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Facing off with fake news

PATRICIA GALLAGHER NEWBERRY

As my year as SPJ president approached, I put “fight fake news” on my to-do list.

I’ll respond to every nasty slam, every spurious tweet, every “enemy of the people” put-down with a counter-tweet of my own, I thought.

A few tweets in — with low-impact “No, you are incorrect, Mr. President” posts — I quickly gave up the goal. Fighting anti-press rhetoric, it turns out requires the voices of more than one lone SPJer.

Happily, dozens and dozens of journalists and their employers are in the game.

For my class lectures, I’ve been tracking their efforts to defend the press since the day our Tweeter-in-Chief won the White House. I picked up more talking points in January as students in my annual NYC Media course asked New York-based journalists about their response to Trump & Co.’s press bashing.

Some of their takeaways:

- “Trump’s made us better. Trump’s made us stronger. He gives us a chance to explain how we do our jobs,” said CNN’s Brian Stelter. One example: When Trump hit 301 days without a press briefing, Stelter and his colleagues spent the better part of a day on the story. He is among the news pros who acknowledge that social media has permanently changed news consumption. “The impetus is on the consumer to go and get the information,” he said. “None of us can individually fix that, but all of us individually can help influence it a little bit by creating high-quality content.”

- At Columbia Journalism Review, Editor and Publisher Kyle Pope explained that Trump’s long record of attacking the press stems from his deep distrust of institutions. The press, in response, has not been oppositional enough, in his opinion. Social media platforms are of little help, he said, as they have no allegiance to journalistic standards. The result is alarming, in Pope’s analysis: “The First Amendment is in play. There are a lot of Americans who are questioning its value and its centrality to the country.”

- At The New York Times, media writer Michael Grynbaum acknowledged new dangers. “The fact that a journalist has not been attacked at a rally or a political event is a bit of surprise,” he said, just after dropping a story that Trump posted “fake news” charges 273 times on Twitter last year, 50% more than in 2018. When sources tell Grynbaum, “Oh, you’re the fake news,” he doesn’t argue back but instead replies,

“Help me understand your point of view.” (Separately, The Times last fall reported Trump’s three-year tally of anti-media Tweets at more than 1,300.)

- At “Morning Joe,” lead anchor Joe Scarborough, a frequent Trump critic, is pressing his staff for balance. “With a new year, it’s our aim to bring more conservatives to the table,” one producer told us.

- At National Public Radio, Public Editor Elizabeth Jensen takes listener complaints seriously, addressing some in columns. In January she wrote about the network’s use of the term “assassination” in reporting the death of Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani; every year, she probes NPR’s slow moves to staff diversity.

- At the Committee to Protect Journalists, Associate Director Robert Mahoney noted that CPJ has recorded more than 400 specific anti-press incidents (arrests, attacks, subpoenas and more) in the United States since 2017, when it launched its U.S. Press Freedom Tracker project. Last year, it added advice for covering events like political rallies and protests to its extensive collection of “safety advisories.”

SPJ, of course, does its part to position journalists as anything but fake-news producers. In fact, everything SPJ does is about promoting and protecting journalism. An example: Last November, we co-sponsored the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press’ #ProtectPressFreedom initiative.

And what exactly is at stake? New York Times Publisher A.G. Sulzberger outlined the crisis eloquently last fall. Taking cues from U.S. leaders, a growing number of governments are trying to shut down journalists, he said. In hot spots where The Times sends journalists, they are now more often discredited (yes, sometimes with charges of “fake news”), intimidated or harmed.

“The United States has done more than any other country to popularize the idea of free expression and to champion the rights of the free press,” he concluded. “The time has come for us to fight for those ideals again.”

Sulzberger called on leaders in political, business, academic and nonprofit worlds to join the fight. He called on journalists to chase stories that matter. And he called on members of his audience — of all audiences — to pay for journalism and then “use what you learn to make a difference.”

Sage and sober advice. No one can shut down Twitter warfare against the press alone. But we can together, as we fight this essential fight. 🦋