

Journalism Has Become a Threat to Democracy

A while back, when Roger Ailes was running Fox News, we had a conversation about the state of journalism in America. “You can’t have a free country without a free press,” he told me, stating the obvious, before adding, “But you can’t have a free country without a *fair* press, either.”

Let’s leave aside whether Roger Ailes was the best person to deliver that message, given FNC’s conservative bent. But when it comes to hard news, Fox reporters strike me as fair, balanced and non-partisan, unlike those at CNN for example. So Roger was on to something important.

And what he said is especially relevant in the age of Donald Trump. I’m no fan of this president, as many of you already know. I won’t bore you with the many reasons I don’t like the man. But however toxic his personality and character, that’s not a legitimate excuse for journalists to think they have a civic duty to make sure he doesn’t get a second term.

From the day he became president, Democrats and their allies in the media have been out to get him. There was the constant drumbeat of stories, fed to journalists by partisan progressive Democrats like Congressman Adam Schiff, about how he was colluding with the Russians – stories that turned out not to be true.

Mainstream news organizations frequently called the president a liar. According to the Associated Press, “In January 2017, the [New York] Times headlined a story ‘Trump repeats lie about popular vote in meeting with lawmakers,’ to refer to his claim that immigrants illegally voting prevented him from receiving more of the popular vote than Hillary Clinton.”

On CNN’s “New Day” anchor John Berman said the president lied

about his policy of separating families at the U.S. border.

The Washington Post ran a page one story from its fact checker Glenn Kessler that said there was “indisputable evidence that Trump and his allies have been deliberately dishonest” about hush money paid to porn star Stormy Daniels and Playboy model Karen McDougal.

It’s true, the president lies, a lot. And journalists have an obligation to point out his lies.

“Lies,” an editorial in the New York Times said, “threaten the foundations of American democracy.” That’s also true. But so does partisan journalism.

I don’t remember the New York Times calling Barack Obama a liar when he told the American people over and over that if they liked their doctor they could keep their doctor – and if they liked their healthcare plan they could keep that too. And that their insurance premiums would go down when in fact they went up.

Either President Obama was lying or he was incompetent and didn’t now how his signature legislation actually worked. But no mainstream journalist said he lied about any of that – or called him incompetent.

And during this current campaign Donald Trump isn’t the only one telling lies, but you wouldn’t know that from the mainstream media.

More than once, Joe Biden has told the most damaging single lie of 2020 race, damaging because it’s a lie about supposed racism. Biden has frequently told voters – and journalists who sit there like potted plants – that Donald Trump said there were “very fine people” on both sides at that 2017 rally in Charlottesville, Virginia – more than implying that the president was calling neo-Nazis and other white supremacist demonstrators “very fine people.”

When he announced his candidacy, Joe Biden said, "With those words, the president of the United States assigned a moral equivalence between those spreading hate and those with the courage to stand against it."

That was a lie, one that he repeats every chance he gets.

What the president actually said beyond the "very fine people" line was, "I've condemned many different groups. But not all of those people were neo-Nazis, believe me. Not all of those people were white supremacists by any stretch. Those people were also there because they wanted to protest the taking down of a statue of Robert E. Lee."

He also issued a statement that said the, "KKK, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other hate groups are repugnant to everything we hold dear as Americans."

Yet the press lets Biden get away with lying about what Mr. Trump actually said. There are no headlines calling Joe a liar.

And now we have the New York Post story about Joe Biden, his son Hunter and a Ukrainian gas company called Burisma. The Post says it obtained copies of emails between a Burisma executive and Hunter Biden, including one in which the executive thanks Hunter for "giving [him] an opportunity to meet" his father.

Hunter, as you probably know, was getting paid a reported \$50,000 a month and had no experience in the gas business. So the suggestion is obvious: that he was getting paid to give the Ukrainian company – which was widely seen to be corrupt – access to his father, the vice president.

"Dear Hunter," the Burisma executive wrote, "thank you for inviting me to DC and giving an opportunity to meet your father and spent [sic] some time together. It's really [sic] an honor and pleasure."

Whether this is legal or not, is not the question – not here and now anyway. And the veracity of the emails is an open question; for the record, the Biden campaign hasn't explicitly denied their authenticity. But Twitter, where a lot of people get their news, made sure that Americans couldn't read anything about it on its platform (at least for a while).

Why? Because Twitter has rules against publishing "content obtained without authorization" and it doesn't want to spread falsehoods.

But Twitter ran all sorts of phony stories about Brett Kavanaugh as Democrats tried to torpedo his nomination to the Supreme Court.

And stories based on Administration leaks, including news about national security matters, have circulated widely on Twitter.

So much for Twitter's high-minded policy about not publishing content that was stolen or is false.

It's not exactly breaking news that big tech has an anti-conservative bias.

"Even the most partisan Democrat can see Twitter's aggressive editorial discretion to silence journalism is not neutrally applied," an editorial in the Wall Street Journal said. "The company has a progressive agenda and is willing to use its substantial powers over America's elite information landscape to advance that agenda. It won't always work; this particular stunt may have increased the circulation of the Post story because the suppression was so outrageous. But it's an ominous sign of what is to come if Americans become inured to such Big Tech behavior."

But maybe you don't get your news on Twitter – or Facebook, which also limited circulation of the Post story. Maybe you're old school and depend on the network evening newscasts for

your information. Good luck with that. If you were watching ABC, CBS or NBC at night, you didn't get any news there when the story broke, and only limited coverage after that.

And at ABC's town hall last week, Biden wasn't asked a single question about the New York Post story – not from the voters in the audience and not from the ABC moderator George Stephanopoulos, either.

“Being the loyal Democratic foot soldiers that they were, ABC, CBS, and NBC all censored the bombshell from their evening newscasts,” Nicholas Fondacaro of the conservative Media Research Center wrote.

“It's really no wonder the liberal networks were hiding this extremely damaging information from their viewers,” Fondacaro added. “And since they refused to cover the Post's bombshell, by extension they couldn't talk about Orwellian censorship from Facebook and Twitter as they tried to frantically stop the story from spreading.”

All this brings me back to that chat I had with Roger Ailes many years ago. You can't have a truly free country if the press is corrupt, if it takes sides, if it thinks it has an obligation to rid the nation of a president it doesn't like.

“You can't have a free country without a free press – but you can't have a free country without a fair press, either,” Ailes told me.

Not for long anyway.