 1985 book, "Amusing Ourselves to Death."

Postman's idea was that the shift in media consumption from the printed word to the television signal had changed the very fundamentals of how we communicate -- and thus had altered our culture and our politics.

While the public, he felt, worried most about an authoritarian world as envisioned by George Orwell in the book "1984," he believed a future as imagined by Aldous Huxley in "Brave New World" was more likely.

“Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us,” he wrote. “Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture.”

Postman argued that a so-called Age of Exposition – when people were informed by the printed word and its implicit requirement that arguments be rooted in logic and evidence -- had been replaced by an Age of Show Business.

What did this mean? It meant that surface appearances mattered more than reasoning. It elevated performance in the sense of acting over performance in the sense of achievement.

Take the issue of “credibility.” In the Age of Show Business, as Postman put it, credibility “does not refer to the past record of the teller for making statements that have survived the rigors of reality-testing. It refers only to the *impression* of sincerity, authenticity, vulnerability or attractiveness . . .”

He added that if on television this brand of credibility “replaces reality as the decisive test of truth-telling, political leaders need not trouble themselves very much with reality provided that their performances consistently generate a *sense* of verisimilitude . . . One may look like a liar but be telling the truth; or even worse, look like a truth-teller but in fact be lying.”

Postman wrote the following *in 1985*: “The reporters who cover the White House are ready and able to expose lies, and thus create the grounds for informed and indignant opinion. But apparently the public declines to take an interest.”

I don’t mean to dwell so much on Neil Postman. And I am not predicting that Aldous Huxley’s prophesy will come true – or Orwell’s, for that matter.

But I do think we must recognize that something profound has changed in our profession. Journalism may not work as it did in the past. Our work’s anticipated impact may not materialize. The public may not process information as it did previously.

The president of the United States may well be on to something when he emphasizes, as he routinely does, his television ratings. Or when he explained, as he did in October, his behavior on Twitter by declaring, “You have to keep people interested.” Or when he remarked of the generals in his cabinet, immediately after his swearing-in on January 20, “I see my generals. These are central casting.”

Or when, in January this year, he conducted a 55-minute bipartisan immigration meeting with cameras rolling, later boasting that networks gave it “great reviews” and garnered “fantastic” ratings. Or the next day, when he welcomed reporters again to the Cabinet Room, saying, “Welcome back to the studio.”

There is clearly a heavy dose of the show, the performance, in this administration. Donald Trump learned from his 14 years hosting “The Apprentice.” He may have learned more about today’s media environment and today’s political communication than we in the press yet fully understand.

“Before taking office,” the New York Times wrote two months ago, “Mr. Trump told aides to think of each presidential day as an episode in a television show in which he vanquishes rivals.”

Just before he took office, one of our reporters asked him how people would know if he had fulfilled his promise to “make America great again.” Aside from talking about jobs and infrastructure, he talked of being a great “cheerleader” for the country, and then previewed a spectacle he had in mind: “. . . we’re going to show the people as we build up our military, we’re going to display our military. That military may come marching down Pennsylvania Avenue. That military may be flying over New York City and Washington, D.C., for parades. I mean, we’re going to be showing our military.” (It now looks as if we may actually get that military parade.)

In fact, Trump’s showmanship goes incredibly deep. In the 1980s when his first marriage had collapsed, as one of The Post’s writers recently recalled, “Trump not only didn’t push back when tabloid newspapers turned the collapse of his first marriage into a daily soap opera; Trump actively participated in the scripting of the drama, calling gossip writers, dishing out salacious morsels almost by the hour.”

“The show is Trump,” he said then, “and it is sold-out performances everywhere.”

Bret Stephens, a conservative columnist for The New York Times and previously the Wall Street Journal, authored a November piece headlined “We are all part of Trump’s show.” But months earlier, in a brilliant lecture, Stephens cautioned: “At some point, it becomes increasingly easy for people to mistake the reality of the performance for reality itself.”

Let me pause here to say I am *not* expressing a view on the results of the presidential election or the president’s policies. I have deep respect for our democratic system and the public’s right to select whomever they prefer to lead the country.

People have their own reasons for voting as they do. And it's to be expected that whoever is elected will endeavor to execute policies consistent with positions articulated during a campaign.

Let people debate what's right and proper. That's our system.

This is the same democracy, by the way, that gives us in the American press the constitutional right to publish freely without government interference, a right I cherish.

Yet the founders of the United States created a democracy where the president is not a king. He occupies a central role.

But so does Congress. The courts do, too. And so does the press, which is why the founders crafted the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

That amendment places checks on the government's power. Freedom of religion, one of the rights there, puts limits on the government. And so do the other First Amendment rights regarding free expression: that is, freedom of speech, freedom to peaceably assemble, freedom to petition the government for a redress of grievances, and freedom of the press.

Those last four rights were designed with a clear purpose: holding government to account. Or, as founder James Madison put it, "the right of freely examining public characters and measures." So, the job of the press is to provide citizens of our democracy the information they need and deserve to know.

The question I'm seeking to address here is this: How is that all working out right now? Does the public see the press as effectively filling this role? When the press does its reporting, delivers the facts it has gathered, and seeks to hold government accountable, how is that received by the public?

What does it take to establish something as fact? Do the old ways still work? And if not, how does democracy function when we can't agree on a baseline set of facts? What if the public rejects the very idea of an independent arbiter of what's true and false?

The late U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan liked to say, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts." What if people believe they are not only entitled to their own opinion but to their own facts? Where does that lead?

A few sobering statistics tell us where things stand today.

A Politico/Morning Consult poll published in October showed that nearly half of all American voters – 46% -- believe the news media fabricate news stories about Trump and his administration. Three quarters of Republican voters believe that.

A Gallup-Knight Foundation survey released in January found that four in 10 Republicans consider accurate news stories that cast a politician or political group in a negative light to always be “fake news.” The number is 17% for Democrats.

Another: The Washington Post’s Fact Checker staff counted more than 2,000 false or misleading claims by President Trump during his first full year in office.

Another: A Vanity Fair/60 Minutes poll showed that 36% of Republicans believed freedom of the press does more harm than good.

Finally: A YouGov/Economist poll found that 55% of Republicans believe the courts should be allowed to “fine news media outlets for publishing or broadcasting stories that are biased or inaccurate.” And 45% of Republicans say the courts should be able to “shut down” biased media organizations.

Donald Trump has made a distinct contribution to the muddling of fact and fiction. And his objective is evident.

Our columnist Michael Gerson – a conservative – put it this way: “It is the dismissal of reason and objectivity as inherently elitist and partisan . . . It is the attempt to destroy or subvert any source of informed judgment other than Trump himself.”

And that is why it is now worth recalling what Justice Robert H. Jackson of the U.S. Supreme Court wrote in 1945 on behalf of the First Amendment: “every person must be *his own* watchman for truth, because the forefathers did not trust *any government* to separate the true from the false *for us*.”

During the campaign, Donald Trump went beyond seeking to discredit the press. He sought to marginalize us, then to delegitimize us, then to dehumanize us -- calling us “disgusting,” “scum,” the “lowest form of humanity,” even “the lowest form of life.”

Only four weeks into his administration, he labeled us “the enemy of the American People.” By late summer, he questioned our patriotism: “I really don’t think they like our country,” he said. By the end of the year, he was calling the news media a “stain on America.”

His first full day in office, the president went to the CIA to declare himself at war with the media. And, indeed, he has been.

Statistics about Trump's tweets capture the unrelenting nature of the assault: Since he declared his candidacy in 2015, he has posted more than 1,000 tweets critical of the press.

From December of 2016 to December 2017, Trump tweeted about "fake news" more than 150 times.

All this in *the United States*, which historically championed press freedom as a foundational principle that truly made America great, inspiring people around the world seeking free expression of their own.

Chris Wallace of Fox News -- of all places -- has declared: "President Trump is engaged in the most direct, sustained assault on a free press in our history," adding: "I think his purpose is clear: a concerted campaign to raise doubts when we report critically about his administration that we can be trusted."

The observations of Yale professor Timothy Snyder apply here. "To abandon facts is to abandon freedom," he has written. "If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle."

As he seeks to undermine confidence in the work of mainstream news organizations, the president himself traffics in baseless conspiracy theories.

One of our political writers, James Hohmann, labeled him "the most conspiracy-minded president in U.S. history," rattling off the baseless theories he has promoted over the years:

Falsely claiming that Barack Obama is from Kenya. Wrongly claiming that Obama did not attend Columbia University. Insisting that Obama personally bribed New York's attorney general to investigate Trump University.

Suggesting there may have been foul play when Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia died in his sleep. Asserting that the IRS audits him because he's a Christian.

Standing by a false claim that he watched TV footage of thousands of Muslims celebrating in New Jersey on 9/11 after the collapse of the World Trade Center. Suggesting that campaign opponent Ted Cruz's Cuban-born father was involved somehow in the Kennedy assassination.

The day after Trump took the oath of office, the White House press secretary, acting on the president's instructions, excoriated the press for unfavorably comparing the size of his inauguration crowd to that for Obama.

The press secretary angrily insisted "this was the largest audience to ever witness the inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe." That was false. National Park Service photographs proved it.

Trump claimed that 3-5 million people voted illegally, alleged fraud without which he would have won the popular vote. False. No one has produced evidence of any pattern of fraud.

The president declared that his predecessor had wiretapped Trump Tower before the election but never produced evidence. Judging from sworn congressional testimony of the former FBI director and the National Security Agency chief, he never will.

This can be head-spinning stuff.

In February last year, when the president spoke to a conservative group, he attacked a story of ours. The Post had disclosed that General Michael Flynn, his national security adviser at the time, had not told the truth when he insisted that he had not held pre-inauguration discussions with Russian officials about sanctions against that country.

In fact, he had held such discussions, we reported. He lied to the American people. And now, based on his December plea of guilty to criminal charges, we know Flynn also lied to the FBI.

For our story, we had nine sources. And we said so. And yet the president declared: "There're no nine people. I don't believe there was one or two people . . . They make up sources."

That was an odd statement. Because the president had just fired General Flynn, explaining that Flynn had not told the vice president the truth about his conversations with the Russians.

But the president went a step further. He pointed to our story in his call for a criminal leak investigation. Which raised a question: If the president really believed we had no sources for our story, then what leak did he think needed investigating?

By March, even the conservative editorial writers at The Wall Street Journal were at wit's end. They published a piece entitled "A President's Credibility," pointing to what they described as the president's "seemingly endless stream of exaggerations, evidence-free accusations, implausible denials and other falsehoods."

Still, it goes on. Toward the end of the year, the president privately advanced the idea that the infamous "Access Hollywood" tape was a fake. That tape was a recording published by The Washington Post near the end of the presidential campaign. It documented Trump boasting about grabbing women's private parts.

After it was published, Trump offered up a rare declaration of remorse: "I said it, I was wrong, and I apologize." But once a year had passed -- and amid widespread allegations of sexual harassment allegations against other prominent figures -- the president reversed himself, asserting privately that the recording had been fabricated.

At about the same time, the New York Times reported, Trump was once again questioning the authenticity of President Obama's birth certificate. It didn't seem to matter that Trump -- finally, during the campaign, and under pressure to admit the truth -- uttered these words: "President Barack Obama was born in the United States."

This all may get worse before it gets better. Tribalism in media consumption is becoming more pronounced.

The Reuters Institute's Digital News Report last year identified the U.S. online media environment as the most polarized in the world, reflecting a society that itself is equally polarized.

Polling for Reuters showed that 51% of those who leaned left trusted the media, compared with only 20% on the right.

A recent Poynter Institute study showed the gap growing, with 74% of Democrats, including respondents who lean Democratic, expressing “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of confidence in media reporting compared to just 19% of Republicans. The widening gap is due largely to a surge in Democratic confidence in the press since Trump’s election.

A Pew Research poll found that early in the Trump administration, roughly nine in ten Democrats said news media criticism keeps leaders in line, an endorsement of the watchdog role of the press. But only four in ten Republicans endorsed that view. The gap between the two was the highest ever in Pew’s polling on this issue since 1985.

Now there are threats to use government power against us.

During the campaign, Trump mused about suing the press so as to burden us with high legal costs and penalties. More recently, when the television network ABC made a serious error in its Trump coverage that briefly sent a soaring stock market down, the president – who never accepts accountability for his own falsehoods – called upon investors to sue the company for any stock market losses they suffered.

Minor errors by news outlets are seized upon and weaponized with the aim of crippling or destroying those institutions. He often calls for reporters to be fired, even for honest mistakes.

Overall, this president, who has made aggressive use of his constitutional right to free expression, has said that the First Amendment provides “too much protection” for the press.

Last month he called U.S. libel laws “a sham and a disgrace” and pledged to review them, although it’s unclear what he can do since they’re rooted in the Constitution, Supreme Court rulings, and state – as

opposed to federal – law.

When speaking with then-FBI director James Comey, Trump called for more leak investigations and proposed putting journalists in prison for publishing classified information.

Last summer, the Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, announced that the Justice Department was conducting 27 leak investigations, three times as many as the Obama administration – which itself had launched a record number.

Sessions declared: “We respect the important role that the press plays and will give them respect, but it is not unlimited. They cannot place lives at risk with impunity.”

All of us in the press understand about putting lives at risk. But the thing is, we haven’t done anything of the sort. The statement by the attorney general was evidently intended to please the president and incite the public against us.

What officials really seem to fear is the damage that truth can inflict on their reputations.

The leak investigations have been, above all, an effort to intimidate. Thankfully, I see little evidence that the press has been cowed. In many ways, it has been reinvigorated.

At The Post, we take inspiration from the principles that were articulated for our organization in 1935. They begin as follows: “The first mission of a newspaper is to tell the truth as nearly as the truth may be ascertained.”

Judging from digital traffic, a surge in subscriptions and reader comments, much of the public believes we are doing just that.

On the glass wall of my office, I have posted dozens of notes from readers. Let me give you a flavor of what they say.

Here’s one: “Thank you for your work on behalf of truth in these times of tension and mistrust. Please know that American citizens rely on you to do your job with thoroughness and integrity, and we so appreciate your role in our democracy.”

Another: "I am counting on you and your able reporters to 'keep at it.' I have come to believe that the free press has saved our asses time and time again. Never has it been more important than it is today."

And finally, "I subscribed to the Washington Post today because facts matter."

Amid an unrelenting assault from the most powerful person on earth, the answer for us is clear: Just do our job. Do it honestly, honorably, seriously, fairly, accurately, and also unflinchingly. "To show, by our work," as David Shribman, editor of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette put it, "that the truth still matters."

We also must be more transparent -- reveal how we go about our reporting, tell people who we are.

The Washington Post's David Fahrenthold said earlier this year, "Beyond the age-old requirements that we be right and that we be fair and we be clear, there is a requirement that we be transparent." That means, he said, we owe the public "proof of why what we do is better. If they don't know it from our name, they must see it from our work."

Tensions between the press and a president are not new. A recently released movie tells a piece of that history.

It happens to be called "The Post." The Steven Spielberg movie is about the confrontation between the press -- the New York Times and the Washington Post -- and President Nixon over the publication of the Pentagon Papers, the top-secret history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam between 1945 and 1967.

The Pentagon Papers were leaked, and the press sought to publish them. The Nixon administration moved to block publication, threatening criminal prosecution. The case landed in the U.S. Supreme Court, which on June 30, 1971, ruled 6-3 in favor of the press and its right to publish.

"In the First Amendment," Justice Hugo Black wrote, "the Founding Fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our democracy. The press was to serve the governed, not the governors . . . The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government."

That opinion of Justice Hugo Black best captures the spirit that today animates The Post's newsroom and, I believe, other leading American news organizations. It is our soul.

But we have been reminded over many months now that, as journalists, we need more than a soul. We also need a spine. I am pleased to report that we have that, too.

Thank you for listening.
