

From Reporting to Commentary

by

Phil Rasmussen

As far back as it goes in recorded history two obsessions have been common to most politicians. The first obsession is to control the populous in order to stay in control. To fulfill that obsession, their second obsession is to use others in order to obtain or maintain their power relative to their control.

Both obsessions go hand-in-hand. The use of influencers, spies, blackmail, and others having an interest in maintaining the control are common practices. It should be noted that influencers also include the media in all its forms.

According to various sources, the Acta Diurna, stone or wooden plaques placed in areas where people gathered in ancient Rome, is the first known evidence of recorded news.

While the invention of the printing press in 1440 made it easier to distribute not only news events, but also a plethora of opinion or commentary. It wasn't until the New York Tribune was founded in 1841 that Horace Greeley established the practice of separating hard news from opinions in what is today called the "Editorial Page."

By the late 1800s, major newspapers across the country had established editorial opinion. What initially started out as a column or two of editorial opinion, soon became four pages of "editorials, reprinted speeches, excerpts from novels and poetry and a few small local ads." [Wikipedia](#), [Britannica](#)

Although journalism was recognized as an academic study in 1879 (University of Missouri), the development of motion pictures, radio and television in the 1900s brought about a realization that news reporting had become a very complex profession, and at the same time, a very competitive economic industry.

While journalists are taught that news reporting should be unbiased and a search for truth and meaning, they are also taught [wordsmithing](#), which has a foundation on the student's personal biases. No matter how well their schooling is, they are often disillusioned on entering the journalism profession where editors have the final word and politics and economics drive the media machine.

Almost from journalism's beginning in America, journalists have adopted social responsibility as their hallmark of a "[free press](#)." Their reporting, oftentimes, include

some aspect of the story's social impact. This is easily noted in reports from Mr. Jones missing dog, to the impact of weather events, to the price of goods. When this happens, the story is no longer just a news event but also becomes a commentary, with or without factual information.

Coexisting with this feeling of "social responsibility," technological developments and societal changes tend to intensify and/or distort reports that journalists make.

Since 2000, the face of journalism has changed dramatically. Two major aspects of journalism have changed. First, print media such as newspapers, magazines, and "letters" no longer dominate how people receive news or information. Additionally, the definition of "news" has also changed. The term now includes various categories of news such as breaking, hard, celebrity, nature/science, sports, health news and many other categories.

These changes have led to societal changes in terms of how time is spent, educational development, and social pressures, that impact how individuals receive news. The advent of high-speed communication processes, such as the Internet and smart phones, also plays a major role.

Today's communication landscape is like being on a merry-go-round. As we go round and round and look outward, we experience life like a kaleidoscope – fragmented, intense, constant change, random, emotional, and bursts of urgency. We are inundated with images, videos, words and sounds before we have a chance to cognitively process the "message" through critical evaluation and thought.

We need to step off this destructive merry-go-round. As long as we stay on it, journalists and editors will continue to inundate us with mixed messaging in an attempt to sway our thoughts and actions.