

Let me make just a couple of serious points:

I can't remember when there have been there have been more challenges for journalists.

Those on the left accuse us of being government lapdogs. Those on the right accuse us of being elitist liberals who somehow want the country to fail and they do so in the meanest possible language.

Gone are the days when people wrote a scathing letter to the editor, then once they got it out of their system, wadded it up and threw it in the trash.

Now they just press the old send button and we are the beneficiaries.

I got an e-mail the other day in which a viewer accused me of being responsible for every ill in the world including diphtheria and he ended it by writing in capital letters DO YOUR DAMN JOB and then signed off, Prayerfully yours Joe Smith.

And all of it is happening while technology is changing so rapidly that we cannot really say in what medium tomorrow's journalists will practice their craft—newspaper, television or some kind of Ipod.

What we do know, is no matter the medium, the role of the journalist will not change and that is to get to the truth and then report it in language that people can understand.

Politicians deliver messages. Bloggers vent. There is even a debate about what journalism is.

Well, here is what it is— the pursuit of truth.

At a seminar not so long ago, someone asked my friend, the great Watergate Reporter Bob Woodward if he and his partner Carl Bernstein had any kind of agenda when they began what became the Watergate story... and did they have any idea how it would come out?

Bob said no, they certainly had no agenda and they had no idea how it was going to come out.

“All we were trying to do is find out what happened.”

What a fine way to sum up what we do. Some how

I wish those words could be posted over the door of every news organization in America.

Find out what happened

If we do that, then the people will decide what to do.

And if we get it wrong. We must correct it as quickly as we can.

We will never report the news to suit everyone.

But the greatest defense against charges of bias is to simply get it right.

If we have done that, there is not much anyone on any side can say.

The second point I want to discuss is this: as the communications revolution has made us increasingly more sophisticated in the handling of information, we have witnessed government become increasingly more secret.

People ask me if this administrative is more secretive than the last one and my answer is yes, and the last one was more secretive than the previous one and on and on.

Each learns from its predecessor.

When I came to Washington in 1969 most members of congress didn't even have press secretaries. Now the ranking member on the committee on hides and skins—and yes there once was a subcommittee on hides and skins—even that lowly congressman has a spokesman and a media plan and talking points and on and on to the point of silliness.

Have we forgotten that a democracy by definition means openness. The founding fathers knew enough about human nature to know that government would always cover up its mistakes if it operated in secret.

Yet each passing day brings yet another report of a reporter being hauled before a grand jury and told he must reveal who within the government he has been talking to.

And with each of these investigations, come insinuations that those who uncover government wrong doing, mistakes and questionable programs are somehow unpatriotic.

Fred Friendly and Ed Murrow would hear a familiar ring in all that.

Would we be better served if more attention was focused on what was leaked rather than on tracking who did the leaking?

Why does the government need a list of my phone calls?

And what business does a democracy have running secret prisons anyway?

If the government hasn't told us they exist, how can we ever know who is being held there.

Do you think anyone would have known about what was going on at Abu Ghraib if it had been left to the government to announce it? Some would argue those revelations hurt our cause.

I would argue the opposite. Bringing mistakes to the fore is a strength, not a weakness.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 acknowledged 200 years of wrongs far worse than Abu Ghraib. Who would say acknowledging and correcting those wrongs made us less secure.

To the contrary, Hubert Humphrey called that act which dealt only with domestic matters, the greatest foreign policy initiative of our time because it told

the world that we lived by the values we preached and that those values worked.

What weakens our cause is when the government tries to cover up mistakes, or plant phony news stories in foreign newspapers or bribe friendly columnists to take the company line. We should not be bashful about calling them on such things when we catch them.

Our great strength comes from emphasizing in every word and action the values and principles that separate us from those who oppose us—not by adopting their methods and techniques.

And let us always remember...

The most fundamental difference between a totalitarian society and a democracy is this:

In a totalitarian society, there is only one source of information—the government. In a democracy, the press provides a second source, a second source that every citizen can use to compare with the government version and then make a judgment about which is right.

If there were no other reason for a free and open press. That is reason enough.

If every time a reporter offends the government of the moment that reporter is brought before a grand jury we simply cannot perform that vital role as an independent source of information.

The press is not a perfect institution. Few human institutions are. But if there were ever a time when we needed a vigorous free press, that time is now.

Yes, we are in the midst of a communications revolution---our communications landscape is changing, the technology is breathtaking, but our success, whether we will remain a relevant and vital part of democracy still rests on the same thing it did in Fred Friendly's day---the personal integrity and courage of each reporter who is sent out with those simple instructions: find out what happened.

And let us never, ever forget the great debt we owe to Fred Friendly and Ed Murrow who showed us the way.