



Photos: Gage Skidmore (CC BY-SA-3.0)

# DEMOCRACY AT RISK

## The American Media Under Attack

MARK HANE BUTT

*Without a free press, democracy is in peril.*

A popular government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives. —James Madison, "Father of the U.S. Constitution," author of the U.S. Bill of Rights, and 4<sup>th</sup> President of the United States

**G**reed. Politics. Irrelevance. Indifference. Technology. The American news media is under attack. If it fails, the American republic may fail with it—for information is the lifeblood of a free people.

How did it come to this? The American press had a noble start. At least in theory, it was based on a grand idea: the pursuit of truth.

Born in a time of monarchies and theocracies and those who promoted “official truth,” the press was a byproduct of the fifteenth-century invention of the printing press and the subsequent growth in freedom of thought, the development of markets and education and the need to share information, and the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rise of “the Enlightenment.” This new philosophy moved away from mysticism and toward rationality and empiricism, the idea that knowledge comes through experience and experimentation. Truth could be proven; facts were important.

Breaking with the past, the Framers adopted the Enlightenment as the foundational philosophy of the new republic. Truth would no longer be determined by the personal whims of the elite; it would be determined objectively, scientifically. Finding that objective truth about ourselves and our world would enable us to advance and flourish. The Founders knew that a free press would play a central role in this gathering and sharing of knowledge and gave it First Amendment protection.

Yet the press arguably has not reached its philosophical potential, even with advances in technology. It remains stuck in a free-for-all of opinion and political diatribe. Only for a few decades in the last century did we see glimpses of what it might have become. Today, the American news media is in danger of slipping even further from its envisioned goal—thus putting our very democracy at risk.

**HAPPY TALK** The reputation of the press has eroded significantly during the past four decades. The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism notes that in the 1980s more people thought the press was accurate than not. At present, those numbers are reversed. Changes in the news industry as well as our culture are to blame for the media’s philosophical stumble.

Perhaps the biggest initial change in the modern era was the advent of television. Like its radio predecessor, television started primarily as an entertainment medium. But when television entered the news business, it took center stage, teaching us to see the world differently.

Early broadcast journalists, having made the transition from newspapers, retained their objective approach to presenting the news. Well into the 1960s, news stories were detailed and focused on government and social issues that affected the public. Sound bites explaining important matters often lasted 60 seconds or more. To make more money, TV executives had to consider ratings, which eventually dictated content. News became anything that would shock, entertain, or pander.

In effect, the news was just another show, not a vital part of democracy.

The trend ushered in the era of happy-talk journalism. No longer would a mature, respected journalist with years of experience dominate the screen. Instead, young, attractive, largely inexperienced news readers smiled their way into viewers’ homes, adding their own personality and banter to the story. Objective news became subjective—if not in fact, in manner—with flashy promos, dramatic video, and colorful graphics. (Search YouTube to contrast a national newscast from the 1960s with one today.)

The changes took a toll on the printed press as well. Profits began to fall. News holes shrank. Less space meant less news for readers. To

compete, newspapers borrowed from TV formats, focusing on graphics and visually enticing content rather than longer, detailed stories. Our attention spans were shrinking and we wanted things quickly and easily.

Cable television filled the gap with more channels than one could count. The evolution may have been good for consumers, but it was bad for the news business. With more channels, portions of the advertising pie got smaller, leaving broadcasters with less money to pay for expensive, well-trained journalists. Cable news programs no longer appeared just in the evening. Before, journalists had all day to gather information. Now, the news could be broadcast 24 hours a day. Fewer reporters had less time to gather more information, which also meant less time to check facts or report in context. The news became snippets of often incorrect information—and credibility took another hit.

Not to worry, though. Clever media moguls switched from news to commentary. One news item could be talked about and debated for hours, with various people giving opinions on what the news meant. Celebrity became more important than expertise; the more famous one was, the more “credible” the commentary.

And then the world unveiled a true Tower of Babel—the internet—followed by the complete democratization of information—social media. Add ready access and dissemination via cell phones and objective news reporters became an afterthought. Suddenly, everyone with a camera phone was a journalist. Without training in objective newsgathering, the difference between fact and opinion blurred. It was more difficult than ever to tell who was credible and who was not—and what was fact and what was not.

**PRETTY PERSUASION** With so many places to turn to for information (the so-called fragmentation of the media)





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: John F. Kennedy speaking in front of Springwood, the Roosevelt home in Hyde Park, NY, during the presidential campaign, Aug. 4, 1960; FDR Presidential Library & Museum. Richard Nixon gives his trademark "victory" sign during the presidential campaign, July 1968, by Ollie Akins; National Archives. President Gerald Ford talks with reporters during a White House press conference, Sept. 30, 1976, by Marion S. Trikosko; Library of Congress. Walter Cronkite broadcasting during the presidential debate, Sept. 23, 1976, by Thomas J. O'Halloran; Library of Congress.

the common information that once held us together as a people was no longer so common. The marketplace of ideas had arrived and everyone was seeing, listening, and reading something different. No longer was the nation watching the same news every night, discussing and debating and trying to answer the same questions with the same facts. Profit and politics, not Enlightenment philosophy, was driving our media principles. "One nation indivisible" was harder to come by.

Some media moguls, on the right *and* the left, ignorant or disdainful of the national philosophy, took the press to an even lower level of gossip, fake news, and propaganda, seeing the change as a way to influence and create democracy in their own image. The result was a crisis in confidence and a move toward the news you *agreed* with. Choosing a news source was no longer about what was accurate, but what you liked. Some facts were good, others were not. At best, the news

became irrelevant; at worst, dangerous.

Predictably, we were listening to a lot of angry voices. The news wasn't bringing us together, it was splitting us apart. We became individualistic and tribal, suspicious of one another. We could no longer reach consensus. We abandoned the pursuit of Enlightenment truth. We abandoned our national philosophy.

We were no longer seeking facts and creating policy from those facts, even if we didn't like them. If global warming was indeed fact, many of us weren't buying it. We followed the "facts" that mirrored our political view, our philosophies of conservatism or liberalism. Enlightenment-based democracy demanded one view; we opted for others.

We changed our concept of America in the middle of the experiment.

To be fair, one could argue that our national philosophy was flawed from the start. The Enlightenment

presupposed that people behave logically and rationally. The reality is that people are swayed by emotions, which are anything but logical and rational.

The Founders may have envisioned Enlightenment principles, but they also adopted a capitalistic economic system that produced abundant wealth. Out of that abundance arose a need to differentiate between products, refocusing our attention away from communicating fact and toward communicating *persuasion*. Advertisers found it easier to persuade using emotion rather than logic and, given that more of our discourse was concerned with commerce than politics, advertising became part of our national conversation and reinforced our focus on feeling as a way to make decisions.

Even in our political discourse we abandoned the philosophy of the Enlightenment and adopted the philosophy of the Aesthetic. We began to see national issues, leaders, and facts

themselves as attractive or unattractive. We made judgments on the basis of what was pretty. Most voters thought Richard Nixon was more logical than John Kennedy in the 1960 presidential debate, but Kennedy looked better. And Kennedy won. The remaining question was whether a nation founded on one principle (the Enlightenment) could survive using another (the Aesthetic) or, more realistically, both.

**TRAINING FOR TRUTH** Certainly the press was far worse two hundred years ago. The Adams-Jefferson debates, and the news stories generated about them, were more vitriolic than current political skirmishes. Perhaps in the eighteenth century, when the biggest local problem was an outbreak of typhoid, political pandering could be tolerated. But the world has become much more complex and complicated, requiring a greater need for knowledge. In an age when problems are global, we need a highly efficient media system providing us with credible, factual information.

How do we accomplish this?

As we rely ever more on knowledge, we need to return to and reinvigorate the institutions and practices that move us toward objective logical thought. The American media and our educational system are at the forefront of finding and sharing knowledge and must be encouraged and protected. Currently, those institutions are seriously challenged—financially, politically, and philosophically. Much of public resentment is a result of perceived and real biases that promote conservative or liberal agendas. The press enjoyed more widespread respect, for example, when it focused on facts rather than promoting the news from a particular political view.

A growing number of students are unaware of the basic tenets of democracy. Schools must move away from the current obsession with job-training and renew curricula that place as much emphasis on the

humanities (specifically English, history, and civics) as mathematics and science. Jefferson and other Founders promoted public schools as a way to prepare the next generation of Americans *for democracy*, not just jobs.

Required courses should help students understand the scientific method of finding truth and train them to identify fake or biased news. Before we can reestablish and promote an Enlightenment-based democracy, citizens must be trained in that method of finding truth; too many of us never learned or have forgotten it. Schools and the media are responsible for that training. Employers say the biggest problem they have with graduates isn't that they don't understand technology, it's that they don't know how to think and write.

Students must understand, too, that democracy is about compromise. Excessive individualism or focus on one's rights at the expense of community will not ensure democracy's success. We must maintain a balance between the individual and the state.

The internet and fractured media are not going away, and it must not be government's job to police content. That responsibility belongs to citizens. To succeed, those citizens' analytical skills must be effective.

The media, for its part, must understand its role extends beyond making money. A responsible press focused on facts and democratic ideals helps us sort fact from fiction, exposes corruption by foreign and domestic interests, helps educate citizens about policies, reduces panic during emergencies, and provides us with a sense of community and oneness.

To reduce reliance on ratings and advertising for financial support, the press should investigate endowments. Some institutions, aside from public television, already have moved in this direction. In the meantime, those in the news media should spend more time checking facts and reporting stories in context.

They should seek to separate fact from opinion, correct mistakes openly, and become more transparent in how they define and gather news.

The American people must see their press as an integral part of the democratic experiment, and the news media must see it that way, too. For if the news media fails in its noble pursuit of truth, so does the push for objective thought and the exchange of credible information. Without these, democracy dies.



MARK HANEBUTT, a former reporter, editor, and syndicated writer with *The Orlando Sentinel*, is Professor of Journalism at the University of Central Oklahoma and is of-counsel to the Magill & Magill law firm in Oklahoma City where he consults on media law issues and cases. He is the author of textbooks on news reporting and media law.

**EXTRA!** READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- "How to Tell Fake News from Real News," Laura McClure, TED-Ed editor, TED-Ed Blog, Jan. 12, 2017. Five questions to ask yourself when vetting news, plus links to tipsheets and respected media sources. [blog.ed.ted.com](http://blog.ed.ted.com)
- "Here's What Non-Fake News Looks Like," Michael Schudson, *Columbia Journalism Review*, Feb. 23, 2017. Commentary on the value and reliability of news providers, and a list of indicators of journalistic quality. [cjr.org](http://cjr.org)
- "Did Technology Kill the Truth?" Tom Wheeler, Brookings Report, Brookings Institution, Nov. 14, 2017. "We exist in a time when technological capabilities and economic incentives have combined to attack truth and weaken trust." [brookings.edu](http://brookings.edu)