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Freedom of the Press is Everybody's Freedom

By Steve Horton

In theory you'd think government officials, serving the public and using taxpayer money, would have no problem being upfront and forthright with the public. But the reality is, of course, more complex and nuanced.

The public is not a unitary entity, single-minded in what it wants and expects. Quite the contrary. It's comprised of individuals (you and I) with a myriad of interests, backgrounds, beliefs, and priorities. And, as individuals, we tend to join or support groups, associations, and (most importantly as far as government is concerned) political parties that we find compatible, and that we feel will further our personal and shared agenda.

And of course, as we well know, there are competing interests, different backgrounds, various beliefs, and dueling priorities that are played out in the halls of government; a tug-of-war that's been going on since the first white settlers showed up in Jamestown and later stepped off the Mayflower.

As far as who gets to set the agenda and determine future direction, in our democratic republic, to the victor belong the spoils—which includes deciding how and where the money is spent, the type of laws that are

passed or rejected, what regulations are put in place and how and in what manner they are enforced, and who gets to use the clout of power.

True, thank God, there are checks and balances, that temper and diffuse power, but who wins an election matters greatly.

The public (often referred to as the American people) is generally portrayed as the common folk—men and women going about their everyday business of family, work, leisure, and making ends meet. But it's, in addition, all of those group affiliations we belong to and support. In governmental policy matters, they are referred to as special interest groups, trade organizations, and lobbyists.

Because of what's at stake, because of the competing and often conflicting agenda, a lot of deal making takes place. Horse trading. Even cutting corners. And believe it or not, some of the participants—those in government as well as those seeking to influence outcome—do not operate in an ethical or even legal manner. The general welfare—the greatest good for the greatest number—is not necessarily their main concern.

As such, being upfront and forthright with the public, having their decision making and actions held up to scrutiny, is not an attitude

or practice that they embrace. They prefer to operate away from public view, behind closed doors, and covered by a cloak of secrecy.

Among of the ‘flies in the ointment’ to this behavior is, first of all, the elected and appointed officials and career employees who do believe in operating in an open-and-above-board manner, who believe in the notion of public trust and take their oath of office seriously, and are principled and ethical.

Another impediment to this behavior is the press—or, as it’s now often referred to, the media. Historically—through their very presence at meetings and legislative sessions, their reporting and commentary, and their willingness to uncover and expose questionable activities and even wrongdoing—the press has earned the title of ‘public watchdog.’

‘SUNSHINE WEEK’ WAS JUST OBSERVED. To the casual observer that term might conjure up the notion of seven straight days of bright skies. In Michigan, such an occurrence would be well worth celebrating.

In fact, it’s the “annual initiative celebrating the crucial need for access to information to ensure governmental transparency and accountability.” That’s a mouthful, but in simpler terms it means “freedom of information.” The metaphor of sunshine is that of “illumination”. Shining a light in those dark corners of deal-making, opening up the closed doors, and exposing improper and unethical behavior.

On the occasion of Sunshine Week, Danielle McLean, the chair of the freedom of information committee at the Society of Professional Journalists, stated: “Free press is

essential in terms of telling the truth and allowing people to know exactly what’s happening.”

A number of people seem to think that ‘freedom of the press’ is a concern only of journalists, a nefarious bunch of ne’er-do-wells intent on disrupting governmental activity, unduly influencing policy decisions, and making life miserable for public officials.

But this freedom, part of the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, is not merely about giving journalists a free reign to poke their noses wherever they wish—although (as far as government is concerned) that’s part of how they find out things—but about the American people’s “right to know” what its government is doing.

I came across a guest column I published in a 1985 issue of this newspaper. It was entitled “The meaning of press freedom” and written on the occasion of National Newspaper Week’ by Richard J.V. Johnson of the *Houston Chronicle* who was serving as the head of the American Newspaper Publishers Association.

Johnson—who noted that “The history of our country teaches us that a really free press was invented in America”—stated that “As citizens we must continually remind ourselves that freedom of the press is a unique right of the American people and that it is indeed the American people’s freedom—not ours as newspaper people—but theirs.

“Above all, we must never forget that a free press is crucial to the preservation of all of the freedoms embodied in our Constitution,” he added. “Once we lose it the other precious freedoms we enjoy will crumble.”

To emphasize this point, Johnson quoted a comment made by Felix Frankfurter, the

renowned U.S. Supreme Court justice. “Without a free press there can be no free society. This is axiomatic. However, freedom of the press is not an end in itself but a means to the end of a free society. The scope and nature of the constitutional guarantee of the freedom of the press are to be viewed and applied in that light.”

Johnson juxtaposed this view from Justice Frankfurter with a quote from Nikolai Lenin, the leader of the Communist Party that founded the Soviet Union turned it into a totalitarian state. “Why should freedom of speech and freedom of the press be allowed?” Lenin asked. “Why should a government which is doing what it believes to be right allow itself to be criticized? It would not allow opposition by lethal weapons. Ideas are much more fatal than guns. Why should any man be allowed to buy a printing press and

disseminate pernicious opinion calculated to embarrass the government?”

The voice of freedom, of sunshine, and ‘the right to know’ versus that of repression and the dark sinister intent to keep people ignorant and scared. It’s an age old tug-of-war.

That long-ago guest column by the head of the newspaper association added this final thought concerning this struggle:

“Americans have always known—though we sometimes forget to articulate it—that a strong, free press and a strong, free country are inseparable. You can’t have one without the other. No society ever has; none will.

“Freedom of the press is everybody’s freedom.”