

Now for something completely different

by SHERALYN ROMAN

There are so many things going on in the world other than COVID, did you know that?

Of course you did. It's just hard to focus on anything else when we're beaten over the head repeatedly with Covid numbers too overwhelming to comprehend. Particularly so when we live in what appears to be the very epicentre of the crisis here in Canada.

That said, there is news happening today (and every day) around the world that is not COVID-related. That's why, despite a COVID tragedy of truly numbing proportions currently unfolding in India, I'd like to focus today on what else we're not hearing about and why? As I write this, it's World Press Freedom Day. Yet knowing that a volcano erupted in St. Vincent, or that protestors were being killed in the streets of Myanmar simply hasn't lingered in international headlines for longer than a day or two at most. Why not? Who is in charge of the news we receive and how it is received? We need to talk. Is anything more important than freedom of the press?

The theme for this year's World Press Freedom Day (as defined by the United Nations) is, "Information as a Public Good." The very existence of a day devoted to declaring the press must be free to report the news is a "call to affirm the importance of cherishing information as a public good." It asks and encourages us all to explore "what can be done in the production, distribution and reception of content to strengthen journalism, and to advance transparency and empowerment while leaving no one behind."

First proclaimed in 1993 by the UN General Assembly, the "Declaration of Windhoek" is now celebrated as Word Press Freedom Day and also designated as a day to honour those journalists who have lost their lives in the line of duty simply for trying to report truth to the world.

Governments, editors, large newspaper institutions, even "we the people," all play a role in upholding the value of a free and unbiased press. The press plays the role of holding governments to account; of monitoring hate speech, of questioning the evidence (or lack of) when banks, institutions or universities engage in questionable activities, or when big manufacturers try to convince us our water is safe or that a vaccine won't cause a blood clot "it's the media who help to separate fact from fiction and to expose the truth.

But inextricably tied to this issue of media freedom is what kind of media you are consuming?

Transparency of social media powerhouses like Facebook, Google and Twitter are increasingly of concern. The information shared on some social media is rarely vetted, easily spread and often specifically designed to exclusively serve paid advertisers.

Where and how you obtain the news will almost certainly impact the news you are receiving. Factor in the ability of the average reader to discern fact from fiction and we have a lot to be worried about.

According to the United Nations, World Press Freedom Day and May 3 must continue to "act as a reminder to governments of the need to respect their commitment to press freedom." It is also "a day of reflection among media professionals about issues of press freedom and professional ethics."

It should be seen as an opportunity to celebrate the basic principle of freedom of the press and to assess "the state of press freedom" throughout the world. We need such a day "ironically perhaps now more than ever. That's because despite free and easy access to news, we have to ask whether it's actually "news" we're accessing and if so, whether it's real?"

In an excerpt published in The Toronto Star several years ago, I stated: "A free press helps guarantee a free society. It is 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.?

Frankly, the ability to discern fact from 'fake news,' to question and call attention to both global and local issues, and to dig behind the COVID mask to uncover what else is actually happening in the world, has never been more important. COVID is and has been overwhelming but when I have trouble accessing information across a variety of platforms about any other news impacting our world, both globally and locally, that's a problem.