

Journalism, at what price?

By SHERALYN ROMAN

Sometimes a topic seems to present itself repeatedly, in a variety of ways, as I go about my daily life. Whether I am sitting in a meeting, talking with my kids, or doing research for an article the same theme presents itself over and over again. This week, in various iterations, that topic is: What price are you willing to pay for journalism? Fake news is free and it's everywhere, our inboxes are flooded with the stuff daily and social media is its breeding ground but when a trusted, major newspaper or magazine, a known reliable source of news, asks you to pay to read their material online do you? Can you? Should you?

A writer with the Washington Post calls the wide-open Internet a "marvelous gift to readers, a vast cornucopia of great writing." (1) Yet of course, it is also a wide-open and vast cornucopia of false, misleading "click-bait" headlines which are then shared relentlessly, without questioning the source. The ongoing spread of misinformation is but a slippery slope toward totalitarianism. Think I am exaggerating? We have only to look back at numerous instances in history as examples. Writer David Simon suggests "a blog here, a citizen journalist there, a news Web site getting under way in places where the newspaper is diminished" some of it is quite good, but none of it so far begins to achieve consistently what a vibrant newspaper, staffed with competent, paid beat reporters and editors, once offered. New-media entities are not yet able to truly cover "day after day" the society, culture, and politics of cities, states, and nations. (2) The implication to me seems clear; the "gift" of wide-open access to information comes with a price tag.

However, I struggle too with reconciling the notion that in a free and democratic society, information should be freely accessible. For a society to be free and democratic they must have access to education and education must be free and equally accessible to all. To continue the theme, students doing research for a paper probably don't have a lot of disposable income to pay for information. Even a small online subscription fee might be too much for their budget to bear. How then do we balance the completely legitimate need for credible news (both on and offline) to make a profit so they can pay journalists to do what we need them to do? Journalists might be the watchdogs of democracy but understandably they can't work for free.

I also struggle with the concept of "signing up" to continue to receive access to information from certain newspapers, whether paid or unpaid. Why do I need to provide an email address for the privilege of reading an article or two? Google knows enough about me already and now I'm giving yet another set of advertisers the rights to see my search engine history, in theory allowing them to customize pop up ads to my specific tastes. Pop up ads are the bane of my existence. As a regular blogger working for a wide variety of clients, I conduct research constantly on an enormous, diverse and eclectic range of topics. Anyone attempting to discern my tastes, habits and interests based on the trail of "cookies" I leave behind would no doubt believe me to be living with a multiple personality disorder. But I digress.

I wrote this some time ago in response to a Toronto Star article requesting readers to comment on "why news matters." It was published in part and continues to reflect what I feel today: "A free press helps guarantee a free society. Why #NewsMatters is because it's the single most effective way to preserve and protect democracy. Journalists question, they investigate, they both incite and encourage debate and they educate and empower through words. But journalism is under attack. Fake news is virulent. Social media is "dumbing down" content and the consumer isn't even aware. Frankly, now more than ever, the ability to discern, question and call attention to both global and local issues has never been more important. Right here in Ontario, with funding cuts to education (even journalism courses are being cancelled!) we're losing our ability to TEACH how to question and therefore LEARN how to question. What's real? What isn't? Who is corrupt? Who isn't? Who calls our leaders to task? If journalists don't ask the hard questions "what price will we pay?"

Continuing this same discussion more recently, with a student enrolled in journalism school, prompted an in class chat with a noted newspaper editor. The students asked why they should pay for content (never mind the how) and the conclusion was that we must be willing to pay for something that has value. That old saying "you get what you pay for" comes to mind. Without checks and balances, without reporters at the local, provincial and federal level reporting back to you, the reader, no one is being held accountable. As one pundit succinctly writes: "Fewer media watchdogs = more corruption." (3) Should you pay for your news? In a

perfect world I'd like to suggest that those who can, should, so that those who can't, won't have to. But that leads to an entirely different conundrum doesn't it? That is, the possibility that we would then only have access to the kind of news those who can afford to pay for it, want us to see. Sigh