

Rebuilding the Fourth Estate: The Press's Role in the Digital Age Era

By Bonnie McDonald, *Epic Presence*, 10 March 2020

An informed citizenry is essential to a functioning democracy. A neutral and unbiased press is necessary to educate citizens. But the growth of digital media outlets that allow anyone and everyone to become “journalists” who share the news of the day has eroded the value of The Fourth Estate and bred mistrust between the media and the people. Anyone, on either end of the political spectrum and everywhere in between, can present any information on digital outlets as facts. Those in power have taken advantage of this opportunity to bypass the fact-checking media and mislead the citizenry with presentation of biased information, so-called “fake news” and outright lies.[...]

In a report, authors Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard explain that information campaigns designed to manipulate public opinion with false or misleading social media posts have become standard political practice. [...]

The essence of The Fourth Estate is that the press should be politically neutral. It serves as a check between those in power and the public, investigating the facts and reporting the unbiased truth. But that essence has been eroded by the changing media landscape.

One of the biggest issues the press is battling in their efforts to report unbiased truths is the 24-hour news cycle. Traditionally, when a news outlet is the first to report a story, it gets recognition for breaking the news. The 24-hour news cycle amplifies the pressure of being the one to break the story because anybody can break the news or scoop the story at any given time. So, instead of taking their time to fully investigate a story to report, media outlets now are rushing to be the first to report the news, whether the facts have been fully checked or not. [...]

Another trend that has pushed the press away from truly investigative journalism is that people now expect their news in “bit-size” headlines, says Eric Holdeman, national security consultant. To meet this expectation, in-depth reporting has essentially gone by the wayside in the rush to get the news out first in a format palatable to news consumers — as a headline they can quickly skim, maybe share and consider themselves informed. [...]

People are being bombarded with information at all times, and not all of it factual. But not everyone is able to make the distinction between facts and fiction online. That’s why the press needs to re-establish itself as a reliable source for getting the facts right and educating the public to the truth. It needs to get back to its investigative roots where journalists questioned every “fact” and dug deeper to ascertain truth. In doing so, they help keep a check on those in power.

Like in 1972, when Washington Post reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward investigated the Watergate scandal, which led to the resignation of President Nixon. They were responsible for the majority of the original reporting on the scandal[...]. Or, in 2002, when reporting by the Boston Globe in more than 800 articles over two years exposed sexual abuse by priests in the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. [...]The coverage led to the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law and more than 150 priests being accused of sexual misconduct.

At the moment, governments can more or less use digital media platforms for the explicit purpose of manipulating the public to their way of thinking — without impunity — giving them unrivaled power over public discourse. If the press can’t find a way to live up to its role as the guardian of truth and intervene on behalf of the people, then fake news, misinformation and biased reporting will irreparably tip the scales of power away from the people.