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Why journalists need to resist the label of ‘the opposition’

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President Donald J. Trump has repeatedly denounced stories critical of his administration or its policies as “fake news.” His press secretary, Sean Spicer, barred some reporters considered unfriendly from a White House briefing on Feb. 24, and senior advisor Stephen Bannon labels the press “the opposition.” On March 2, the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Society of News Editors, the PEN America Foundation and 78 other groups concerned with press freedom warned that the new president’s attacks on the press were an attack on democratic norms.

“The effort to delegitimize the press undermines democracy, and officials who challenge the value of an independent press or question its legitimacy betray the country’s most cherished values and undercut one of its most significant strengths,” the groups said in a joint statement.

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The characterization of the press as “the opposition” is especially dangerous. It is an attempt to delegitimize facts, to denigrate reporting gathered through objective methods as nothing more than ideological agitation. To call journalists the opposition demotes them from truth-seekers to partisans. Mr. Bannon’s characterization is likely to stick because it fits neatly into the current habits of ideologically cosseted news consumption, in which citizens tune into Fox or MSNBC, right-wing or left-wing radio, to hear their own ideas parroted back at them, with details that complicate the story edited out. More insidious is the delivery of news via Facebook or through “selected just for you” algorithms that spoon-feed articles to readers based on their previously surveilled interests and reactions.

This is the opposite of being informed, even if the source articles are written by legitimate news organizations—and so much on Facebook is worse, just compilations of outrage and misleading headlines meant to gin up ad revenue. In this format, news that reinforces your beliefs becomes a cudgel, ammunition for your side, while news that makes you uncomfortable can be dismissed as propaganda, partisan manipulation for the other side.

Acknowledging our failings should not be an excuse for dismissing the importance of journalism to the functioning of a democracy.

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up to the Iraq war in 2003 to a blindness to growing economic stratification that was not corrected until after the Occupy Wall Street movement. But acknowledging our failings should not be an excuse for dismissing the importance of journalism to the functioning of a democracy.

These attacks by the Trump administration come as the press is severely weakened by decades of newspaper and magazine closings, a desperate drive to flatter and entertain fickle internet-addled readers, and a dive into punditry, which is cheap to produce but useless for the acquisition of knowledge. Each of these developments has been bad for democracy and has eroded the nation's ability to engage in critical discourse about public life.

Journalists need to resist the label of opposition.

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Journalists need to resist the label of opposition. What we need to do is report. We need to accumulate facts in a sea of supposition. Actual, old-fashioned reporting, which involves calling strangers, leaving the office and refusing to carry water for anyone is the solution to these threats and our diminution as an industry.

“The enemy of the people” line had me thinking about a different characterization of the press—one favored by the investigative journalist and Trump biographer Wayne Barrett. He trained scores of journalists during his long career, instilling in us a zeal for precision, fealty to detail and appetite for tireless digging. (He died on the eve of the Trump inauguration from a rare lung disease.) While he was a thorn in the side of many politicians, he did not consider himself *against* anyone. He was *for* honesty. Mr. Barrett referred to journalists as “detectives for the people.” When we are doing our job correctly we are not the enemies of the people or cheerleaders for politicians. We are detectives.



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