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LIBERAL & PROUD

THE APPALLING STATE OF 'JOURNALISM'

Exclusive: Ellen Ratner blasts media members who 'do politicians' and government's bidding'

Published: 6 hours ago



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Ellen Ratner is the White House correspondent and bureau chief for the Talk Radio News service. She is also Washington bureau chief and political editor for Talkers Magazine. In addition, Ratner is a news analyst at the Fox News Channel.

Four years ago, I interviewed the editor of a government-sponsored newspaper in the Middle East. Given that the government paid for the newspaper, I questioned the editor about journalistic integrity and independence. The answer I received: There's a lot of self-censorship in the American press, and we don't have as much of a free press as I wanted to believe. I walked away thinking the editor was crazy. Surely, I assured myself, we have a free press in our country.

Fast forward to this week, when an article in the New York Times titled, "Latest Word from the Trail? I Take It Back," by Jeremy Peters, detailed the quote policy from the Obama White House and the Romney campaign. It was shocking to me as a journalist. I have been covering the White House since 1993, and the control of the press has been increasing.

President Clinton had free-wheeling press conferences and showed up in the press room on occasion for an "off the record" talk. Journalists would gather around him and ask as many questions as possible.

Now presidents have short press conferences and take questions from a list of reporters prepared by the press secretary.

Previously, there was the morning "gaggle," where the television people were not seen on screen, which allowed the radio, print and magazine folks to have equal access. The gaggles were held in the press secretary's office.

President George W. Bush's press secretary, Dana Perino, stopped the gaggles. The Obama administration did not resurrect them.

The "mix and mingles" after State dinners stopped. Even the annual press picnic – where members of the media could have conversations with staff members – stopped as well.

Now, sadly, we have the White House and political campaigns cleaning up quotes before reporters are even allowed to publish their stories.

Peters' article details what is really happening. Politicians are granting news outlets access only if they are allowed to first edit and approve their own statements.

He wrote, "Quote approval is standard practice for the Obama campaign, used by many top strategists and almost all midlevel aides in Chicago and at the White House – almost anyone other than spokesmen who are paid to be quoted. (And sometimes it applies even to them.) It is also commonplace throughout Washington and on the campaign trail."

Peters continues, "The Romney campaign insists that journalists interviewing any of Mitt Romney's five sons agree to use only quotations that are approved by the press office. And Romney advisers almost always require that reporters ask them for the green light on anything from a conversation that they would like to include in an article. "

This entire process turns my stomach.

Wealthy news organizations can afford to travel with the president and with Gov. Romney. They want to show their bosses and the consumers of their news product that they have access.

The trade is clear: You give us the interview, and we will let you approve our reports.

We have all reviewed quotes with sources. It is done for the sake of accuracy. However, if an interview is taped, there is no need for reviews – unless it is to “clean up” a quote to please the news source.

The Associated Press has never allowed its journalists to clean up quotes that were accurate in the first place. Just this week, James Asher, the Washington bureau chief of McClatchy Newspapers put in force a policy regarding getting quote approval and the policy of Freedom of Information, or FOIA, requests.

In a letter to staff and readers he said, “These days government is trying mightily to constrain access to public information. Each of you has had no comments, demands for FIOAs that goes unanswered and worse. More recently our sources have been chilled by threats of leak investigations and some have endured full blown leak inquiries.”

Asher continued, “As advocates of the First Amendment, we cannot be intimidated into letting the government control our work. When The New York Times agreed with Bush Administration officials to delay publication of its story of illegal wiretaps of Americans until after the 2004 election, it did the nation a great disservice. Acceding to the Obama administration’s efforts to censor our work to have it more in line with their political spin is another disservice to America.”

Finally, McClatchy’s Asher said, “And judging from the controversy that has ensued from the disclosure of these requests, the people don’t like this, either.”

Helen Thomas gave me great advice when I first arrived at the White House. She said, “Ellen, a free press is necessary for democracy, and remember to never do anyone’s bidding.”

It seems that many in the news media are happy to do politicians’ and government’s bidding in exchange for access.

That kind of “journalism” will signal the end of our democracy faster than a rigged election. We don’t need it. Americans don’t want it. And it will ruin our free press – as well as our country.