

All the News That\222s Fit To Print?
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We treasure our freedom of speech, which is the very first amendment in our constitution. We consider the press to be an arm of our democracy, with its primary responsibility to be the watchdog over government power and its possible abuse. When investigative journalism works as it should, we all benefit from governance in which officials cannot get away with corruption for long. Not all get caught, but enough do to serve as a warning to the rest.

Look at Afghanistan, where the governors are either relatives of the president or are warlords who govern like the Mafia. Much of the lesser-developed world is run the same way, as used to be the case in Medieval Europe. For all the faults of modern liberal democracy such as ours, that kind of abuse is not possible.

We are on the cusp of a new world, one in which the computer has changed everything and genetic science promises changes in everything from the foods we raise to the way we practice modern medicine. Our new and dazzling brain sciences will inevitably change how we practice law and order, crime and punishment, as we learn why people do what they do.

While we rebuild our worn out infrastructure, draw up new constitutions in our states to meet current problems, and rethink how we need to educate our young for this changing world, we need to rethink the responsibilities of journalism, not just its freedoms.

What I propose here is idealistic\227which means that I am ignoring the economic factors that make journalism a business rather than a calling. Despite the predictable demise of the newspaper and some magazines, news will just move to the wild west of the Internet. Before it is too late, a code of ethics (and values) needs to be aired in public.

What are the duties of journalism?

\225 Report how our government works. C-SPAN on television provides gavel-to-gavel hearings of Senate and Congress, Presidential speeches and press conferences. The press covering these events summarize and analyze the significance of these actions for us. The purpose: to help informed voters to understand complex issues.

\225 Analyze legislation before our city, state, and national governments. Legal jargon is difficult for the average citizen to understand. We need plain language to explain the proposed laws.

\225 Columns by informed columnists who can clarify issues and/or advocate for an action, or put issues in historic context.

\225 Journalists must double as historians in foreign venues. They must understand our own history and values, as well as explaining those of cultures unlike ours. Such journalists should not be hampered by politically correct mandates; not all cultures are wonderful.

What some journalists do today does not belong in a proper democracy:

\225 What is \223fit to print?\224 Whose business is it when there are sexual scandals, celebrity crime trials, or murder investigations in process? This is, of course, where money comes in; it sells. But to what end in societal terms? The murder of Chandra Levi was an example of a media frenzy in which a congressman was convicted in public opinion before the real criminal and body of Ms. Levi were found. Only the tabloid press benefitted from this; it cheapened the readers.

\225 In 1898, William Randolph Hearst used his press to foment a war when, without investigation, he blamed an explosion aboard an American ship in the Havana Harbor on Spain. He got the war he wanted, which is not the duty of proper journalism; it is an abuse of power, but it made him money. Evidently the tabloid papers of today are no better. Yes, this kind of news sells, but what does it do to democracy?

Providing such fare to a public hungry for gossip, scandal, and sensationalism does not promote a responsible democracy. If we care about health, what about mental health? Trash is not nourishing.

Some will criticize having a Nanny State that cares about raising the level of the public, not bring us all down to the lowest common denominator. If I were the Nanny, it would be so.

678 words

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