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May 1, 2017

Media are the voice, not the “enemy,” of the American People

Donald Trump isn't the first president to attack journalists, but his strategy founded on outlandish remarks and Twitter streams is definitely a first. And while the president continues waging what he deems a “running war” with the mainstream media, the press, or as Trump calls it “the enemy of the American People,” is scrambling to make sense of this uncharted territory.

In March, more than 80 groups, which included prominent media and professional journalism organizations, endorsed a “Statement in support of freedom of the press,” which outlined concerns that “efforts by elected and appointed officials to penalize, delegitimize, or intimidate members of the press” are a threat to constitutional rights and limit press freedom.

The First Amendment right to freedom of speech is a right that many Americans treasure, but until you visit a country that doesn't afford this same right, it's easy to take for granted. There are places in the world where sharing information openly is nearly impossible, and people are killed for engaging in an everyday practice for most Americans.

Journalists have a special relationship with the First Amendment — their profession is founded upon it. And it can be difficult to ward off anger, sadness and discouragement when your life's work is under attack, when you feel hated, or when history reminds you that limiting free speech is a tactic of dictators. But rather than fall into this trap, today's journalists must find new and courageous ways to overcome the hostility and continue the crucial job of informing the American people.

Media scholars and journalists alike have produced robust, insightful work in the wake of the recent election, including pieces focused on the idea of censorship and threats to press freedom. While the fear of outright censorship is legitimate, it is also highly unlikely that a president alone could change laws to limit free speech.

Before entering the Oval Office, Trump threatened to “open up our libel laws” and sue the media, but most libel laws are state laws, and a president can't change federal laws without the support of Congress. Moreover, the Supreme Court, not the President, is the ultimate interpreter of the First Amendment in the case of a lawsuit.

However, there are subtler forms of censorship that are a threat to press freedom, such as the possibility of the media unintentionally censoring itself. First Amendment scholar Geoffrey Stone said in an interview with Slate magazine “if you want access to information, and if you have a president who says, ‘If you criticize me, you're never coming to a press conference again,’ there are members of the media who would shade what they say. That's a huge power (and danger), which hasn't traditionally been exercised in any aggressive way.”

Presidents recognize the power of the press and have used various strategies to manipulate journalists since the beginning of mass media, so President Trump is not special in this way. Most presidents take a different strategy by pandering journalists with amenable press conferences and illusions of transparency, but it's imperative to remember that journalists were never supposed to have an alliance with the President — we have a duty to the readers.

Since the President has challenged the norms of a president's relationship with the media, journalists should reexamine their norms when it comes to covering presidents. There are ways to obtain news without press conferences, and perhaps the most newsworthy information isn't what's coming out of the President's mouth.

The media further censors itself when the news doesn't reach its intended audience, which can happen when an audience stops consuming media altogether. Most major news outlets are clustered in large cities along the coasts, leaving many journalists isolated from the people and problems that the rest of the country faces. As small and mid-size papers continue to struggle financially or disappear altogether, large geographic areas become unintentionally ignored.

It's no coincidence that these areas where coverage is lacking are the same areas that voted for Trump. Many of these individuals were frustrated with the media long before Trump ran for president, which allowed him to further drive a wedge between the press and a large number of Americans. As journalists, we need to do a better job of understanding and reaching these areas, and failing to do so only legitimizes the anti-media narrative and limits the press's ability to inform the public.

And if there are important stories going untold, if journalists aren't giving a voice to all Americans, if we aren't capturing the whole truth, or we are allowing ourselves to be manipulated by powerful people, it's not hard to imagine that some Americans believe the media is their enemy. Thankfully, as long we have the first amendment, we have the power to change that.

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