

# *The Critical Failure of the Fourth Estate*

Thursday, October 13<sup>th</sup> 2016  
Monterey Rotary - Hyatt Regency

(Very likely this draft contains typos)

Thank you, Dan, and thank you Monterey Rotary for the invitation to speak to you.

In less than four weeks, we should know which of the two most hated, distrusted, and despised candidates in our history will be our next president.

I lay the fault for this choice at the feet of the media, the press, the Fourth Estate. I speak of the Fourth Estate because they have a role as significant as the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches.

The term Fourth Estate originated back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Edmund Burke, the Irish philosopher who was known for saying "*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.*" He was also, coincidentally, referred to as the father of modern conservatism.

Anyway, Burke was said to have coined the phrase when he noted that "*there were Three Estates in Parliament*" – he was referring then to the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners – "*but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all.*"

Our Fourth Estate is on a respirator. If the press had been doing it's job, the American public would have been roused decades ago to select and elect competent leaders. We would not have had to put up with weak presidents, with presidents who put politics before country, with presidents who lied us into wars. Informed by quality journalists, we wouldn't have stood for a do-nothing congress, or a high court that perversely accepted the corrupted Florida election in 2000 and later vested corporations with human rights.

No, we are not being informed about what we need to know.

For instance, while 16 million American children go hungry, we spend more on our military budget than the next ten countries combined. And I have yet to meet anyone who thinks our nation is more secure than it was before 9/11.

The streets of Chicago are a war zone, and yet we have more people in prison per capita than any other nation but the Seychelles.

Only ten countries have higher firearms death rates than the US, nine of them south of our border.

We spend more per capita on health care by far than any other country, and yet we rank 31<sup>st</sup> in life expectancy worldwide and 58<sup>th</sup> in infant mortality.

Our 15 year olds rank 29<sup>th</sup> on maths and science tests.

50% of American adults are unable to read an 8<sup>th</sup> grade level book.

We invented modern communications technology and we rank 14<sup>th</sup> in Internet speed.

These are significant issues, and when effectively hidden from public view can't be addressed. It's the job of the Fourth Estate to keep us aware of such matters.

Before I move on, a word about statistics. Mark Twain is said to have said that *"Statistics are like ladies of the evening. Once you get 'em down, you can do anything you want with 'em."*

\* \* \* \* \*

For the past four decades, the Fourth Estate has been sliding into irrelevancy and disgrace. How did it happen? Technology was part of it. In the mid-Seventies, videotape replaced film, and microwave transmissions made "live" more important than fact. A decade later, satellite and cable distribution gave us limitless viewing choices. In the Nineties, the Internet exploded, and we had not only more choices, but also immediacy. Being first was more important than being right. Remember the coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing when the photo of two innocent people appeared on the front page of the NY Post, and how CNN misreported arrests?

One reason why news outlets – both broadcast and print – slipped was that they didn't understand the Internet, which was not only a different platform, it was a different kind of platform, and cutting and pasting their products on the Internet just wasn't going to work.

Another reason for the collapse of both TV and print media is the cost. Compare an online news operation which is produced with computers and distributed via the Internet to the enormous cost and time it takes to print and deliver newspapers. Or television where high-priced Ken-and-Barbie's sit in high-overhead broadcast studios.

Could it get more dicey? It already is with the smartphone. There are two billion of them worldwide and what they are pointed at all too often becomes news,

regardless of who was doing the pointing, and what they thought they were pointing at.

\* \* \* \* \*

Another reason why television news is slip-sliding away is that the quality of the reporting has declined...dramatically. After the Senate Watergate and House impeachment hearings, news went from being a loss leader to a profit center. Local news operations expanded their hours of operation, and filled their shows with coverage that looked more like the sex-'n-violence shows of prime time. Journalism didn't matter; it was the number of eyeballs they could promise the advertisers. You may recall the phrase "*If it bleeds, it leads*".

Thirty-five years ago when Walter Cronkite anchored the news for CBS, he drew 24 million viewers a week. Today, Lester Holt, Scott Pelley, and David Muir combined attract 22 million viewers a week. Why, because they're not reporting **the news we need to know**.

Why should we care? Because it is a symptom of Americans having stopped caring about being informed about their government, their society and their future. A poll just before the vice presidential debate showed not even 60% knew who the candidates were.

\* \* \* \* \*

The most serious flaw in reporting today is that rather than tell us the truth, the press gives us he said-she said reporting, leaving the truth suspended in confusion. A Republican will make a charge, the press will get a Democrat to respond to it. What's the truth? How are we to know?

Here's how Russell Baker, the eminent columnist spoke of the problem: *In the classic example, a refugee from Nazi Germany who appears on television saying monstrous things are happening in his homeland must be followed by a Nazi spokesman saying Adolf Hitler is the greatest boon to humanity since pasteurized milk. Real objectivity would require not only hard work by news people to determine which report was accurate, but also a willingness to put up with the abuse certain to follow publication of an objectively formed judgment. To escape the hard work or the abuse, if one too many says Hitler is an ogre, we instantly give you another to say Hitler is a prince....The public may not learn much about these fairly sensitive matters, but neither does it get another excuse to denounce the media for unfairness and lack of objectivity.*

And, Baker added, "*In brief, society is teeming with people who become furious if told what the score is.*"

As media law professor, Jane Kirtley, said, *It's not easy to live with a free press. It means being dismayed, disrupted, disturbed and outraged - every single day.*

I should underline this important observation from Edward R. Murrow who said there are not always two equal sides to a story, and it's the job of journalists to bring their viewers and readers the truth.

Murrow provided a clear picture of the power of television in a speech in 1958 when he said,

*...This nation is now in competition with malignant forces of evil who are using every instrument at their command to empty the minds of their subjects and fill those minds with slogans, determination and faith in the future....If we go on as we are, then history will take its revenge, and retribution will not limp in catching up with us....Stonewall Jackson, who is generally believed to have known something about weapons, is reported to have said, "When war comes, you must draw the sword and throw away the scabbard." The trouble with television is that it is rusting in the scabbard during a battle for survival.*

[By the way, if you haven't seen the film *Good Night and Good Luck* about Murrow battling CBS and his program on McCarthy, I strongly recommend it.]

The broadcast networks do have the most clout, and one of the biggest press scandals in modern memory happened to NBC just last week. A week ago Monday, *Access Hollywood* discovered the sordid Trump three-minute conversation with Billy Bush in which the presidential candidate said he could get away with what can only be termed sexual assault because he was a star.

*Access Hollywood* is part of NBC. You'd think that NBC News would have broken the story that night, but instead they waited until the next morning to bring the issue to the attention of Andrew Lack, chairman of the NBC News. Apparently because Monday was a Jewish holiday, if that makes any sense. For serious journalists, news doesn't take a holiday.

Anyway, NBC officials were waiting for their lawyers to decide if they could air the tape. Finally it was decided they could air the tape, but that it should be *Access Hollywood* that would get to show it first...not NBC News. Last Thursday, *Access Hollywood* somehow decided they would wait until this past Monday to run the piece.

Of course when the *Washington Post* got a hold of it on Friday, NBC finally ran it. But it was stunning that NBC News didn't air the clip the day they got it. Holding it for a week bordered on insane. It was hard news, the kind where you don't even think to ask permission from the lawyers.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few words about the major cable networks. Fox News has long been known as a propaganda arm for the neo-con wing of the Republican party. Company executives warned pro-Trump network hosts not to reference bogus online polls, because they are self-selecting rather than scientific. Sean Hannity who had scorned all of the polls that had Clinton winning the debate, ignored the directive. Another example of Fox's slanted coverage was their commentators blaming the *New York Times* for reporting Trump's \$900 MM tax loss, and Bill Clinton for having done nothing about the tax rate as president. No wonder that according to a number of independent studies, Fox News viewers tend to be less informed about current affairs than people who "*who don't watch any news at all.*"

CNN isn't slanted like Fox, but its news judgment is certainly questionable. They tend toward CAPS LOCK reporting – big headlines and wall-to-wall coverage, at the expense of other important news developments. Also, CNN smeared itself by hiring Corey Lewandowski, Trump's former campaign manager, to become a paid commentator. Until last month, Lewandowski was getting \$20,000 a month from Trump's campaign – they said it was severance pay but he was consulting Trump on an almost daily basis.

MSNBC, which is regarded as the weak liberal opposition to Fox, is more entertaining than CNN and beat them in the ratings in August. Fox had more viewers than MSNBC & CNN combined.

Another gripe about the cable channels is that they cover political speeches from beginning to end when the true role of journalism is to record and edit, to digest events, not to play them in their entirety. Especially political speeches which are just so much propaganda.

Both the cable and the broadcast outlets have gone south on their responsibility with their Sunday talk shows. They used to have interesting guests to talk about the news; today they choose guests who will produce headlines. News should focus on the ideas and what people have to say, rather than on the people themselves. Otherwise the election becomes a popularity contest, and people vote their emotions instead of their intellect.

That's why we're in such trouble today. A number of years ago, I interviewed Drew Westen, the author of "*The Political Brain,*" and I asked him if it was true, as he said in his book, that 95% of Americans voted their emotions. *No*, he said. *It's up to 96%.*

\* \* \* \* \*

To be clear, news is not about left or right, it's about truth. There are a great many pretenders who manufacturer their own version of events, no where more so than on radio, where there is a plague, a dangerous mass of uninformed opinion and agenda-driven preaching.

The talk isn't just ugly. It legitimizes racism and justifies hatred. It undermines citizenship. People believe they are getting real information. So say the ditto-heads, people who take pride in not thinking for themselves.

Mark Twain said, *Loyalty to petrified opinions never yet broke a chain or freed a human soul in this world – and never will.... If a man doesn't believe as we do, we say he's a crank, and that settles it. I mean, it does nowadays, because now we can't burn him.*

\* \* \* \* \*

So what is the press to do? First, they have to know the facts, and second they have to present them immediately when they are in contravention to something an interviewee or candidate is saying.

It's challenging for a reporter to tell a public figure they have something wrong, but it is essential that they do so and in the moment. First because a serious journalist has to be up front with the facts and the truth, and second because very few people ever hear about corrections.

The truth about both candidates – every public figure – is that they need fact-checkers, and bless Clinton and Trump, for they are the reason for the growth of a whole new industry devoted to instant fact-checking.

In the meantime, it has been rare that a reporter has been able to push back a dogmatic interviewee. Bob Schaeffer, the *éminence grise* of CBS News, [showed how it can be done](#) by pressing Leslie Rutledge, the attorney general of Arkansas and rabid Trump supporter, over her insistence that no one other than the left and the media was calling for Trump to release his tax returns. I would play it for you but it runs 10 minutes. In any case, Schaeffer challenged her effectively and undermined her implausible position.

\* \* \* \* \*

I've been speaking mostly about television but of course there is still print, though even the most optimistic observers think daily papers will soon disappear from the racks. Already major papers have cut back their products and the frequency of their distribution. Some have shut down altogether. What newspapers should do is go electronic seven days a week, and also put out a print edition on Sunday. That would save some 70 million mostly old growth

trees every year.

Some papers have changed their content, seemingly in an effort to attract more readers. Two of the most important papers in the country, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, have both gone heavily into features. Some of the stories have merit, but features above the fold push serious news stories out of sight. And consider this recent WaPo lede headline: “*11 ways to think about the Anthony Weiner-Huma Abedin split.*”

These papers have also focused heavily on race and sexual identify matters. While these are important social issues, much of the coverage is driven by top editors and marketers. Many observers think these matters should receive less attention, believing that less coverage would generate less confrontation and result in the social shifts taking place sooner.

I should mention our local news situation briefly. Here on the Monterey Peninsula we have some of the brightest, well-heeled people in the country, but our news outlets aren't nearly of the same quality. *The Monterey Peninsula Herald*, as it was called into the early 90s, was a good daily. Today the *Herald* is barely a shadow of its former self. Mainly put together in Chico and printed in San Jose, its reporting staff has been cut to the bone. Further, the *Herald* is put to bed around 8:00 at night. With some stories, that doesn't matter, but it was woefully inadequate during the Sobranes Fire coverage. The *Herald* website is also lacking.

Some of you no doubt subscribe to the *Chronicle*. It's put to bed almost twelve hours before you get it. Why *wouldn't* you go online for it? But sadly, the once respectable *Chronicle* has gone tabloid.

KSBW television owns the local broadcast market with their *Action News*. People who want to be informed don't need *Action*, they need facts. The coverage by KSBW is heavy on crime and pathos, and thin on **The News We Need To Know**.

The Monterey Peninsula, with its money and education, should have a radio or online station to which we can tune in during an emergency. Like during the power outage a year ago, or the Sobranes fire.

\* \* \* \* \*

Many people have turned away from traditional information sources to social media. They inform themselves about their family and friends, and receive “news” items from sources that have no credibility. Another serious problem with the unlimited choices offered by the Internet is that people will choose to receive only the stories than interest them. It may be just sports or the

Kardashians. They think by seeing their selected “news” stories that they are being informed. In fact they are being taken ever further away from what is required to make intelligent decisions about our country.

Why are the news and being informed so important? As George Orwell wrote, *Ignorance is bliss*. But bliss is in the short term; in the long term it can be suicide. Nineteen people in North Carolina have died due to Hurricane Matthew. You might remember that in 2012, the state general assembly passed a law preventing local governments from passing regulations based on scientific forecasts of climate change. As Stephen Colbert said at the time, *If your science gives you a result that you don't like, pass a law saying the result is illegal. Problem solved.*

We are in a deep backwash of anti-intellectualism that has grown over the past six decades. Daniel Patrick Moynihan said, *Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts*, but many people are proud to be uninformed and apathetic. This is particularly dangerous now, as we are five billion over-populated, depleting our food sources, running out of potable water, and producing massive amounts of waste. Being stubbornly obtuse is making the crises worse, and faster.

We need to shift the social consciousness so that being bright is esteemed instead of derided. Because as Gore Vidal once observed *As societies grow decadent, the language grows decadent, too. Words are used to disguise, not to illuminate, action: you liberate a city by destroying it. Words are to confuse, so that at election time people will solemnly vote against their own interests.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Is there too much going on in the world for a person to be aware of? Of course there is. And that's why quality journalism – selecting and editing the day's events – is so important. The news-starved public needs to receive the information that Murrow defined as *that which interests AND AFFECTS the largest number of people*. But at the moment, without looking at a wide variety of sources, it's a challenge.

Av Westin, one of the early pioneers of television news said that people tune in to the news essentially to get answers to four questions – *Is my world safe? Is my country safe? Is my community safe? What else do I need to know?*

I suggest if you're looking for a quality news source you should ask whether it addresses the five most important issues affecting your lives. Nationally the issues might be health care, education, the environment, the economy, and our country's security. Locally it might be the water supply, the effects of tourism, gangs, fire protection, and the paucity of doctors. If your news sources aren't



discussing these critical issues, then you're probably just being distracted.

\* \* \* \* \*

Responsible journalism in the Western World has all but collapsed, and without a healthy Fourth Estate, the very notion of democracy is threatened. As Thomas Jefferson warned, *"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."*

We are in crisis times. We can't straighten out what's wrong with our country unless we know what's wrong and what might be done to fix what's broke. Without an accurate, dependable, comprehensive source of information, many have felt disenfranchised and have turned away from the information pretenders, and from their own responsibility to govern. Confidence in the mass media "to report the news fully, accurately and fairly" has dropped to its lowest level in Gallup polling history, with 32% saying they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media. This is down eight percentage points just from last year.

Even the pope has commented on the failure of the media, warning that journalism, when based on rumors, can be a form of terrorism, meaning a "weapon of destruction" of both people and nations. He called on journalists not to generate fear regarding such issues as migration forced by war or hunger. Said Pope Francis, *"I have often spoken of rumors as 'terrorism,' of how you can kill a person with the tongue. If this is valid for an individual person, in the family or at work, so much more it's valid for journalists, because their voice can reach everyone, and this is a very powerful weapon."*

So what can be done about all this? What we need from the Fourth Estate are Facts and Truth to foster Citizenship. Facts are accurate statements. Truth is facts in context that inform. Truth about our government, our society, and our world is essential for Citizens to do their part in maintaining a health democracy. Their role, thus-informed, is to find and vote into office candidates – not on the basis of campaign hype or like-ability – but for the quality of their hearts and minds. We urgently need first rate leaders to pick up the reins of our government at the local, state, and national levels to get America back on track.

\* \* \* \* \*

The bottom line is this...it seems unlikely that we will elect a first-rate president next month. Nor can we hope that Congress will do anything but argue in the near future. And if truth in advertising were applied to our judiciary, our high court would have to drop the name Supreme.

That is why I'm focused on the Fourth Estate, because it is fixable. It is possible to produce news coverage that is comprehensive, relevant, and accurate. To give Americans a place to find the truth and thus be equipped and motivated to select and elect quality people to the executive and the legislature who might eventually staff the courts with quality judges.

What a reinvigorated Fourth Estate can importantly produce is a new dialogue on who we are as a nation, where we want to go, and how we might get there. A conversation that goes beyond money and politics and reaches higher to a new level of consciousness that is based on not what we can get away with but what is right and good and noble.

Thank you for your time. It has been an honor to speak to you today.

I welcome your questions.

I believe that someday soon to be informed, even bright, will be recognized as patriotic. I'm anticipating that an innovative news service will surface that will satisfy the needs of our information-starved citizenry. One which provides an hourly update on the latest events as well as a site with wide-ranging access to all of the important news of yesterday, today and tomorrow. And the icing on the cake, it will incorporate a training center for world-class journalists, so that from a new generation of ink-stained wretches will arise to be the new Cronkites and Murrows, Maureen Dowds and Kathleen Parkers of tomorrow. Why not?