

Good afternoon. This is quite an honor to be speaking here today. Years ago, when I was a journalism student at Northwestern University, I became convinced I wanted to work in the South because of my admiration for great voices like Ralph McGill and my interest in a changing South.

During the winter vacation of my senior year, I purchased a \$99 Greyhound bus pass and traveled from one southern city to another, trying to persuade some editor to hire me. Nashville. Knoxville. Chattanooga, Atlanta, Dallas, Lexington, Louisville. I knocked on a lot of doors.

I believed that the best journalism in America had been practiced in the South and would continue to be practiced in the South. Now, I know much more, particularly after reading an excellent book by one of the AJC's managing editors, Hank Klibanoff called the Race Beat. (Okay, it's a shameless plug for his book!). Hank and his co-author Gene Roberts did a brilliant job of documenting the heroic journalism that was practiced in the South in the 50s and 60s. But they also show the other side of Southern journalism of that time... journalism that covered up, conspired and ignored.

When viewed against the appropriate backdrop, Ralph McGill's work seems even more inspiring and impressive; for example, Mr. McGill's classic column about the 1958 bombing of a Jewish synagogue in Atlanta, which begins this way:

“Dynamite in great quantity ripped a beautiful temple of worship in Atlanta. It followed hard on the heels of a like destruction of a handsome high school at Clinton, Tenn. The same rabid, mad-dog minds were, without question, behind both. They are also the source of previous bombings in Florida, Alabama, and South Carolina. The schoolhouse and the church were the targets of diseased, hate-filled minds.

Let us face the facts. This is a harvest. It is the crop of things sown.”

Today, I want to talk about another bad seed I'm concerned we're planting and will someday have to harvest. I want to talk about the status of the First Amendment, particularly freedom of the press and freedom of speech. Those freedoms and our democracy are under assault, just as they were in Mr. McGill's time.

I fear we will look up years from now and say “how could this happen?” and the answer will be “this is a harvest. It is the crop of things sown.” This is a result of what we ourselves have planted.

We all know the history. Freedom of the press and freedom of speech are key tenets in our democracy. The founding fathers wrote eloquently and passionately about those critical freedoms.

On my office wall, I have a note written to me in 1980 by a Filipino political dissident by the name of Benigno Aquino. Aquino was released from prison after seven years of incarceration. A senator and political opponent of then-president Ferdinand Marcos, he had been jailed for dissent. He was released because of a serious heart condition. He arrived in Dallas, Texas, for surgery where I was a reporter. As he prepared for surgery, he sent me a note with his demands for the Philippines. First: lift martial law. Second: freedom of the press. Important rights, such as free, fair elections followed.

Unfortunately, Aquino did not live to see those demands realized. He was assassinated as he deplaned on his return to Manila.

I keep that note close as a reminder of what is truly important. Sen. Aquino lived by the same beliefs of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. Government can only succeed when it is open, when a vibrant press is constantly informing the citizens of what's happening and what's not happening.

More than 200 years into our democracy, I worry that too many of us have forgotten the importance of a free press. In a 2004 study of high school students by the Knight Foundation, nearly three-fourths say they do not know how they feel about the First Amendment or admit they take it for granted. Most shocking, half think the government should be allowed to approve stories that appear in newspapers. And half believe the government can censor the Internet.

So... who is killing the first amendment and why? There's a whole list of suspects. There's the federal government, state governments, local governments. There's technology. There's secondary and elementary school education. There's the press ourselves. The list is long.

Colin Powell, the former Secretary of State, made some interesting comments recently in a GQ magazine article. In it, he asked and I quote: "What is the greatest threat facing us now? People will say it's terrorism. But are there any terrorists in the world who can change the American way of life or our political system? No. Can they knock down a building? Yes. Can they kill somebody? Yes. But can they change us? No. Only we can change ourselves."

But, sadly, we are changing ourselves. The post 9/11 world has given government excuses to close doors

on its operations. Public information is increasingly closed off, citing security reasons.

But before we go blaming 9/11, access to information wasn't great even before then. The federal Freedom of Information Act was passed in 1967 with great hope and fanfare. It was designed to be a new tool that would force the federal agencies to disclose information in a timely manner. Last year the Knight Foundation sent requests to all federal government agencies, asking for a status of their open records requests. Of the 57 who responded, 53 reported backlogs. Five reported 17 requests older than 15 years. One dated back to 1987, the year many of you students were born.

Even getting basic information in Washington can be difficult. For years, top public officials have talked to reporters, but refused to be identified. Henry Kissinger, when he was Secretary of State, was legendary for requiring that he be quoted as "a senior official on the Kissinger plane." He got his view out with no accountability. Now, some federal agencies won't even allow their spokespeople to be quoted by name. Who said that? Who knows?

Here in Georgia, there is a constant struggle over freedom of the press. We now have a speaker of the

House who introduced a bill to ban reporters from the floor of the House and was the lone vote against toughening the penalties for government agencies that refused to follow the Open Records Act in 1999. We have local government officials who don't believe in even letting citizens know when the government buys land. We have a Fulton County sheriff who fights over releases of the most basic public documents.

One area of increasing concern is the growth of quasi-government institutions, frequently labeled a "public-private partnership". This is the notion that government and private corporations will partner together to achieve a mutually beneficial goal for a city or state. For example, when the city of Atlanta wanted to get the NASCAR Hall of Fame in Atlanta, they worked with the Chamber of Commerce and the downtown development organization.

But in pursuit of economic development or some other supposed good, these partnerships assume all the authority of government institutions. The problem is that frequently these partnerships want the authority of government, but they reject the public oversight and transparency necessary.

Unfortunately, our elected leaders have an unacceptable record of not forcing public-partnerships

to operate in the sunlight. These officials regularly look the other way when public-private partnerships fail to comply with public disclosure laws. Here's one example that hits close to home.

In 2004, the University of Georgia Foundation flatly refused to disclose records or open meetings related to its effort to restructure the compensation of the University's president. The Foundation claimed to be private, but it had been working hand-in-hand with the University for years in an obvious partnership to raise funds for University activities.

The Attorney General was ultimately forced to threaten the Foundation with legal action in order to force its membership to conduct itself in a more public manner. Not surprisingly, when there was a little bit more sunlight in their meetings, the machinations over the President's compensation quickly got resolved.

Unfortunately, the Foundation and others like it pushed legislation through a willing Legislature that makes it far more difficult to know who is contributing to educational foundations and whether there are any strings attached to those contributions.

But, our challenges are not limited to some public officials trying to operate out of the public eye. They start much earlier, and are much more troubling.

The landmark Knight Foundation study on student and teacher perceptions of the First Amendment was very shocking. By 2006, the Knight Foundation found 72% of students said they had taken classes that dealt with the First Amendment, but 30 percent felt First Amendment rights went too far.

When I was in school, civics was a robust part of public education. The school newspaper was very active, and we regularly discussed issues like freedom of speech and the press. This was during the Vietnam War and the discussions were lively about how far one can and should take free speech, in a time of war.

Now, with all the political issues that confront us, civics has become increasingly difficult to teach in a way that engages students, and makes them think about the larger issues. We have parents who want to ban Harry Potter! You can forget conversation as controversial as an individual's roles and responsibilities in a democracy.

High school newspapers — often a very real way to teach students about freedom of the press — are becoming less common. About one-fourth of schools no longer have a student newspaper. About 40% of these stopped publishing those papers in the last five years.

And even in those schools where newspapers exist, the lessons can be sobering. In DeKalb County several years ago, copies of a newspaper that was critical of the school superintendent were rounded up and destroyed.

As we're looking for suspects, we in the press must check our own DNA.

Since 1997, the First Amendment Center in Nashville has conducted a survey about the public's attitudes on the First Amendment. In the latest survey, 60% of Americans disagree with the statement that the press tries to report the news without bias, and 62% believe the making up of stories is a widespread problem in the news media. How depressing is that?

But back I was in journalism school in the 70s, the press was riding high and newspapers were king. The New York Times had fought a heroic journalistic and judicial battle to share the Pentagon Papers with their readers—a top-secret report of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The Washington Post had hammered and

hammered away, probing a “third-rate burglary” in a building called Watergate, until a presidency unraveled.

Some of the best and brightest entered journalism and, in many ways we’ve blown it. We haven’t paid enough attention to the basics, letting inaccuracies; bias and self-absorption erode our credibility.

Phil Meyer, a professor at UNC Chapel Hill, studied 20 newspapers in his book, *The Vanishing Newspaper*. He found errors of facts (names, places and dates, etc.) in between 16-27 percent of the stories reviewed. Pick up any newspaper and look at the corrections. The worst part is studies have shown only a small percentage of errors actually get corrected.

We have focused too much on ourselves, and not enough on our readers.

One of the many lessons that Mr. McGill can teach us is the importance of staying close to our readers. Even though he was heavily committed to changing the South into a better place, he balanced his columns, mixing in homespun humor, great story-telling and personal anecdotes.

I don’t want to imply that everything newspapers do is bad. Newspapers do lots of wonderful work. At the AJC, Cynthia Tucker regularly wakes readers up with

her prescient view of local issues. This year, Alan Judd and Andy Miller exposed the horrid conditions in mental health hospitals throughout this state, forcing changes. And Helena Oliviero was relentless in her beat coverage, exposing a behind-the-scenes feud between a police chief and city council in one suburban town.

Last year, we had a bit of a go-around with the governor, over — believe it or not — football. He complained about a headline on our story about UGA losing to Vanderbilt. He accused us of being anti-all things Georgia. Our readers stood behind us; they stood behind honesty and truth in the news.

That's promising, but often the problems aren't as simple as a football game.

The seismic changes in how people get information is another way freedom of the press and freedom of speech are being challenged.

In many ways, the Internet is wonderful. It provides in-depth information. It provides information in a variety of formats – video, audio, animation. It allows two-way communication, so people around the world can discuss anything.

But it's the Wild West when it comes to issues like copyright and libel. Anyone can say almost anything on the Internet – and they do. And – true or false, accidentally or intentionally — it stays there forever.

The AJC has had its own experience with Internet lies that won't die. When we re-organized the newsroom recently, we changed half of the jobs. One of the jobs that changed was that of the book editor. National book critics immediately started a petition condemning us, saying that we had gotten rid of the book editor and might get rid of the book pages. That was a lie. If they had followed basic journalistic practices, they would have discovered the truth.

Instead, as John Freeman, president of the National Book Critics Circle, told me the critics were concerned about decreasing book coverage in newspapers around the country. They had a protest plan ready and were just waiting to pounce when the next newspaper decreased coverage. They thought that newspaper was us. They put their plan into action, despite the facts. Some well-known names signed their petition. Some people who I admire greatly. People who believe in and have fought for truth. Salman Rushdie signed the petition, and Melissa Fay Greene. The problem was that they signed a petition that was not based on reality. We actually have expanded our book coverage and focused more

heavily on local literary events and books of local interest. Even so, someone will Google the topic and start writing, repeating the misinformation, without ever checking to see if it's true.

This is troubling. Where is truth? How do we know it when we see it? That becomes increasingly difficult to answer. If truth becomes more difficult to discern, that leads to only one thing — cynicism about all information. If I don't know what to believe, I don't believe anything.

The economics of the Internet are also challenging freedom of the press. For decades, newspapers have been owned by family or public corporations, which have stated beliefs about the critical role of media in our society.

We are very fortunate at the AJC to be owned by privately-held Cox Enterprises. The Cox family has been in the newspaper business since 1898. Their support of the public service work we do is steadfast. Every day on our editorial page, we include a quote from the company's founder, Ohio Gov. James M. Cox: "Ask yourself one question? Is it right? Then do what you believe is best for your town, your state and your country."

As the economic model changes for how people get information, it is unclear how the role of public service information on the Internet will sort out.

In the old world, classified and other advertising have provided a steady and strong fuel for well-staffed newspaper newsrooms around the country. Newspapers have been able to take on public officials, business leaders, anyone in power, because they have strong economic underpinnings. In my years in this business, I've had many publishers who stood up to threats of boycotts, creation of new newspapers and advertising pullouts. My current publisher in Atlanta, John Mellott, went as far as to sue the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce to disclose public information in one of those public-private ventures I discussed earlier. That's a free press fighting for the citizens, playing an important role in our democracy.

But that economic model is eroding. Advertisers are increasingly moving to the Internet for more targeted, personal and searchable advertising. And readers are becoming more comfortable with getting information in a digital format. Many people – especially young people – are moving to the Web for their news.

A new economic model is emerging and those making money in it aren't necessarily the folks who are used to

taking those profits and investing them in newsrooms. Think of it simply — in the old world, if you bought a classified ad to sell your car, some of that money funded journalism. Now, you get that ad for free on the Internet and the advertising around goes to companies that are built around very different goals.

Who will the Internet users of the future be and how will that affect us? It's hard to know right now how that will change the need for information on public policy issues.

Clearly, there are different segments in any society. In Duke professor James Hamilton's book *All The News That's Fit to Sell*, he found that 51% of newspaper readers could identify the head of the Federal Reserve. Only 18% of people who watch TV shows like Jerry Springer and Ricki Lake could do that.

How will Internet users want to spend their time? Will they know who is head of the Federal Reserve? There are early signs that news will have a difficult fight in that world. Way back in 1957, Anthony Downs in his book *Economic Theory of Democracy*, explained that the reasons people seek information fall into four categories —to facilitate consumption decisions, improve business decisions, engage in entertainment and make political choices.

The metrics on the Internet shows us exactly where the majority of people's interests lie. The categories of public service and political decisions rank last in terms of clicks and time spent.

In Atlanta and elsewhere in the country, we are working very hard to find a future that brings economic sustainability and the means to provide critical news and information to our community. We believe that newspapers will continue to be an important source of information for millions of people. But we also believe that many others will get their information from the Internet and other digital sources, and we want to be an important voice in that world as well.

We are making difficult choices and trying things we've never tried before. But we do it because we believe in the huge value we offer to society. As people increasingly get their information on the Internet, we want to make sure some key values of journalism are brought along – truth, accuracy, and transparency.

But as we work our way through these questions, this can't be just a bunch of journalists seeking answers. The future of freedom of the press is an issue for all of us. Ralph McGill understood that, advising that when we shook our heads in disgust about the Temple

bombing, we couldn't just blame the bomber. All of us were to blame. So, it is true with freedom of the press.

This is an issue for everyone: Not just the politicians, not just the press. As Mr. McGill said: "This is a harvest. It is the crop of things sown."

Now is the time for all of us to get out into the fields of freedom and do some work.