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## EDWARD EDWARDS

# The Wild West Plight of the Media

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A good many years ago when I joined the adult wage earning workforce (bagging groceries at the local supermarket doesn't count), it was the start of my career in the newspaper business (euphemisms like mainstream media, legacy media, etc., had yet to be coined).

Early on, a veteran reporter in the newsroom where I began as a copyboy at age 17 summoned me to his desk to relate a tale which summed up the public perception of my newly chosen vocation.

It went as follows:

“Two former classmates encountered one another at a reunion and, after the obligatory small talk, one asked the other what he did for a living.

“I'm a newspaper reporter,” he replied, “but don't tell my mother. She thinks I still play the piano in the whorehouse.”

Back in the day, reporters were often portrayed in truly dreadful movies as slovenly creatures, wearing a cheap, ill-fitting suit, a dirty shirt collar, and nicotine-stained fingers.

The piano player story – apocryphal though it may be – crept out of my memory banks with the release of two polls earlier this week.

A New York Times/Siena survey found that nearly 60 percent of registered voters felt the “mainstream media” constituted a major threat to democracy and another 25 percent felt it was a minor threat.

A Gallup poll showed seven percent of Americans hold a great deal of trust in the media; 27 percent a fair amount; 28 percent not much trust, and 38 percent none at all.

It was, the Gallup report noted, the first time that the percentage of Americans with no trust at all in the media was greater than the percentage with a great deal or fair amount of trust.

How is it that an institution that's been a part of American life since the founding of the Republic – one whose protection from government censorship was written into the constitution by the founding fathers – is today considered less trustworthy than the piano player in the brothel?

It is easy and tempting to place blame for the low esteem in which the media is held on the rise of social media. And, to a degree, it is also accurate.

The tsunami of news produced on internet sites has overwhelmed traditional outlets, driving thousands of small newspapers out of business and many others to teetering on the brink of bankruptcy as advertising revenue streams ran dry and circulation plummeted.

Once thriving newspapers struggled to remain economically viable in the face of technological competition, electronic platforms accessed without cost to the consumer and capable of delivering news around the globe in an instant.

It opened the way as well to anyone with a keyboard to become a news and opinion source, literally unfettered, without restraint and no regard for truth or accuracy.

It created a Wild West environment, bullets in the form of supposedly legitimate news fired in all directions while bystanders sought cover.

Trust became a casualty, undermined not only by the free for all the news business had become, but by the decision made by some in traditional media to respond to the threat by punching holes in the barrier that had always separated straight news from editorial opinion pages.

Ideological bias from both left and right crept into news columns no longer identified as opinion, analysis or commentary. What was normally found in an inside section of the paper could now be found on the front page as well.

The history of newspapers is replete with criticisms and accusations of favoritism. Someone or one faction or another was always unhappy with allegedly unfair treatment, sometimes justified and others rooted in personality conflicts, grudges or dislike.

The atmosphere ratcheted up to a new level of vitriol, though, when public figures with large platforms and megaphones from which to dominate the public discourse relentlessly drove a message of “fake news,” and demeaned the media as “an enemy of the people.” Both phrases have worked their way into the normal political vocabulary.

The screamers who preside over cable and national network news and interview shows deal solely in frequently vicious, personal and ill-informed opinion, attacking their competition and anyone who disagrees with their agenda.

Reporters have flocked to Twitter and similar outlets to express overwhelmingly critical and often abusive opinions on issues and personalities. A skeptical public not surprisingly assumes that the reporters’ views ultimately find their way into their published writings, revealing a biased ideological streak.

Is it any wonder trust in the fairness of the media to present news in a straightforward and factual manner has corroded so deeply?

In fairness, there exist many newspapers that remain committed to the principle of covering politics and public affairs in a balanced and even-handed fashion but are lumped in with the media as a class and subjected unfairly to the belief of public distrust.

The large legacy publications — New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Wall Street Journal, for example — dominate the national media landscape and, as such, have become the face of journalism while contributing disproportionately to the reputation of biased enterprises promoting a political agenda.

It’s become routine to assign ideological motivation to the media; Fox News and the Wall Street Journal come from the right while MSNBC, New York Times and Washington Post are rooted in the left, for instance, adding to the distrust factor as purveyors of political favoritism.

While the lack of public trust in the media should be troubling to the industry, it is astonishing and disturbing that it is also viewed as a threat to democracy.

That perception is, perhaps, reflective of the deep polarization which has gripped the country, a reaction to the political and social upheaval that has roiled and split the nation into bitterly opposing factions.

Trust in any institution – once lost – is exceedingly difficult to regain. The recent polling data suggests further that the lack of it has become so deeply embedded in the national psyche that the process of restoration will be a lengthy one.

It is, though, critical that the process begin. With trust comes relevance followed by acceptance – goals the media should strive to achieve.

As for me, I spent 11 years as a newspaper reporter before leaving to seek my fortune and future in an endeavor that was equally fascinating, bizarre, captivating, exhilarating and depressing – New Jersey politics.

I didn't stray too far from a connection to the media, though, serving – among other things – as press secretary to two governors (Tom Kean for eight years and Christie Whitman for three years) and dealing on a daily basis for 11 years with Statehouse reporters and outsiders who parachuted in because they found a particular issue or personality sufficiently appealing to deserve their time and attention.

I've never forgotten, though, the tale told me all those years ago in the newsroom of a small town Pennsylvania paper. It engenders my respect and admiration for all who chose newspaper reporting as a career and stayed with it.

I am glad, though, that I lacked even the most fundamental musical talent and couldn't play the piano.

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