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Defending Press Freedom in the Age of Trump

Intervista a Martin Baron

As authoritarian leaders seek to delegitimize independent news and AI blurs the line between facts and falsehoods, journalists around the world are fighting to be heard above a rising tide of misinformation and propaganda. In this environment, news outlets must assert their independence through rigorous reporting.

Political intimidation, ownership pressures, the rise of AI, and economic constraints are calling into question the future of press freedom – nowhere more conspicuously than in the United States, where these forces have combined to fuel growing anxiety about the fate of an institution that has been fundamental to democracies everywhere. At this year's International Press Institute World Congress, *Project Syndicate* Deputy Managing Editor Rachel Danna sat down with Martin Baron, former executive editor of the *Washington Post,* to discuss the state – and fate – of journalism today.

Project Syndicate: *You've said that journalism's core mission is to hold powerful institutions to account. In today's climate, in which media owners, particularly in the US, fear political retaliation, how can editorial independence be maintained?*

Martin Baron: Journalists must insist on their editorial independence. That's the first thing: not to concede anything, and to make it clear that their job is to report on what's happening – what their government is up to, and what the most powerful institutions and individuals in their countries are doing, for good and for ill. The core of our mission is to hold the powerful to account and listen to people who would otherwise go unheard. The alternative is to become either stenographers or propagandists.

James Madison, the principal author of the US Constitution, talked about the importance of freely examining public figures and government measures. I always focus on the word "examining," because it means to investigate, inspect, and assess – the opposite of stenography and propaganda. America's founders wanted a check on government. They wanted somebody to guard against corruption and abuse of power, and we should live up to those assignments.

But ownership remains a point of vulnerability for media outlets. There's no perfect form of ownership – they all come with pressures, especially when owners have other commercial interests. These pressures have only grown since Donald Trump returned to the White House this year, willing and eager to target those interests. Owners who yield do a disservice to the journalists who work for them and to democracy itself. Their primary goal should be to defend the rights that allowed their media businesses to exist in the first place.

PS: *You said that you don't think there's a "perfect form of ownership," and considering your experience following Amazon founder Jeff Bezos's purchase of the* Washington Post*, you may know this firsthand. But are there other models? Should the media be profit-driven, or should it aspire to be more like a public utility? Are there different models we should be exploring that might work in the US or elsewhere?*

MB: I haven't seen anything that's very promising. Joseph Stiglitz sort of advocated government funding during his talk at the IPI's World Congress, but I think that's a major trap. Public broadcasters in the US received government funding, and Trump used it as a way to clobber them. Trump and state officials aligned with him would use government funding as a cudgel to pressure media outlets, when what we need to do is eliminate sources of – or potential sources of – pressure so we can operate with independence. That requires finding a way to be self-sustaining, whether as a nonprofit or as a commercially oriented enterprise.

Many independent media organizations around the world, operating in very challenging environments, have been the recipients of American assistance through USAID. Now that USAID has been shut down, they are not getting that money,

creating a huge crisis for them. Other outlets have been financed by philanthropic organizations, and they are finding that funding has dried up as well. That is particularly true of news organizations operating in exile or in countries like El Salvador, Venezuela, and Myanmar.

Suppose US media organizations relied on government funding. In such a case, Trump would insist that they adhere to the standards he has set, just as he is doing with other recipients of public funding, like universities and school districts. And his standard for the media is to serve as his propaganda outlet. He does not want a free and independent press. The only press he considers legitimate is the kind that repeats what he says word for word.

PS: *Given this context, and drawing on your experience leading the* Washington Post *during Trump's first term, what do you think the media got right – and what did it miss – in covering a president openly hostile to the press? What do you think of the coverage of the second Trump presidency so far?*

MB: For the most part, the press has done a really good job, both during the first term and now in the second. We know a lot about what happened during the first Trump presidency. We knew much of it at the time, and we know even more now. The same is true today: every day, there is another revelatory report about what's happening in this administration.

Many front-line journalists, and the editors who work directly with them, are committed to holding the government to account – to finding out what this administration is really up to, who's influencing it, and how its policies are affecting people. I deeply admire them for it.

The real failure regarding Trump's first term actually came before he became a candidate. We didn't do a good enough job of understanding how we could end up with a president like Trump. We didn't understand America well enough. We didn't spend enough time traveling around the country, listening to people's grievances, and explaining them to others.

We still don't do enough of that. The press needs to serve as a bridge between communities, helping people better understand one another and what they're going

through. That requires reporting without a trace of contempt or condescension, grounded in real empathy.

It's also important to remember that most people don't spend their days thinking about politics or democracy. They're focused on making a living, ensuring their kids get a good education, and maintaining access to health care. We need to understand why people feel these things are under threat, why they believe they're worse off than before, why their kids have fewer opportunities, and why the social problems in their communities are not being addressed.

PS: *So, how should journalists approach the coverage of populist leaders who actively seek to delegitimize the press? How do you present both sides, or adhere to the cherished principle of impartiality, when one side is clearly lying? You've talked about the idea of "objective reality" in journalism. How should journalism today reflect this idea?*

MB: I have long been an advocate for what's been known as objectivity in journalism. I know that word can make a lot of people uneasy, but I think it's been grossly mischaracterized. What I mean by "objectivity" is that reporters should start their work knowing they don't know everything. That's the whole reason for reporting. Reporting means finding out about things you don't know about, or don't know enough about. So, we should do our jobs without thinking we have all the answers. Instead, we should be focused on asking the right questions.

Objectivity – approaching every story with humility, acknowledging what we don't know, and being willing to learn – is how we preserve our independence. But objectivity is not "both-sidesism." It doesn't mean pretending every issue is split 50-50. If the evidence points in one direction, we should say so, rather than pretending otherwise. Only after we've done rigorous reporting can we tell people that what we've found is true.

"Truth" is a big word, so I'm reluctant to use it. The goal is simply to get as close as possible to reality and understand the facts. And to do that, in any field – whether you're a judge, a scientist, or a journalist – you have to begin with a hypothesis but keep an open mind, knowing it could be wrong.

People used to describe journalism as the "first rough draft of history," and that remains true: it *is* a draft, always incomplete and constantly evolving. I often think we're looking at the world through a keyhole; we don't see everything, yet sometimes we can push the door open a little and get a clearer view of what's really going on. If we're skilled and lucky, we can swing that door wide open and see the whole picture. That doesn't happen every time, but with each discovery, the draft becomes more refined and our confidence in it grows.

PS: *It seems that many people today are eager to tell others what they know – or think they know – despite having no background or formal training in journalism. Influencers and "content creators" have built huge followings on Substack and social media. What does this mean for the future of the profession?*

MB: I'm not attached to the traditional ways of doing things. Technology has fundamentally changed how people consume information, and that naturally changes how we convey what we know, or think we know. This shift has created an entire ecosystem of influencers, Substackers, YouTubers, and podcasters. The core principle everyone should follow is verification. Is the information you're communicating authentic and accurate? Alternatively, is it misinformation, or even disinformation?

Upholding that standard is critical. Everyone in this business has a duty to share only what they know to be true. Passing along information you haven't verified is simply irresponsible. Share it only if it's been checked and comes from trustworthy sources.

But how do you do that? That's the hard part. You need to rely on sources that have proven to be reliable over time. As much as people criticize traditional news organizations, when there's a natural disaster, guess where they go for information? Whether it's a hurricane, an earthquake, fires, floods, or war, people turn to the traditional news organizations. That suggests that they believe the information they find there will be accurate.

PS: *What opportunities and risks does generative AI present? Is this, in your view, a turning point for news media and for journalists?*

MB: People always sound wiser when they say everything is terrible. Doomsayers tend to sound more profound, and people are more inclined to believe them than the

optimists. AI, of course, is a powerful tool capable of many great things. But like every technology, it comes with risks as well as benefits. Social media is a good example: it connected us in unprecedented ways while also deepening polarization.

The same is true of AI. It's an extraordinarily powerful reporting tool that can make journalists more efficient by allowing them to sift through vast amounts of data. Reporters have already used it to analyze bomb strikes, identify the weapons used, and piece together what actually happened.

At the same time, the risks are enormous. AI makes it easy to fabricate images, video, and audio. You can hear a recording that perfectly imitates someone's voice – tone, cadence, and speech patterns. It's fake, but people may still believe it. Or they may conclude that distinguishing truth from falsehood is impossible and not even worth trying.

That's a precarious position. It threatens not just the press but democracy itself in ways we have yet to grapple with. When we can't even agree on a basic set of facts, progress becomes impossible. That uncertainty enables people to exploit the situation for personal, commercial, and political gain.

This is already happening in US politics. An unflattering image appears, and a public figure says, "That wasn't me. That was AI." You hear their voice on a recording, and they say the same thing. Some denials may even be true. But as fake images and audio spread, even authentic ones will be dismissed. People will claim that anything that contradicts their narrative or casts them in a bad light was fabricated. Without a shared sense of what's real, we lose any firm foundation for public debate.

PS: *You've warned that democracy cannot survive without a free press, which underpins many other freedoms. What reforms or protections do you think are most urgently needed to safeguard press freedom around the world?*

MB: First, it's important to make clear that free-speech rights are not reserved solely for the press. They belong to everyone. In many countries today, including the US, even business executives are afraid to speak openly for fear of government reprisal. What we need is a broad coalition of people who understand that free expression is essential to a functioning society.

Clearly, there have been many encroachments on free-speech rights in the US recently, and I worry about where they may lead. But we still have judges who recognize the importance of those rights, and many who continue to stand up for the rule of law. That's the model other countries should aspire to: constitutional protections for free speech, judicial systems that enforce those protections, and governments that respect them.

PS: *What lessons can emerging democracies draw from US efforts to protect press freedom and uphold institutional resilience at a time of democratic backsliding?*

MB: You can't just declare yourself a democracy and sit back. The greatest defender of US democracy has always been its institutions, and Trump is systematically trying to destroy them, with far too much success. Yet they still exist, and they continue, in their own way, to push back against these assaults.

That is the key lesson for emerging democracies: you must defend your institutions and protect their independence while recognizing how easily they can be subverted. People around the world are horrified by what's happening in the US precisely because they saw it as a bastion of free expression and the rule of law.

Emerging democracies should remember how fragile these pillars really are and resist the temptation to take them for granted. In the US, we've done that for too long, which is why so many people once asked, "How much damage can Trump really do?" We took the press freedom for granted. But many more people now understand that the press is often the only institution willing to listen to them, investigate wrongdoing, and hold the powerful to account. And they know that if the press isn't there, none of that work gets done.

PS: *And yet the press is increasingly demonized and blamed for various crises around the world. There is a notion that the news media finds itself in its current predicament because it has somehow failed. Do you think this criticism is fair? Has the media done a different – or lesser – job in recent years?*

MB: It seems to me that many of these criticisms come from people who claim the press is irrelevant and then insist that, had we covered something differently, the

outcome somehow would have been different. I don't know how to reconcile those two ideas. If we're irrelevant, why would our coverage make a difference?

Often, the people who criticize the press haven't actually looked into what we reported. In many cases, we did cover those issues – people simply weren't paying attention because they didn't see them as urgent at the time. When something doesn't feel urgent, it's easy to ignore.

Some people seem to think the media runs the world. In the US, for example, there's a notion that the press somehow got Trump elected in 2016. That's complete nonsense. There was extensive reporting on Trump. At the *Post*, we published an entire series on his personal and professional history. We wrote so much that it eventually became a book: Marc Fisher and Michael Kranish's *Trump Revealed*.

If you read that book now, it's striking how prescient it was. Yet people say, "You didn't write about this," or "Why didn't you tell us *that* before he got elected?" Many of these criticisms just aren't borne out by the facts. More often than not, the issues people say we ignore were, in fact, covered – and covered thoroughly. Or else we simply didn't know then what we know now. Over time, new information emerges, documents surface, and more people come forward.

PS: *So how can news organizations get people to pay attention, especially younger audiences? You've said that without younger readers, journalism has no future. What strategies do you believe are most effective in reaching them without compromising journalistic rigor?*

MB: I'm not sure we're communicating in the ways people actually want to receive information. People read less nowadays. They're more passive consumers; they don't want to go searching for information. We live in a digital age in which more people get their news visually or through audio rather than text. If I had my choice, it would be different, but that's the way it is.

We should study what works for audiences and apply those lessons ourselves, even if it makes traditional journalists uncomfortable. A journalist recently asked me, "What should I be focusing on? What should I be learning?" I told him, "Short-form video." You're a long-form writer? Great, you should still learn how to do short-form video.

You may not want to, but you need to provide a tasting menu that makes people want the full course. Most people are not going to read a 10,000-word story or a ten-part series. They don't have the time or patience.

That said, merely adapting isn't enough. We have to embrace these new formats with enthusiasm, because they're teaching us how to reach people in a world where communication habits have changed dramatically. We could sit around blaming audiences for the current state of journalism, but that would be a waste of time.