

**Unfreedom of the Press**, Mark R. Levin, Threshold Editions, 2019, pp. 272, \$16.44 hardcover.

## That's Right, I Said It!

**Glynn Custred**

Mark Levin's *Unfreedom of the Press* tells the story of how contemporary journalism has departed from its earlier standards and betrayed the principles that make a free press an essential part of a self-governing society. Levin is an outspoken proponent of the founding principles—the separation of powers in government, the commitment to individual liberty, property rights, and a free press. The author of a number of books on those and related subjects, a radio talk show host, and the producer of a subscription service on cable television, Levin is a powerful polemicist whose work is grounded in facts, and whose observations are based on a thorough understanding of history.

As we read Levin's description of how the press has changed over time, we see clear similarities with higher education. In an earlier age both the press and higher education were closely related to doctrine in the form of religious orthodoxy, and in more recent, more "enlightened" times both became committed to empiricism, rational inquiry, objectivity, and the advancement of knowledge. This meant that the press was free to gather and publish the news, and that the university operated as a free market of ideas. Sadly, both have converged on the same, more retrogressive track reminiscent of those early days with which Levin begins his historical discussion, a time when doctrine was supreme and free speech and inquiry stifled.

Levin begins in 1638 with the introduction of the first printing press in America. The press was set up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and began operation the following year. Its purpose was to publish religious material and literature for propagating the gospel among the Indians in their own languages. In order to prevent contentions within the congregation, and to hinder the rise of heresies, the Puritan

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ecclesiastical authorities placed restraints on what could be published. In 1662 the government of the Massachusetts Bay Colony appointed licensers of the press, and after 1664 a law was passed restricting printing to Cambridge and placing restrictions on what could be printed.<sup>1</sup>

And so, the press in America began not with freedom, but with censorship and control from the top. These controls became lax during the early eighteenth century, and printing spread throughout the colonies and with it the publication in America of books, pamphlets, and newspapers. This phase in the history of the media in America is what Levin calls the era of “the patriot press,” since printers, pamphleteers, and newspaper editors played an important role in the American Revolution. Thomas Paine’s decisive tract *Common Sense*, for the most prominent example, was published in pamphlet form on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1776, and spread throughout the colonies.

After the Revolution, presses rapidly multiplied and the evolution of the mass media in the United States entered its next phase, which historians call “the party-press era.” This period lasted roughly from the 1780s to the 1860s, a time when most

newspapers were openly aligned with parties, politicians, and campaigns, not concealing their partisanship. Toward the end of the century, with the rise of the urban press in big cities, partisan preference in the press merged with commercialism, as seen most clearly in what has been called “yellow journalism,” which Levin skips but which is a part of the overall story. This kind of journalism mixed sober news with stories that emphasized human interest, crime, and disasters, sensationalizing and exaggerating reports for the sake of boosting circulation.

The 1890s profit-motivated circulation war between Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal* combined with the earlier pattern of party preference. The *New York World* was aided in part by the Democratic Party, and both publishers were active in party politics. They both served as Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives, and Hearst served as mayor of New York City and governor of New York State, and ran unsuccessfully for president. In both cases Progressive ideas and viewpoints appeared in their publications.

1 For more on colonial journalism colonial journalism is Marvin Olasky, “‘Whatever is, is wrong’: Antinomianism and the teaching of journalism history,” *Academic Questions* 3, no. 2 (Summer, 1990): 40-50.

The aims of progressivism in this era were to reform business and government to promote the general welfare through careful “scientific” planning, as well as to improve accountability in public institutions. In the latter case some journalists dedicated themselves to the task of exposing corruption, thereby earning the designation of “muckrakers.” An early expounder of Progressivism was embodied in Herbert D. Croly (1869-1930), one of the most influential public intellectuals of the early twentieth century. Croly rejected the Founders’ concept of limited government and the enumeration of powers, and called for nothing less than a total transformation of the American political system by concentrating power in government. For the journalists who followed that movement, Levin writes, democracy was “too messy and too dispersed to allow for the ‘expert’ decision making and ‘scientific’ planning required of the ‘administrative state’ for which they advocated.” They were, therefore, not only journalists gathering and reporting the news, but also propagators of an ideology.

One of the chief proponents of this movement, and an advocate of how the media might serve those ends, was Edward Bernays who pioneered the scientific shaping and manipulation of

public opinion, known as “engineering consent.”

During the “Great War” government once again became involved in the press. While Lincoln did close down some newspapers during the Civil War, World War I was different. That conflict was the first total war in history, requiring the participation and the sacrifice of all sectors of society, and the willing co-operation of the population as a whole. To this end, the Wilson administration created its own propaganda organization called the Committee for Public Information. Bernays was recruited to help in that effort. Ten years after the war, in 1928, he published *Propaganda*, in which he defined propaganda as “a constant, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea, or group.” Bernays considered the public incapable of enlightened thinking and thus of making the kind of decisions required in a republic, a view common in Progressive thought, though antithetical to that of the nation’s Founders. Newspapers and those who ran them—the folks that knew better—were now uniquely situated to lead the ignorant masses.

We see, therefore, in the history of the press three themes that characterize the mass media over

time: 1) reporting in the service of religion, ideology, or political party; 2) reporting in pursuit of profit; and 3) pure ideologically driven propaganda. All three themes can intertwine in different ways, but despite the pro-government political efforts of its practitioners, progressivism also had a countervailing consequence. By the 1920s its “scientific” approach to everything was being thoroughly ensconced in newsrooms. As a result, journalists began to distance themselves from their predecessors by making news gathering and reporting more “professional.” Levin cites former journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, who in *Elements of Journalism* (2014) define modern journalism’s generally agreed upon principles and standards that readers had come to expect after World War I. These included such notions as “the first obligation of journalism is the truth,” journalists should be “transparent about their motives and methods,” “journalism’s essence is a discipline of verification” and “practitioners must serve as an independent monitor of power.”

Independence and objectivity, of course, are not principles that are easily defined or adhered to. Bias, even when it is unintended, can enter into the process. Muckraker Lincoln Steffens is just one prominent

example of a journalist whose left-wing perspective blinded him to what was going on in the Russian Revolution, even though at home he was keen on exposing the weaknesses and corruption of institutions. After a short visit to Russia in 1919 he infamously said—repeating it over the years—“I have been to the future and it works.”

The *New York Times* comes in for particular opprobrium from Levin for violations of Kovach and Rosenstiel’s professional journalistic protocol. Even after Stalin’s forced collectivization and the starvation of millions, the “*Times*’s long-time man in Moscow,” correspondent Walter Duranty, never reported what was actually going on, although he, like many other journalists—among them the highly respected Malcolm Muggeridge—knew the vast immiseration caused by Stalin’s forced collectivization. Based on work by Lubomyr Luciuk of the Royal Military College of Canada, Levin reports that on September 26, 1933 at the British embassy in Moscow, Duranty confidentially told British diplomat William Strang that as many as ten million had died either directly or indirectly of famine conditions in the past year. Yet Duranty “orchestrated a vicious ostracizing of those journalists who risked much by

reporting on the brutalities of forced collectivization and the demographic catastrophe, Muggeridge among them.” When Duranty was confronted with the truth, said Luciuk, he “evolved a dismissive dodge, canting ‘you can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs.’”

Duranty was considered the dean of foreign correspondents, a “journalistic celebrity,” and the recipient of numerous honors, among them the Pulitzer Prize. Yet as Muggeridge later said, he was “unquestionably a long time mouth piece for the brutal Soviet regime” who was “the greatest liar of any journalist I have met in my fifty years of journalism.”

Levin cites the *New York Times* for another egregious lack of journalistic integrity. This time during World War II, when news of the systematic slaughter of Jews by the Nazis was purposefully and regularly reduced to brief reports that appeared only in the back pages, if reported at all. This was partly in deference to the Roosevelt government’s downplaying of the story, and partly, says Levin, to Arthur Hays Sulzberger, the publisher of the *Times*. Sulzberger was himself an assimilated Jew of German descent who desperately wanted to avoid the *Times* being stigmatized as the “Jewish paper,” guilty of “special pleading” on

behalf of the Jews in Germany and in German occupied countries of Europe.

Since World War II, however, Levin shows those principles laid out in the *Elements of Journalism* have been jettisoned by the “mainstream” press in favor of practices that go back to earlier, partisan forms and downright propaganda. One of many examples of the latter today is the way the press handles the issue of climate change, a multilayered scientific matter that raises questions of cause and effect often extending beyond the current state of scientific understanding. Yet the issue has been thoroughly politicized, and media coverage of the topic exudes a certainty that most closely resembles that of a millenarian cult.

In determining what is “fit to print,” the major media have adopted a narrative that closely aligns with the priorities of higher education. Both institutions are currently absorbed with reductionist narratives concerning matters of race, gender, and sexuality that often override the concern with journalistic and scholarly standards, standards that those institutions themselves had promulgated in an earlier time. The case of rape allegations against the Duke University lacrosse team provides a prime example.

In 2006 the Duke Lacrosse team players hired two strippers to perform at a party. One of them, a black woman, Crystal Mangum, later accused the team members of rape. A dishonest prosecutor, Mike Nifong, prosecuted the men despite evidence that ultimately exonerated them, and was later disbarred. Nevertheless, both the media and the faculty jumped into the fray feet first to expound on the guilt of the white lacrosse players and the victimization of the black, presumably working-class woman. In this one incident, former *New York Times* editor Dan Okrent observed, all the preferred narratives came together; “white over black, rich over poor, all the things that we know happen in the world, coming together in one place. And journalists, they start to quiver with a thrill when something like this happens.” Of course, the whole thing turned out to be false. Nifong was disbarred and given a day in jail for having wreaked havoc on the lives of the young men accused. Only a small number of media outlets, and even then only grudgingly and in extremely small print, corrected the story.

In essence, Levin believes that the press today has become the mouthpiece for a political ideology

and for the political party most closely associated with it. The most obvious piece of evidence Levin deploys to back up his thesis are the widely disparate ways the media has covered the presidencies of Barack Obama, a Democrat, and Donald Trump, a Republican. While Levin’s comparisons are worth reading, the extreme favoritism accorded Obama and the savaging accorded Trump is generally known—and empirically demonstrated. Harvard University’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, has published research that shows the ratio of negative to positive news coverage of President Trump to have been 80/20, while coverage of President Obama enjoyed a ratio of 40/60.<sup>2</sup>

Since the publication of *Unfreedom of the Press*, events have transpired that strongly support Levin’s thesis that the media has reverted to its pre-1920s form of propagandizing. There is the egregiously propagandistic 1619 Project, a series of articles and education materials produced by the *New York Times* and designed to promote the idea that America is and always has been primarily a vessel for black oppression and white supremacy. Despite protests from dozens of leading historians,

<sup>2</sup> John Kass, “Harvard study: Media has been largely negative on Trump,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 19, 2017.

the project was awarded the Pulitzer Prize—the brass ring of journalistic excellence.

The 1619 Project was itself an effort to obfuscate the paper's role in “Russiagate,” a largely media-driven effort to indict Donald Trump's 2016 political campaign and presidential administration for the crime of “colluding” with the Russians to win the presidency. After special counsel Robert Mueller's team found that neither “the Trump campaign, or anyone associated with it, conspired or coordinated with the Russian government,” the Pulitzer Prize committee once again awarded the *Times* with its imprimatur for “relentlessly reported coverage . . . of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and its connections to the Trump campaign, the President-elect's transition team and his eventual administration.”<sup>3</sup>

More than any single event, however, the George Floyd protests and riots of summer 2020 have served to establish a pattern of welcome, if regrettable, transparency about the media revolution Levin diligently describes. Staffers at the *New York Times*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and

other media outlets openly revolted and forced the resignations of long-time editors whose work was deemed insufficiently deferential to the Floyd rioters and the Black Lives Matter/Critical Theory ideology they espoused.

Senior media figures have supported and advanced the new journalism, which insists media objectivity is a cover for racism and white supremacy. In response to the Floyd riots *Washington Post* media columnist Margaret Sullivan argued the old approach of “‘just tell me the bare facts [and] don't be on anyone's side' . . . doesn't always work, especially right now . . . that's why the notion to ‘represent all points of view equally’ is absurd and sometimes wrongheaded.”<sup>4</sup> Sullivan was joined by Wesley Lowery, a correspondent for the *60 Minutes* news program, who decried the “American view-from-nowhere” approach to reporting, stating that “‘objectivity’-obsessed, both-sides journalism is a failed experiment. We need to fundamentally reset the norms of our field. The old way must go.”<sup>5</sup>

Objectivity and disinterestedness are not the only principles that the

3 Sean Davis, “A Catastrophic Media Failure: America's blue-chip journalists botched the Russia story from its birth to its final breath Sunday,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2019.

4 Margaret Sullivan, “What's a journalist supposed to be now — an activist? A stenographer? You're asking the wrong question,” *Washington Post*, June 7, 2020.

5 Mark Grabowski, “Objectivity didn't fail journalism. Journalists failed it,” *Washington Examiner*, June 17, 2020.

media seem to have discarded. The 2020 U.S. presidential campaign revealed that journalism's commitment to free speech is also in doubt. When emails from an abandoned laptop raising serious questions about presidential candidate Joe Biden's son Hunter and his involvement with foreign interests surfaced, most of the major media decided to prevent the story's circulation. When the occasionally irreverent *New York Post* broke the story, the paper's Tweets containing links to their articles were immediately locked by Twitter and subjected to strict limits by social media giant Facebook. The seemingly unchecked power of the tech giants to squelch political debate is troubling in itself. But the legacy media also ignored the story, and few industry leaders denounced Big Tech's attacks on the free speech rights of the *New York Post* and its writers. What little media coverage there was consisted of incredulous dismissals of the scandal as "Russian disinformation" (*Washington Post*, *Politico*, *Axios*), "unverified" (*New York Times*, MSNBC, *New York Times*), or otherwise

"inauthentic" or "unreliable" (CNN, Wikipedia).<sup>6</sup>

Instead, according to an editorial in the *National Review*, a number of well-known journalists were quietly warned that they would be ostracized and pilloried, their careers ruined if they dared report on the laptop story with anything other than critical disdain for the outlet that published them. Intrepid reporter Glenn Greenwald felt obligated to resign from the news site he co-founded, *The Intercept*, because the editors refused to publish his piece discussing the Biden emails. Even taxpayer funded National Public Radio, which obsessively reported on the (still) unverified "dossier" claiming that Trump colluded with Russia, refused to air the story. Its managing editor for news Terence Samuel reasoned that "[w]e don't want to waste our time on stories that are not really stories, and we don't want to waste the listeners' and readers' time on stories that are just pure distractions."<sup>7</sup> It is anyone's guess how the media regains its credibility in light of a December 8, 2020 statement by Hunter Biden that "the U.S. Attorney's Office in Delaware advised my legal counsel, also

6 Joe B. Pollack, "Mainstream Media, Big Tech Cover-up Collapses with Hunter Biden Investigation," *Breitbart.com*, December 9, 2020.

7 Yaakov Kornreich, "How The Hunter Biden Email Story Was Suppressed By Social Media," *Yated Ne'eman*, October 21, 2020, <https://yated.com/how-the-hunter-biden-email-story-was-suppressed-by-social-media/>



yesterday, that they are investigating my tax affairs.”<sup>8</sup>

In the not too distant past the media would have seen it as their duty to examine the evidence on the Biden laptop in order to discover how much of it was real, how much false, and how much, if any, could be relevant to the election of Hunter Biden’s father, Joe Biden, Democratic candidate for President of the United States. For at least the past one-hundred years the media has unfailingly taken the side of releasing to the public more information, not less. Whether the issue is classified intelligence on troop movements, the Pentagon Papers, or even private information about the affairs of individuals, journalists have always seen it as their duty to, in the words of the Society of Professional Journalists, “promote the flow of information.” In the case of the Hunter Biden laptop, however, the media’s combination of silence, cover up, and even counter accusation reflects the new diktat that the public should have less information, not more, particularly if the information might disrupt the favored viewpoint.

Regardless of politics, the story of news reporting’s evolution from

an institution that saw its primary function as “seeking truth and reporting it” to one that promotes a viewpoint, has had serious costs. The media has now become one of the least trusted major institutions in the United States. A recent Gallup poll found that 86 percent of Americans believed the media was politically biased, with almost half stating that there was “a great deal of bias.” More than 75 percent of Americans believe that news organizations are “trying to persuade people to adopt a certain viewpoint” and most Americans believe reporters are “misrepresenting the facts.”<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes called the “fourth branch of government,” an independent media has long been as crucial to the proper functioning of democracy as the other three branches. For those interested in understanding how we have come to this point, or even perhaps doing something about it, Levin’s *Unfreedom of the Press* is an invaluable tool.

8 Pamela Brown, “Federal criminal investigation into Hunter Biden focuses on his business dealings in China,” CNN.com, December 10, 2020.

9 Megan Brennan, Helen Stubbs, “News Media Viewed as Biased but Crucial to Democracy,” Gallup.com, August 4, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/225755/americans-news-bias-name-neutral-source.aspx>.