

Freedom of the Press IS Democracy's Tent Pole®

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OPENING WORDS

My name is Vikki Porter and I became a journalist in 1968 – “The Year that Change America for Forever,” according to *US News and World Reports*.

And I retired in 2017, a year that may rival 1968 for that title.

I sometimes joke that: “I’m a trained observer.” Preparing for today I realized I really DID witness pivotal technological, cultural, social, economic and political changes that brought us to these “unprecedented” days.

That’s why I think Joni and Brian asked me to explore Freedom of the Press with you today. It’s the first of FDR’s essential freedoms that we are highlighting in this series that Brian kicked off earlier this month.

During those almost 50 years:

- I worked in eight newsrooms in seven states.
- I won some awards along the way including sharing a Pulitzer Prize.
- I worked as a reporter, a frontline editor, and top editor as well as newsroom consultant and trainer.

I covered anti-war protests, complete with tear gas and riot-gear national guard. I covered the burning of campus buildings and reported on locals with shotguns driving up and down alleys in their pickup trucks looking for hippies.

And that was just in college.

I’ve seen the up close horror of plane crashes, flash floods and murders. And I’ve followed politicians running for president who were tripped up by their private lives.

And I’ve directed reporters as they held local officials responsible for their actions and unmasked those who violated public trust.

Finally, in the last 15 years, I tried to help news leaders from some of the largest newspapers and broadcast organizations in the country figure out how to survive the digital age.

But what I value most about all those years are the people I worked with, learned from, and bought pizza for on election nights.

That's why, after the mass shooting last month of five newspaper employees, including four journalists, at Annapolis' Capital Gazette, I was jarred back to the reality that journalism is about real people trying to do the right thing for people like you and me without much glory or reward.

I am thinking of them throughout this morning. We need those people now more than ever.

READING # 1

Adapted from *The Premise and the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association*, by Warren R. Ross (2001).

The UUA, The Pentagon Papers and Freedom of the Press

Last year, the Oscar-nominated film "The Post" reminded us how two major newspapers – The Washington Post and New York Times – fought to reveal the astonishing secrets of the U.S. role in the Vietnam War, documented in the Pentagon Papers.

The movie celebrated press freedom. The End.

But it wasn't the end.

Another battle was to come and it was fought by Unitarian Universalists.

Almost 50 years ago, the Unitarian Universalist Association and its Beacon Press drew the wrath of President Richard Nixon and the scrutiny of the FBI when they published the complete text of the Pentagon Papers in October 1971.

It took more than a little courage for then UUA President Rev. Robert West to decide to publish the classified Pentagon review of the U.S. government's involvement in Vietnam.

The UUA was dangerously low on funds and low on morale in the early '70s.

West had pulled the UUA from the brink of bankruptcy in his first year in office, cutting UUA staff by half and convincing a bank not to foreclose on \$450,000 of debt.

The Association was also reeling from the controversy over its involvement with the black empowerment movement—and deeply divided by the Vietnam War.

But West and Gobin Stair, then director of the UUA-owned book publisher Beacon Press, saw publishing the Pentagon Papers as integral to the Unitarian Universalist commitment to a free and democratic society.

UUs agreed. President Nixon did not.

As the movie “The Post” depicted, the Supreme Court quickly upheld the freedom of the press from prior restraint.

But whistle-blower Daniel Ellsberg, the RAND researcher who leaked the 7,000-page report, was still looking for a safe way to make the full report public.

Ellsberg turned to Alaska Democratic Senator Mike Gravel, hoping that Gravel's congressional immunity would provide some cover for the report.

Gravel – who was one of only two UUs in the Senate -- agreed to enter the Pentagon Papers into the Congressional Record as part of his filibuster of Nixon's legislation renewing the military draft.

After spending hours on the Senate floor reading the documents into the record, Gravel agreed to help find a publisher. He contacted Gobin Stair at Beacon Press after three dozen other publishers refused to touch the report.

According to Stair: “Other publishers had turned down the manuscript both for commercial reasons and out of fear, and as a free press we felt we had a responsibility to publish needed information when others would not.”

Days after Beacon Press published *The Pentagon Papers: The Senator Gravel Edition*, FBI agents showed up at the UUA's bank asking for the UUA's financial records. The UUA and Senator Gravel sued the government to suspend its search in a case that made its way to the Supreme Court, which decided in June 1972 that the senator's immunity did not protect Beacon Press.

Beacon Press and UUA braced for a bigger fight. But something else stalled the government's investigation: The discovery of the Watergate break-ins, also in June 1972, came to occupy Nixon's attention.

“There is no question in my mind that our denomination performed a truly significant service,” West says. In spite of government intimidation and mounting legal expenses, UUs supported Beacon Press and President West.

Stair considers the publication “a watershed event in the denomination's history and a high point in Beacon's fulfilling its role as a public pulpit for proclaiming Unitarian Universalist principles.”

SERMON

Wow. What a week? Right? Heck, what a year and a half? I, for one, am very thankful we DO have a First Amendment and a Free Press in these chaotic times!

Now, before I begin, I need to make a disclaimer: I'm NOT going to talk about “Fake News” or “What's his name” or his use of that term and his attacks on journalists as “enemies of the people.” The last thing I want to do is make today's conversation all about him.

The topic of a Free Press in our Democracy is too important to our future to waste.

- I WILL talk about the need for all of us to combat these attacks because they really are attacks on OUR right to know what's going on.
- I WILL talk about the importance of all of us raising OUR voices in defense of the press or news media even though it gets messy these days.
- I WILL talk about how we can help get the best truth we know to friends and strangers.

I've come to hate the word “unprecedented” It's so overused these days but so true. It just seems all of our institutions are under attack.

But...as my title says: *Freedom of the Press IS Democracy's Tent Pole.*

That's why we do know so much about the chaos that is our government. But lots of people are trying to knock it down, including What's-his-name. All this is happening in a time when journalism, the news industry, the news business is really in its weakest state.

I spoke earlier about starting my career in 1968 and how, when I retired a year ago the world had flipped almost upside down. Not always for the good but also not all for the bad. Because that change continues, we need a free press and trusted voices more than ever before.

When I became a reporter, I wanted to be a change-agent. I wanted to help people who couldn't speak for themselves or who didn't know what was happening that impacted their lives. I guess it was a bit of naiveté and maybe some arrogance. God knows, as Margaret Sullivan wrote in her column, journalists can be arrogant, believing that we know what's best for you.

I think the majority of reporters working today DO have those same biases ... to make the world a better place, at least from their point of view. As Margaret also wrote, today's journalists are still not paid much.

In fact, some of the best journalism today is coming from freelancers -- reporters who lost their jobs in one of the hundreds of downsizings, layoffs, buyouts and simple closing of newspapers in the last 20 years.

Newspapers were the deep roots of journalism. That's because the reporting requires being on the ground, in the community or on the front line, talking to people, looking at records, *verifying facts*.

Verifying facts. That's what a journalist does. And it takes time, it takes curiosity and skepticism. AND it takes money and a news organization willing to invest money to find the facts others don't want you to know. And sometime, they get it wrong. But the trusted and true professionals also correct their mistakes.

As we all know Seeking Truth is the essence of our 4th Principle. It's hard and elusive and requires paying attention and considering many points of view.

Today there's a cacophony of voices claiming to be telling the truth. That's our challenge as consumers as well as the challenge for those who are trusted sources.

How'd we get here?

When I started in 1968:

- There were three national broadcast networks with 30 minute nightly news reports and also daily radio news
- There was at least one, sometimes two competing newspapers in most small and mid-size towns

- And the biggest cities often had more than two newspapers.

It's kind of hard not to be nostalgic, right? There was no NPR or PBS until 1970. There was no 24-hour cable news – that didn't come until Ted launched his Turner Cable News Network in 1980.

And, of course, there was no Internet. No, that mega-disruptor blew the media landscape apart beginning in 1990, when Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web.

NOW There are hundreds fewer newspapers in the mix, largely because of the continued rise of technology beginning with the home computer, to the internet, to smart phones to wifi. And virtual reality and artificial intelligence are already part of “internet of things” and automated interaction.

Many newspaper organizations weren't sure how to handle the new technology in the 90s. It was a novelty and seemed more suited as an appendage, like a special section to be put out on special occasions.

But someone else figured it out first.

Most of you probably don't know that the launch of Craigslist in 1996 is blamed by many for the beginning of the steady and steep decline of newspapers that continues today.

By one account the newspaper industry lost more than \$5 billion from 2000-2006 because Craigslist walked off with a cash cow – classified advertising, then retail advertising. Later other online entrepreneurs found ways to slice more and more of the newspapers' revenue.

Yes, journalism has experienced more change and disruption in the 21st Century than it experienced in the 220 some years since the First Amendment was adopted.

Today, we're hit with a fire hose of news, information, opinion, and yes, “fake news” from literally hundreds of sources.

We, the consumers and seekers of factual information, are both benefitting from the changes and also are victimized by the changes.

Because of the expanding number of sources and platforms, we have more choices and a diversity of voices and greater opinions than ever before.

We also have more confusion because many of those sources DO make up stories for both political, social and commercial gain.

We also have more news and information coming from friends and family because of social media.

We actually can become sources of information, with the power to publish and distribute content we create.

So how can we be professional news consumers AND active truth seekers and truth-tellers?

Scientific American and other sources recommend ways to be better at news consumption :

1. Control your dosage. Yes, because of the availability of news and information 24 hours a day, it is possible to OD. Especially when the newsfeeds today are filled with breathless vitriol, anger, hate, tragedy, etc.
2. Identify trusted sources. Although there's evidence people seek content that supports their own bias, there are many professionally focused news organizations that apply journalism values and methods to what they do no matter their editorial page tilt.

The New York Time, Washington Post, Guardian, Reuters, Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg, the Atlantic, New Yorker, the major networks, CNN are among my trusted sources. But also nonprofit online news organizations like National Public Radio and Public Broadcasting System. But also Pro Publica, Reveal, a news magazine from the Center for Investigative Reporting here in California.

3. Read past the headlines. Headlines are written to get your attention and, especially in the digital age, to get you to click. Definitely don't share a story on Facebook or other platforms that you haven't actually read and checked. I'm guilty of this sin and embarrassed when called out on it. That hurts MY credibility and can lose the trust of friends.
4. Be your own fact-checker. There are several sites that provide this service, especially in these particularly truth-shy days. A good fact checking service will write with neutral wording and will provide unbiased sources to support their claims. Look for these two simple criteria when hunting for the facts. Some of the best: Snopes.com, FactCheck.org, Politifact, and Open Secrets.

5. Diversify your media diet. A benefit of Facebook for me is finding stories from new news sources. Conservative yet trustworthy organizations include the Wall Street Journal and the Economist. Their politics are clear but their news content is still verifiable and professionally produced. Alternative weeklies and journals are also good for different perspectives.

And I do look at what's coming from the far right, because it helps me understand what What's His Name is feeding his supporters.

Using these practices makes you an active and careful truth seeker.

When truth seeking melds with truth-telling, I think we have the perfect cocktail of Freedom of the Press and Freedom of Speech.

We need to share credible news and information widely. We need to be able to knowledgably discuss what's happening with fact-based arguments.

We need to offer to write guest columns for the local editorial pages. We need to wrap our social justice actions in fact-based information that can blunt emotional, often baseless accusations.

And we need to support professional journalists and pay for the work they do. Because, like the journalists at the Capital Gazette in Annapolis, they are working for you and the Freedom of the Press.

Now, let's sing of our closing hymn #108 *My Life Flows on in Endless Song*. This is an old Quaker hymn adapted by Pete Seeger after the third verse was added in 1950 as resistance to the McCarthy era.

It also was the favorite song of reporter Wendi Winters who was one of the journalists shot and killed at the Capital Gazette. Wendi also was a very active UU in Annapolis. This hymn was sung by her daughter at her memorial this month.

Margaret Sullivan, Media Columnist for the Washington Post recently wrote:

Some people get it.

Some people never will.

One of those who gets it was the security guard in Denver who stopped Denver Post reporter Noelle Phillips on her way out of the building

Thursday to say [how upset he was](#) about the massacre of journalists at the Capital Gazette newspaper in Annapolis.

“If you attack the press,” he told her, “you attack our democracy.”

One of those who never will is the president of the United States, who reacted to the journalistic disaster with a tepid “thoughts and prayers” tweet along with a thumbs-up sign and a dismissive wave to reporters asking for his comments.

[He just kept walking away](#), and his body language announced, “I don’t give a damn.”

On Friday, Trump offered a statement on the killings: “This attack shocked the conscience of our nation and filled our hearts with grief. Journalists, like all Americans, should be free from the fear of being violently attacked while doing their job.” It was heartening to hear the president say this, even if it was hard to square it with his calling the press the “enemy of the people” as he did at a rally earlier this week.

I want to be very clear: There is no reason to think that Trump’s unceasing attacks on journalists had anything [directly](#) to do with Thursday’s terrible killing of five staffers at the Capital Gazette.

Those who suggested that — including a Reuters editor who later apologized for impulsively saying that “blood is on your hands, Mr. President” — were simply wrong.

But while there is no causality, there is a connection in the attitudes of this unhinged gunman and the president of the United States: a dangerous failure to understand the role of the media in our society. Or to acknowledge how it’s supposed to work.

Jarrold Ramos had been harassing journalists at the Capital Gazette for years — so extremely that the paper’s former editor and publisher, Tom Marquardt, said Thursday that he had long feared that something like this could happen.

“I said during that time, ‘This guy is crazy enough to come in and blow us all away,’” Marquardt [told the Los Angeles Times](#).

The judge who threw out Ramos’s groundless defamation case against the Annapolis paper recited to him the basics of news coverage.

“I think people who are the subject of newspaper articles, whoever they may be, feel that there is a requirement that they be placed in the best light, or they have an opportunity to have the story reported to their satisfaction,” the judge said. Good journalism has no such obligation.

The paper’s 2011 story about his conviction for criminally harassing a woman who had spurned him was accurate. There was no defamation, but an enraged Ramos kept up his abusive attacks on the woman — and the newspaper staff.

Trump seems to have pretty much the same attitude about news coverage that is true, though it may portray him in an unfavorable light.

If he does understand the role that journalists must play in a democracy — as public-spirited watchdogs, not sycophants like his friends at Fox News — he shows no indication of it.

And while the president frequently, and rightly, praises the “first responders” to a disaster, he fails to see that journalists, too, are first responders.

The small Capital Gazette staff bravely played that part on Thursday — tweeting the initial call for help, reporting immediately via social media from the scene, and managing to put out a print newspaper amid the trauma of a real-life nightmare.

The nation’s press was already under siege long before Thursday’s massacre. The number of ways seems almost infinite:

- Resources are shrinking. At Noelle Phillips’s paper in Denver, a once robust staff has been [squeezed nearly to extinction](#) by the hedge fund owners. And that is happening, to varying degrees, in nearly every community. It’s hard to be a watchdog when you’re starving to death.
- Legal threats are mounting. The Trump Justice Department, like Obama’s, has come after journalists as part of their crackdown on leaks. Just weeks ago, investigators seized the phone and email records of a New York Times reporter in a case that has alarmed First Amendment champions.
- Verbal abuse is rampant. At rally after rally, Trump has turned his amped-up crowds on journalists, encouraging insults or worse. Nastiness, and death threats, are the result.

●And Trump's attitude has infected the entire culture, emboldening other public officials to trash press rights. It's no wonder that America's press-freedom ranking is sinking among the nations of the world in a recent Reporters Without Borders study.

Granted, journalists are far from perfect. We make mistakes, and often pay dearly for them in harm to our jobs or reputations. We can be unfair or show poor judgment. We certainly can be arrogant.

But we try to get it right, and usually do — as the Capital Gazette did with its accurate reporting on Ramos seven years ago, and as the national media does, day in and day out, in reporting on the Trump administration.

Trump can't, and shouldn't, be blamed for the Annapolis massacre.

But that doesn't make his contempt for the press any less dangerous.

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