The Fourth Estate—Commitment to Truth in the Age of Trump?

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With the holiday season upon us I find myself engaging in a lot of difficult and awkward conversations with family and friends about politics. What immediately becomes clear is that some of these people are avid Fox News viewers while others watch CNN and MSNBC. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that these conversations frequently degenerate into unpleasant exchanges.

Sadly, in our current political climate, the all too often knee-jerk refrain about the media is that they have become disseminators of “fake news” and political bias instead of being the guardians of the truth. This perception should be worrisome to all of us, regardless of our political affiliation and ideology.

As a scholar of rhetoric I teach my students that our ability to communicate in a civil and productive manner depends on a shared commitment to truth and facts. In the absence of this, it is hard to imagine how rational and democratic deliberation can survive.

How refreshing it is, then, whenever we get to witness rhetorically effective examples of journalism transcending such negative and frequently baseless
stereotypes. These moments should give us hope that we’re living through an aberration in history rather than a permanent shift in habits.

Allow me to offer two examples. I confess that both examples are particularly noteworthy for me since they come from a news organization I normally don’t watch or trust, and because they are atypical for that organization. However, as I remind students in my Argumentation and Advocacy class, we have a responsibility to listen to and try to understand the views expressed by those with whom we disagree.

Best of all, these examples might provide me with the rhetorical resources needed to persuade those who watch the network I don’t like — Fox News.

Example One: On Wednesday (December 12), “Fox and Friends” interviewed Secretary of State Mike Pompeo about the attacks on Jamal Khashoggi and how the Administration has not responded adequately and appropriately. Despite their usual tendency to let Trump Administration officials off the hook, giving them a platform to disseminate propaganda, Fox broadcasters behaved like professional journalists; in a nonpartisan manner they pushed Pompeo hard on the accuracy of his statements about whether the United States really is holding the Crown Prince accountable for his despicable actions.

Frankly, I was surprised to see the Fox hosts remind Pompeo throughout the interview that he was not directly responding to their questions, and that his comments stood in stark contrast to the audio evidence and the “high confidence” CIA report.

But this is not the only illustration of what seems to be a change at Fox News regarding how they cover matters related to the Trump Presidency.
Example Two: On this week’s “Fox News Sunday” (December 16), Chris Wallace, who more often than not has sided with President Trump, joined many of his reporter colleagues at Fox News of late and behaved like a professional journalist rather than a Trump sycophant. Wallace astutely and meticulously interviewed Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani and held his feet to the fire on the question of whether the President lied about the two felonies for which the Court in the Southern District of New York has accused him of being an unindicted co-conspirator.

Giuliani’s attempt to answer follow up questions appeared as a clear deflection — and Wallace correctly and pointedly observed that Giuliani was non-responsive, playing a shell game instead of directly answering questions. Isn’t this exactly what we expect journalists in a nonpartisan manner to do in their quest to unearth the truth and expose the facts?

Put simply, like Fox News anchor Shepard Smith who has a record of debunking Trump rhetoric, Fox and Friends and Chris Wallace exhibited a willingness to place journalistic principles above partisanship.

These two examples underscore why in a polarized political environment the fourth estate is our nation’s best check and balance — and vehicle for preserving the rule of law. Effective journalism can break through partisan barriers.

This is especially true at a time when facts and truth have been severely and systematically undercut by the president of the United States.

In addition, as both a citizen and scholar, these illustrations give me hope that objectivity and fairness can still be a cornerstone and guiding principle for how we communicate with one another and how we adjudicate our differences.
Will examples like these assist me in speaking with friends and family over the holidays? I hope so — and trust this is not just wishful thinking.

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