

EAST OREGONIAN
Founded October 16, 1875

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OUR VIEW

Media — and its consumers — must improve

American media has never been more in the crosshairs than today.

Like Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela and Vladimir Putin in Russia, U.S. President Donald Trump has made hay while hammering on a press that Trump describes as “fake” and the “enemy of the people.”

And he has found a receptive audience. Trust in the media is at an all-time low.

It is worth defining “media,” as the vague and often pejorative term means lots of things to different people. Disappointingly, to a growing number it means cable television news.

In January, about 2.8 million people watched Fox News each night during primetime, 1.2 million watched CNN and MSNBC had 1.1 million viewers. You can bet that can’t-take-your-eyes-off-him Donald Trump was one reason for that increase, and likely a reason why those numbers will stay sky high.

At the same time, about 38 percent of Americans (120 million) claimed to read a newspaper on a regular basis according to a 2013 Pew Research study, down from 54 percent in 2004.

We are a newspaper, so we come from that journalistic perspective. We go to meetings, go to schools, go to businesses, tag along, talk to people, ask blunt and sometimes annoying questions, read budgets, go to wrecks, go to fires, write down what we see, write down what authorities tell us, ask more questions, then report.

We hope to do it with a mix of entertainment, humor and local flavor — but information is always at the core.

Cable news does television remarkably well. But the line between journalism and entertainment is often blurred there. Many news shows consist of pundits propping up, then attacking what are often straw man arguments from an opposition figure.

Talking heads are invited to voice a side of the issue, not to help the audience understand the issue. It’s great television — especially if you have a dog in the fight — but often it’s not journalism. It’s borderline debate, it’s definitely entertainment, and it’s designed to keep you hooked. Like Doritos, it offers enough flavor to keep you coming back but not enough sustenance that you can put down your bag of chips.

One other way you can become “hooked” on empty calories is by emotional manipulation. If you watch a segment on cable news

or read an article online and come away from it incensed, furious and apoplectic, it is important to step back and ask yourself if you are being manipulated — and to what end.

That doesn’t mean the best journalism doesn’t cause intense reactions. We cover fatal accidents and fires and suicides and bankruptcies that can incense readers. But those powerful stories are buffeted by the daily grind of many others that move the narrative forward, give the reader context, include relevant facts and help round out the entire story. It’s not

always life-changing stuff, more often it’s the day-to-day machinations of the world we live in and the government we pay for.

Perhaps you are willing to trust

your government and its president implicitly, to take one person’s word for what is fake and what is true. We believe that’s dangerous and that good journalism is more important when it’s under attack.

Our education system does too. In schools across the country, facts are paramount. Right answers get you credit and wrong answers get you bupkis. Learning how to research, how to think critically and how to reach the correct conclusion has long been the basis of learning.

That’s why teachers are instructing students on how to be good consumers of news — to find secondary sources, look for bylines and contact information, research a publication’s history and range of output and how to tell the difference between spin and fact. They are important reminders for all Americans now more than ever, as information designed to mislead is being pushed out in high number.

You should be suspicious of what you read, as journalists are trained to be whether looking at a press release, a government document or a note from an anonymous source. But you should be more trusting of outlets and journalists who show their work, who have a long history of revealing truths, who admit readily to errors, who don’t play with your emotions and favor cold, hard (sometimes boring) fact. Some do that better than others, though none are perfect all the time. But you should be a wise consumer, not reading outlets based on whether you agree with their conclusions but those who make you smarter and more informed.

The media is going through the wringer right now, but it will outlive this era and — with your help — be better than before.

It may be good TV, but it’s not always good journalism.



OTHER VIEWS

Today’s age of reason

Being around a college classroom can really expand your perspective. For example, last week we were finishing off a seminar in grand strategy when one of my Yale colleagues, Charles Hill, drew a diagram on the board that put today’s events in a sweeping historical perspective.

Running through the center of the diagram was the long line of Enlightenment thought. The Enlightenment included thinkers like John Locke and Immanuel Kant who argued that people should stop deferring blindly to authority for how to live. Instead, they should think things through from the ground up, respect facts and skeptically re-examine their own assumptions and convictions.

Enlightenment thinkers turned their skeptical ideas into skeptical institutions, notably the U.S.

Constitution. America’s founders didn’t trust the people or themselves, so they built a system of rules, providing checks and balances to pit interest against interest.

De Tocqueville came along and said that if a rules-based democratic government was going to work anywhere it was going to be the United States. America became the test case for the entire Enlightenment project. With his distrust of mob rule and his reverence for law, Abraham Lincoln was a classic Enlightenment man. His success in the Civil War seemed to vindicate faith in democracy and the entire Enlightenment cause.

In the 20th century, Enlightenment leaders extended the project globally, building rules-based multilateral institutions like the European Union and NATO to restrain threatening powers and preserve a balance of power.

The Enlightenment project gave us the modern world, but it has always had weaknesses. First, Enlightenment figures perpetually tell themselves that religion is dead (it isn’t) and that race is dead (it isn’t), and so they are always surprised by events. Second, it is thin on meaning. It treats people as bland rational egoists and tends to produce governments run by soulless technocrats. Third, Enlightenment governance fails from time to time. At these moments anti-Enlightenment movements gain power. Amid the collapse of the old regimes during World War I, the Marxists attacked the notion of private property. That brought us Lenin, Stalin and Mao. After the failures of Versailles, the Nietzscheans attacked the separation of powers and argued that power should be centralized in the hands of society’s winners, the master race. This brought us Hitler and the Nazis.

Hill pointed out that the forces of the Enlightenment have always defeated the anti-Enlightenment threats. When the Cold War ended, the Enlightenment project seemed utterly triumphant.

But now we’re living in the wake of another set of failures: the financial crisis, the slow collapse of the European project, Iraq.



DAVID BROOKS
Comment

What’s interesting, Hill noted, is that the anti-Enlightenment traditions are somehow back. Nietzschean thinking is back in the form of Vladimir Putin. Marxian thinking is back in the form of an aggressive China. Both Russia and China are trying to harvest the benefits of the Enlightenment order, but they also want to break the rules when they feel like it. They incorporate deep strains of anti-Enlightenment thinking and undermine the post-Enlightenment world order.

Hill didn’t say it, but I’d add that anti-Enlightenment thinking is also back in the form of Donald Trump, racial separatists and the world’s other populist ethnic nationalist movements.

Today’s anti-Enlightenment movements don’t think truth is to be found through skeptical inquiry and debate. They think

wisdom and virtue are found in the instincts of the plain people, deep in the mystical core of the nation’s or race’s group consciousness.

Today’s anti-Enlightenment movements believe less in calm persuasion and evidence-based inquiry than in purity of will. They try to

win debates through blunt force and silencing unacceptable speech.

They don’t see history as a gradual march toward cooperation. They see history as cataclysmic cycles — a zero-sum endeavor marked by conflict. Nations trying to screw other nations, races inherently trying to oppress other races.

These movements are hostile to rules-based systems, multilateral organizations, the messy compromises of democratic politics and what Steve Bannon calls the “administrative state.” They prefer the direct rule by one strongman who is the embodiment of the will of the people.

When Trump calls the media the “enemy of the people” he is going after the system of conversation, debate and inquiry that is the foundation for the entire Enlightenment project.

When anti-Enlightenment movements arose in the past, Enlightenment heroes rose to combat them. Lincoln was no soulless technocrat. He fought fanaticism by doubling down on Enlightenment methods, with charity, reason and patience. He worked tirelessly for unity over division. He was a hopeful pessimist who knew the struggle would be long but he had faith in providence and ultimate justice.

We live in a time when many people have lost faith in the Enlightenment habits and institutions. I wonder if there is a group of leaders who will rise up and unabashedly defend this project, or even realize that it is this fundamental thing that is now under attack.

David Brooks became a New York Times Op-Ed columnist in September 2003. He has been a senior editor at The Weekly Standard, a contributing editor at Newsweek and the Atlantic Monthly, and is currently a commentator on PBS.

The Enlightenment gave us the modern world, but it always had weaknesses.

YOUR VIEWS

Walden has not met with local group of concerned citizens

A group of concerned Democrats and Republicans from Pine Valley tried unsuccessfully to arrange a meeting last week with Representative Walden’s office in La Grande, to discuss the Congressman’s legislative agenda for this year. Our repeated attempts to connect with his staff there failed. We are now writing to express our serious concern regarding this failure to allow citizen input to our representative in Congress.

We called and left messages at the La Grande field office on Feb. 17, 21, 23 and 24. We also spoke with someone in Rep. Walden’s Washington, D.C., office on Feb. 21 and 23, both times being assured that they would communicate our interest in meeting with his staff. Still, we have heard nothing from the La Grande office.

Additionally, Rep. Walden’s website showed no town hall meetings scheduled in

Eastern Oregon last week. However, we did learn during the call to his Washington, D.C., office on the 21st of a town hall meeting in Ontario, only an hour before it was to begin. We were unable to attend on such short notice. We’ve read in local newspapers that the congressman met with a few individuals and a Rotary group in our area this past week.

In conclusion, it appears that Representative Walden and/or his staff may not want to hear from a broader range of his constituency. This is very disappointing and reflects poorly on our representative’s commitment to democracy. For a stronger democracy, for our country to heal, to build a better more compassionate world, we all need to be heard. We all need to listen.

Patrick Barrett, Patti Walker, Mike Higgins, Donna Higgins, Judith Fisher, Tom Nash, Maureen McMahon, Spring Bartlett, June McKenzie, MaryJo St. Clair, Coco Forte, Jue Covey, Alice Covey
Pine Valley



LETTERS POLICY

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