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FAKING IT

by Charles R. Kesler

THOMAS JEFFERSON DEFENDED FREEDOM OF THE PRESS AS essential to an informed public, and thus to democracy. “The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people,” he wrote in 1787, “the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

Twenty years later, deep into his second presidential term, his confidence had, well, soured. “Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper,” he wrote in a private letter. “Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle.... [T]he man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them, inasmuch as he who knows nothing is nearer to truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods and errors.”

By then Jefferson had been the object of sustained attack by Federalist Party newspapers for about a decade and a half—including, since 1802, lurid accounts of his purported affair with his slave Sally Hemings. He lamented wearily to his correspondent “the demoralizing practice of feeding the public mind habitually on slander, and the depravity of taste which this nauseous aliment induces.”

President Trump could sympathize with President Jefferson.

Few presidents enjoy a charmed relationship with the press. Hence complaints about the press's untruthfulness, bias, and arrogance come with the office, no matter how piously a president may believe in the First Amendment or how assiduously he may court journalists. Still, Trump has given his war against “fake news” a striking prominence, waging it in full public view, unremittingly, and *con brio*. He intends to win it, or at least to give as good as he gets, and that itself is unusual.

Today the press includes not only newspapers but radio and television networks, internet sites, and anyone with a cellphone and a Twitter handle. Gone are the days when the three national TV networks (along with the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, who between them furnished most of the networks' copy) enjoyed a kind of sacerdotal authority in our politics.

That authority came partly for technological reasons—the limits of newspaper distribution and of the broadcast spectrum—and partly for ideological ones. Early in the 20th century journalism began to think of itself as a profession. In the 19th century most newspapers had been

outgrowths of political parties. Now the rising spirit was non-partisan, independent, and expert, guided by the example of the new social sciences, whether philosophical-historical or more scientific in approach. Both recipes came from the same university kitchen, so it was common to find enlisted in the same political causes both the earnest, idealistic, Progressive social reformers and the cool, scientific social inquirers into facts and nothing but the facts (hold the values).

THE NEW JOURNALISM, TOO, GREW UP THINKING OF ITSELF AS liberal and “objective” at the same time. It was objective insofar as it separated facts from values: reporting the facts, and relegating the values to the editorial pages. But to be objective or scientific in that way was itself a liberal value. Liberals of almost all stripes were confident that those separated facts would eventually line up together as “history,” a meta-fact confirming their own version of progress and hence their own values. Muckraking journalism led naturally to political reform. The front page and the editorial page were ultimately in synch.

This self-satisfied faith in its own ethics and expertise inspired the mid-century media establishment. Although most of the old media titans continue to exist, they no longer dwell at the heights; they wade, along with many others, through the murky, slow-moving “mainstream.” To their shock, neither technology nor politics has supported their pretensions.

President Trump exploits that vulnerability with his criticism of “fake news.” He accuses them not merely of making it up, that is, of getting the facts wrong or concocting “facts” to fit their bias, but also of inventing the very standards by which to conceal and justify their abuses: the fake authority of “objectivity,” nonpartisanship, and progress. They are as partisan as journalists were two centuries ago, but can't, or won't, admit it, which means they can't begin to ask how to moderate themselves. In truth, they may be as much self-deluded as deluding.

President Jefferson suggested that the newspapers of his day would be improved if each issue were divided into four sections, headed Truths, Probabilities, Possibilities, and Lies. He predicted that the first section would be the shortest. It would be an interesting experiment in our day, too. The First Amendment guarantees the press freedom, not respect. That has to be earned.

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