

OPINION

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition their Government for a redress of grievances.



Future of local journalism takes commitment — of journalists and readers alike



By Caitlyn May
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There was an email going around this weekend.

It came into a newsroom in Portland from a Southern Oregon militia man who wrote:

"So this journalist named Kashoggi gets set-up and murdered by Saudi operatives in Turkey and we're supposed to care? Don't get me wrong, murder is and always will be wrong, illegal and a violation of God's laws, which means I wouldn't do it and most decent Americans wouldn't either. But ask yourself this question: Are you really sorry a 'journalist' is dead?"

I don't care about this dead journalist because journalists don't care about the truth, so what good are they alive?"

The writer goes on to detail a story that ran in the *Mail Tribune* about a city council candidate who used abusive language in responding to comments.

"And you know what?" he writes, "If this guy completely imploded and murdered all of the *Mail Tribune's* executive staff, I wouldn't approve of what he did but I also wouldn't shed a tear, either. The truth is that most murder victims have it coming. It is a fact that most murder victims know the person who murdered them and they usually did or didn't do something that just about assured their murder ... That is what has changed in America; today if a journalist is murdered, nobody outside the radical left and the media is really going to care. Frankly, the media has lost its usefulness to our society, so why would we ever miss them?"

Last week was National Newspaper Week and it was in my every intention to write a

piece for this page espousing the benefits of local news and praising a country that would weave such a right into its founding documents.

But, my workload got a little heavy and the day I usually set aside for extra writing projects — Saturday — was booked with something else: The Society of Professional Journalists Conference.

More than 50 local journalists from Oregon and Washington met at Lane Community College for the annual conference, where there were panels on public records, investigative reporting, rural news and building diversity in the newsroom.

I know that journalists get it wrong sometimes. But I honestly have never met a group of professionals so fiercely dedicated to their jobs that they'd sacrifice their Saturday to spend talking about how to get it right.

I know the political landscape has inexplicably tangled itself into questions about the media's existence. It's raised even the most fundamental questions of what our job means, when we're allowed to do it, how well we do it and if we should be allowed to do it at all.

It doesn't extract from that discussion the complicated differences between what we have always understood as the press, and what we're currently defining as the media.

Our political division has somehow leached into our understanding of what commentators are and how they differ from what journalists are.

It is within that confusion that local journalists are paying the price for the media machine of corporate-held news driven by metrics and ratings.

Branded "news" personalities engage in propaganda far removed from the tenants of journalism, then cast local journalists in the role of villain for their audiences.

And so, here we are.

On Friday, the University of North Carolina's School of Media and Journalism released

a study reporting that more than 1,300 communities had lost their newspapers since 2004. Of the 3,143 counties in the U.S., more than 2,000 are without a daily newspaper; 1,449 have one newspaper — a weekly or twice weekly — and 171 counties have no newspaper at all.

"The stakes are high," the researchers say in their report. "Our sense of community and our trust in democracy at all levels suffer when journalism is lost or diminished. In an age of fake news and divisive politics, the fate of communities across the country — and of grassroots democracy itself — is linked to the vitality of local journalism."

That premise, illustrated by the email that landed in a reporter's inbox this weekend, is no longer readily believed.

And that's our fault.

As journalists, we've failed to understand that we've been allowed to educate the electorate because the electorate has allowed us to. We grew too far away from the duty gifted to us in the Constitution in the quest to brand ourselves and increase our personal worth in an industry that was crumbling around us.

We threw around terms like "media literacy" when we really just meant we had failed so hard at explaining to our communities how we do our jobs that our communities no longer understood what we were doing — or how.

We started buying into the concept of "engagement" as if it wasn't something we were supposed to be doing all along. And when we got it wrong, we stopped apologizing.

Because, sometimes, we do get it wrong; everybody does. The plumber installs the wrong fixture; the mailman delivers packages to the wrong house and waiters bring the wrong food.

Journalism, like all of these professions, is a profession of service and our intentions, like theirs, are good. And just as a wrong fixture or mail mix-up wouldn't warrant the murder of a plumber or mailman, neither

should an error in a news story carry the penalty of death for a journalist.

So, while my intention had been to write a sunny story about the benefits of local news, I'll instead say this:

In rural Oregon, I always get out of my car, one arm raised in an open-handed wave, the other clearly holding my notebook when I stop at the end of a long, dirt driveway and am greeted by someone who may not know why I'm there — a gun tucked at their hip.

Once, a rifle in their hand. I've made appointments with farmers in the middle of nowhere; have taken tours of towns in the passenger seat of a car owned by people I've just met; followed demonstrators into crowds, carnival workers behind the curtains and craftsmen into the back of welding and paint shops — all to better tell their story.

It's become too easy and too common for some to harass journalists under the guise of sticking it to the nebulous concept of "the mainstream media." But for every story we read, there's a journalist on the other side of it who followed someone into war, to the back of the shop, around town or onto a submarine.

Or into a consulate. Some of them, like Kim Wall and Jamal Kashoggi, never come home.

Admittedly, in rural Oregon I've gotten it wrong a lot. But the only way this continues to work — the only way local news doesn't fall to the darkness of things that once were — is if, should we get it wrong, we're given the opportunity to make it right. And that those mistakes come with understanding:

An understanding on the part of readers that we're not acting out of malice and we're not going to be perfect;

And an understanding on the part of journalists that we must be willing to sacrifice some Saturdays to learn how to do it better.

Because our communities deserve it.

Letters to the Editor Policy

The *Sentinel* welcomes letters to the editor as part of a community discussion of issues on the local, state and national level.

Emailed letters are preferred. Handwritten or typed letters must be signed. All letters need to include full name, address and phone number; only name and city will be printed. Letters should be limited to about 300 words. Letters are subject to editing for length, grammar and clarity. Publication of any letter is not guaranteed and depends on space available and the volume of letters received.

Letters that are anonymous, libelous, argumentative, sarcastic or contain accusations that are unsourced or without documentation will not be published.

Letters containing poetry or from outside The *Sentinel* readership area will only be published at the discretion of the editor.

Political/Election Letters:

Election-related letters must address pertinent or timely issues of interest to our readers at-large.

Letters must 1) Not be a part of letter-writing campaigns on behalf of (or by) candidates; 2) Ensure any information about a candidate is accurate, fair and not from second-hand knowledge or hearsay; and 3) explain the reasons to support candidates based on personal experience and perspective rather than partisanship and campaign-style rhetoric.

Candidates themselves may not use the letters to the editor column to outline their views and platforms or to ask for votes; this constitutes paid political advertising.

As with all letters and advertising content, the newspaper, at the sole discretion of the publisher, general manager and editor, reserves the right to reject any letter that doesn't follow the above criteria.

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LETTERS

Ideas for BMD 60th

Bohemia Mining Days celebrates its 60th Diamond Jubilee next summer and we want the community's help to make it fun and meaningful.

The BMD board is now in planning mode for the July 18-20, 2019, event and wants community feedback on what special events should be included.

For example, resurrounding the Lemati Gang's old west shoot outs on Main Street is a

frequent request from old timers who have fond memories of them. If this is to happen, we need a Lemati Gang Committee that will take this on as a 60th year only project.

Another idea is to start a new tradition of Ore Cart Races (similar to Virginia City's annual outhouse races and soapbox derby competitions) between Slabtown and Lemati families.

To do this we will also need to have a planning committee.

The BMD board is undertaking an oral history project to host one or two videotaped gatherings of former festival organizers to share their memories of "the good ol' days."

The BMD board would love to have a group photo of all the past BMD presidents, too. Call the BMD office at 541-942-5064 to be invited.

The BMD board wants to build enthusiasm for next year by scheduling some early Slabtown vs. Lemati feud com-

petitions to help raise additional funds for producing the Diamond Jubilee.

Anyone with other ideas or a favorite memory to share can do so on the BMD Facebook page.

We're looking forward to sharing this rare celebratory milestone with all the community.

—Cindy Weeldreyer
BMD Festival Coordinator