

# MEDIA WATCHDOG FUNCTION NEEDED MORE THAN EVER

In an age in which alternative facts and fake news abound, true journalists are needed more than ever to function as government watchdogs, to hold elected officials accountable and to keep the public informed.

*By David Thomas*

While the digital age has brought with it an explosion of media that is accessible by the general public, it has also caused considerable confusion and debate as to what constitutes true journalism and who in fact can legitimately be classified as a journalist. The advent of social media and multiplication of media platforms has provided anyone with a smart phone or access to a computer the ability to publish “media” of various types. While the average internet user does not consider himself or herself to be a practicing journalist, the proliferation of blogs and vehicles for publishing information to the world has made it extremely difficult to differentiate and define who is actually a journalist.

“... some dogmatists find it compelling to draw hard and fast lines in the territorial sands, defining journalism in ways that include only a select few highly moral professionals while de-pressing or excommunicating everyone else.

Meanwhile, it's equally problematic to broaden the definition of journalism such that everyone qualifies (‘We're all journalists now’).” (Black, 2010)

One of the primary functions of the media in a democratic society is to act in the public interest by monitoring the government and reporting truthful and accurate information to keep the citizens apprised of what the government is up to. According to the US constitution, here in America, we are supposed to have a representative government of the people, for the people and by the people. As such, ordinary citizens play a key role in insuring that the government fulfills its mission of representing the interests of the people. In order to call elected officials to task, the public must be provided with detailed and accurate information about the government’s actions and policies. Thus, throughout the nation’s history it has been customary to allow the media to have unfettered access to the government.

On February 24th, the Trump administration, in the person of press secretary Sean Spicer, set a dangerous precedent by barring several major news organizations including the NY Times, CNN, the Guardian, BuzzFeed and others from participating in the weekly press briefing and admitting instead several conservative publications including Breitbart, the One America News Network and the Washington Times. Trump is not the first president to have an adversarial relationship with the press. All previous presidents have had to weather negative press critiques at times. It comes with the territory and is part and parcel of media's responsibility to keep in check the executive office. In a free society, the government or president does not get to control the media. The rewarding and restricting of access based upon favorable or unfavorable coverage goes against our basic American principles, namely freedom of the press.

The Trump presidency and administration diverges in several respects from his predecessors. One aspect in which he differs is the extent to which he uses twitter to bypass the media and communicate directly with the public. He has continued a practice begun when he was a private citizen of personally attacking his critics via twitter. Now that he is President, his tweets can and do have international consequences.

Another variance from the past is the key role that digital blogs and publications now play in terms of how Americans are receiving their news and the stratification of digital news audiences. This has created a conundrum for traditional media outlets as they must struggle to update the pay to read model for the digital age.

We are raising a generation now in which everyone is in the media business," said Gibbs of young people's fluency in digital publishing. At the same time, legacy media outlets are no longer as authoritative as they once were. Editorials, once a powerful tool of persuasion, have reduced influence on a public with less reverence for institutions. (Gibbs, 2016)

The digital age has brought with it a blurring of lines between entertainment and news, facts and opinion, between true journalism versus propaganda. In a universe in which everyone is simply stating their particular opinion about issues, there is no absolute truth. Your opinion is just as valid as mine. Despite the proliferation of fake news and alternative facts, in the real world, facts and data do matter. In order to manage and govern a modern society, one needs real information as opposed to opinions. Additionally, in order for citizens to play a role in determining the course of the nation, they must have access to real and accurate information.

Beginning in the 2016 election and continuing to the present, Donald Trump has assailed the media declaring the mainstream press to be an enemy of the people and labelling it as “fake news”. In February 2016, then-candidate Trump threatened if elected to open up libel laws to make news outlets easier to sue. “We're going to open up those libel laws. So when The New York Times writes a hit piece which is a total disgrace or when The Washington Post, which is there for other reasons, writes a hit piece, we can sue them and win money instead of having no chance of winning because they're totally protected.” (Gold, 2016)

The Trump administration has utilized the current confusion over who is a legitimate journalist to insert right wing propaganda instruments into the mix that will support the administration unquestionably and will not challenge the lies and misstatements that are put out on a regular basis. The following criteria for evaluating whether a publication qualifies as an authentic journalistic publication is taken from *Here's What Non-Fake News Looks Like* by Michael Schudson (Schudson, 2017).

When we want to know what is going on in the world, we do not call 911. We turn to professional news gatherers who have earned reputations for reliability. But how do we know which of the news providers around us can be trusted? Consider the following list of earmarks of journalistic quality:

1. Willingness to retract, correct, and implicitly or explicitly apologize for misstatements in a timely manner.
2. A reliance on professional ethics, including the following:
  - Accuracy. Spell the name right. Get the address right. There's no "it's all relative" here. And write a story that tells what happened, not what you think about what happened.
  - An interest in contrary evidence. "Report against your own assumptions," my Columbia Journalism School colleagues tell their students.
  - Follow the story regardless of its political implication. If you are a reporter, not a propagandist, you will follow the story even if it may injure the career of the candidate or the party you personally favor or your newspaper has endorsed.
- 3, Reliable journalists adopt other identifiable features, too, such as the following:
  - Be calm and declarative. No hyperventilating.
  - Present multiple positions or viewpoints within a story if the topic is controversial and (unlike "false balance") the various sides adhere to different values but are not separated by an acceptance of consensual scientific evidence and a rejection of it.
  - Identify your sources whenever possible. And acknowledge the gaps, inconsistencies, or insufficiencies in the information you are basing your story on.
  - Use commonly accepted data and databases and reliable authorities. If you want to write about whether more people rode the Washington, DC metro system on the day of Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration or on the day of Donald Trump's 2017 inauguration, ask the Metropolitan Transit Authority, which collects this data. If you prefer, take President Trump's word for it—but then you are not a journalist, you are a sap. Trump has demonstrated repeatedly that he accepts figures that flatter him and refuses to acknowledge those that do not. Personal vanity is not a commonly accepted database.
  - Pursue evidence and leads that run counter to your hunches, passions, and preferences and, when that evidence pans out, give it appropriate attention in your story.

Given the Trump administration's hostile attitude toward the mainstream press, journalists have to adjust to the new realities of covering the White House. Gleaning insights from crackdowns on press freedoms worldwide, Nic Dawes makes the following suggestions for US journalists:

1. Get used to the end of access as you know it.
2. Get used to spending more time in court.

You are going to need to litigate to get access to information, but you are also going to have to defend, a lot.

### 3. Get used to being stigmatized as “opposition.”

Mr Trump was quick out of the blocks on this one with his “professional protesters incited by the media” tweet. His subsequent attacks on the *Times* fit a familiar pattern: call out one prominent enemy *pour encourager les autres*, and let the trolls do the rest. This will escalate. The basic idea is simple: to delegitimize accountability journalism by framing it as partisan.... The challenge is to maintain a tough, independent, journalistic politics, a politics of accountability, equity and the rule of law without straightforwardly aligning with the partisan opposition. This is a tough line to walk, because people on both sides of the political divide actually want you to fail at it. But it is among your most important tasks. (Dawes, 2017)

Notwithstanding the myriad disruptions to the media industry caused by conversion of news distribution to digital platforms, there are positive changes that the digital age has brought about. According to TIME Magazine’s editor, Nancy Gibbs, she is optimistic that the current disruption of media and politics also brings with it new opportunities.

“Never in history have we had the power to reach the audiences that we reach now,” she said, also noting that the ability to better tell stories with data and across multiple platforms is another beneficial development of technological advances. “This can be a golden age not only of journalism, but of governance, because these tools apply every bit as much to those who are looking to shape policy,” she continued. “If you are a citizen with a good idea looking to solve a problem, your ability to rally people to your cause... has never before been as great as it is now.” (Gibbs, 2016)

Despite the current adversarial climate and despite the shrinking market for print journalism, the press must continue to fulfill its mission of keeping the public informed. Because we live in an age in which fake news abounds and in which the executive branch of the government routinely broadcasts false narratives and lies, the need is greater than ever for true journalists, traditional as well as digital, to function as the eyes and ears of the public, sounding the alarm when necessary and always staying vigilant.

I concur with actress Meryl Streep who brilliantly laid out the case for supporting and maintaining a free and principled press during her acceptance speech at the 2017 Golden Globe Awards. “We need the principled press to hold power to account, to call them on the carpet for

every outrage. That's why our founders enshrined the press and its freedoms in our Constitution."

(Mullin, 2017)

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