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## Why Do I Teach Journalism? Because it is More Important Now Than Ever

By Jeff Kunerth

UCF Forum columnist

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(Photo by All About News)

I hear this all the time from former newspaper colleagues who have left as the newsroom has diminished over the years: How dare you teach journalism? Or this version: There are still students who want to be journalists? Really?

I could answer that I teach journalism because there still are students who are curious about the world; who want to make a difference; who need to give voice to the voiceless; who find the lives of other people interesting and worth telling; who get their kicks

exposing wrongdoing; or who want a job that pays them to write. All the same things that motivated me, and my former colleagues, to go into journalism.

It was never about the money. It's possible to make a good living doing journalism, but nobody then — nor now — goes into the profession with the idea of getting rich.

I could say that I come from a family of journalists, so I'm just carrying on the family tradition.

But what I tell those who question why I teach journalism is this: Because journalism is more important now than ever.

And that's all I need to say because they know what I mean.

I heard a story on NPR about a newspaper that was going out of business. The paper was a family business handed down from generation to generation and the current owner, who wanted to retire, could not find a buyer.

The owner said watching the decline of the newspaper was like watching a person die and not being able to do anything to save that life.

“There is no democracy without journalism.”

— CBS journalist

Scott Pelley

And then somebody made this point: When that paper dies, so does an element of our democracy.

“There is no democracy without journalism,” said CBS journalist Scott Pelley, during a recent visit to UCF.

You can't be a journalist these days without fearing for the future of our democracy when the president of the United States characterizes the press as the enemy of the people.

“The quickest way to destroy a democracy is poisoning the information,” Pelley said. “Journalism is what pushes back against that.”

As Pelley knows, a dictator's playbook begins with attempts to vilify, denigrate and delegitimize the press. A free press is a threat to despots for many reasons: It challenges authority, it holds public officials accountable, it speaks truth to power, it gives voice to the opposition.

In our democracy, the press is often called the Fourth Estate. The original three estates — clergy, noblemen, commoners — were the power structure of Medieval Europe. But in modern America, our power structure is the organization of government: the legislative, judicial and executive.

The role journalism plays in our democracy is to hold those other estates accountable to the public; to challenge lies and misinformation with truth and accuracy; to uncover and expose corruption. Basically, keep everybody honest.

In a democracy, an informed public is the antidote to authoritarianism, the cure to the cult of personality, the balance to bombast. If the press is the enemy, the enemy of the press is ignorance and fear.

I teach journalism because in these fearful, divisive times — where not only is the press under attack, but higher education as well — we're more important than ever.

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