Freedom of speech endangered by ignorance, hostility

Taylor Armerding

October 31, 2017

It's a colossal irony, but President Donald Trump, in his own ham-handed and frequently toxic way, is actually doing the nation a favor with his attacks on the media. He's raising awareness of the rights spelled out in the First Amendment.

Which is long overdue. The founders put it first because it enumerates some of the most important, fundamental protections for a free republic. Yet it is being regularly trashed, abused and attacked. There have been calls to gut it or outright repeal it. Recent polls have found an alarming ignorance of it.

One of those rights is, of course, freedom of the press. Which means Trump is wrong — catastrophically wrong — when he calls for television networks to have their licenses "challenged and, if appropriate, revoked," if they engage in too much of what he deems to be "fake news."

"It's frankly disgusting the way the press is able to write whatever they want to write, and people should look into it," he said.

But, none of that is going to happen. The press is safe — perhaps safer than it has ever been, even with a recent Politico-Morning Consult poll finding that 46 percent of registered voters believe major news outlets fabricate stories about the president.

In the era of Trump, readership and viewership are up. If the media were truly fearful, they wouldn't be hammering Trump every day and stroking his attackers with blatant puff pieces. They know if he actually tried to do some of what he is suggesting, it would have even less success with the courts than his various attempts at travel bans.

Yes, his pronouncements about controlling the press are frequently absurd, but no more so than the caterwauling from members of Congress and others about what a "dangerous" president he is.

Nobody — nobody — is afraid of him. Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), now a darling to the far-left ladies of "The View" because of his attacks on the president, was asked on the show this past week if he was worried about any retaliation from Trump.

The question had barely been asked when everybody — from McCain to all the panelists to the studio audience — erupted in derisive laughter.

Retiring Republican senators Jeff Flake of Arizona and Bob Corker of Tennessee both regularly mock the president, and now that they are doing so, they are getting wall-to-wall, adoring coverage from the mainstream media, who have suddenly decided they are "principled" and "courageous."

Freedom of the press, all the breathless rhetoric notwithstanding, is just fine.

What is not so fine is another one of the rights the First Amendment guarantees — freedom of speech. It is at much more serious risk than freedom of the press, not from Trump, but mostly from left-wing fascists who think they have a right to decide what you can say.
There is both profound ignorance and hostility to free speech — especially in our institutions of allegedly higher learning.

Just this year there have been incidents that, much more than presidential rhetoric, ought to worry everyone who believes in constitutional rights.

• Left-wing thugs blocked an appearance by conservative Ann Coulter at the University of California, Berkeley this past spring by threatening violence, which is a crime. The university system's president, Janet Napolitano, is a former head of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Yet neither she nor the Berkeley police apparently had the wherewithal (or the motivation) to secure a lecture hall for the speech.

Coulter, whatever you think of her, has never threatened violence to try to prevent someone else from speaking.

• Gay conservative Milo Yiannopoulos was "allowed" to speak in September, but couldn't use a microphone and nobody could hear him.

• Students at allegedly bucolic Middlebury College in Vermont used threats and violence, injuring a (liberal) professor, in an effort to prevent a lecture by conservative author Charles Murray.

What is even more ominous is the growing percentage of young people who think the First Amendment doesn't, or shouldn't, protect whatever they consider to be hate speech — anything that offends them or that they think might offend any minority group.

Even the increasingly left-leaning *Washington Post* is concerned. This past week, after droning on about how dangerous Trump allegedly is to a free press, the paper also took note of a survey by a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution of 1,500 students at U.S. four-year colleges and universities.

He found that only 39 percent think the First Amendment protects “hate speech.” A plurality — 44 percent — said it doesn’t.

A much smaller percentage but still approaching critical mass — 19 percent — said they approved of a student group using violence to prevent an invited speaker from appearing on campus.

The paper also reported on a poll commissioned by the libertarian Cato Institute that found 40 percent of respondents think government should prevent people from using hate speech.
This is, unfortunately, not shocking. But it ought to be. Yes, there are limits to free speech — shouting “fire!” in a crowded theater, or direct incitement to violence.

But those exceptions are rare, and they don’t include so-called “hate” speech, in part because everybody has a different definition of it.

One of my beloved critics just called me “demented.” Is that hate speech — to dehumanize poor me like that?

President Obama famously said, when he was a senator, “If they bring a knife to the fight, we bring a gun.” Is that an incitement to violence, even though everybody knew he was speaking rhetorically?

The whole point of free speech is to protect unpopular, perhaps even toxic, speech. Popular speech obviously needs no protection. Yet universities are in some cases teaching, and in others enabling, the kind of suppression of speech that is blatantly fascist.

That is far more dangerous than Trump’s bluster. As he would put it, “people should look into it.”