

# **Slouching Towards Same-Sex Marriage: How the Advent of New Media Influenced Press Bias and Public Opinion**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The remarkable shift in public opinion favoring gay marriage is most curious in that it exactly coincides with the advent of social media. This examination suggests that social media posts favoring same-sex marriage were pivotal in influencing press bias and public opinion. These posts, which by 2012 overwhelmingly backed the right of gay couples to marry, provided the early momentum for support which soon thereafter was more broadly embraced in the traditional press and eventually, by the public itself. Modern standards of journalistic impartiality were largely abandoned by the traditional press, so much so that it became an unabashed cheerleader for gay marriage. This has had the regrettable consequence of further eroding public trust in an institution whose crisis today is as much existential as financial.*

The fight over same-sex marriage has been one of the most divisive cultural issues of our time. And when the Supreme Court ultimately decided the issue last June, the justices were just as divided as advocates for gay marital rights and those opposed to it, with the single vote of Justice Anthony Kennedy deciding the outcome. Yet judging from how the nation's newspapers treated the decision on their front pages Saturday, June 27, 2015, you'd hardly know there was any divide at all.

And to some extent, there may not have been. Indeed, if polling conducted by the Pew Research Center is to be believed, 57% of the American public favored same sex marriage by the time the court issued its verdict, which represented a stunning flip-flop considering that only a decade earlier, the polarity was reversed—53% were opposed.<sup>1</sup>

The news media is not supposed to have a dog in the hunt on the outcome of this or any other issue. Journalists are supposed to be conveyers of reality, not shapers of it. They're

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center Web site, "Support for Same-Sex Marriage at Record High, but Key Segments Remain Opposed: 72% Say Legal Recognition is 'Inevitable,'" (June 8, 2015).

supposed to remain neutral and call balls and strikes impartially—“without fear or favor,”<sup>2</sup> the modern standard of impartiality established by *The New York Times* in 1896 during the heyday of yellow journalism. But the evidence in this case overwhelmingly indicates that my profession failed to uphold the principles of fairness, balance and impartiality in their coverage of same-sex marriage—and the emergence of new media, and its social media variant, to a very great extent explains why.

Although public opinion usually moves at a glacial pace, the flip-flop in support for same-sex marriage is one very notable exception. This remarkable and sudden shift in public opinion favoring gay marriage is most curious in that it exactly coincides with the advent of social media, which was the second revolution of the digital age after the invention of the Internet itself.

As early as 2009, six years before the Supreme Court’s decision, the Pew Research Center found that social media posts overwhelmingly favoring gay marriage established early momentum for support at a time when the traditional press was barely covering the topic.<sup>3</sup> By May of 2012, in that year’s presidential election when President Obama came out in favor of same-sex marriage and while the American public was still fairly evenly split on the issue, statements on Twitter and blogs backing the right of gay couples to marry outnumbered those opposed by a more than 2-to-1 margin.<sup>4</sup> Within a year, this momentum favoring same-sex marriage had been widely embraced in the mainstream media to such an extent that a study published in 2013 by the Pew Research Center found that stories with more statements

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<sup>2</sup> The “without fear or favor” standard originated in *The New York Times* in a mission statement published on its pages on August 18, 1896, by Adolph S. Ochs, the founding father of the modern *Times*. Ochs envisioned a dignified and responsible alternative to the sensationalism rampant in the New York press at that time, a newspaper that would provide “the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of party, sect, or interests involved.”

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center Web site, “Same-Sex Marriage and a Photo Op Flap Lead a Diverse Online Conversation: *PEJ New Media Index May 4-8, 2009*,” Pew Research Center, May 14, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Hitlin, “In Social Media, Support for Same-Sex Marriage: *PEJ New Media Index May 7-11, 2012*,” Pew Research Center, May 17, 2012.

supporting gay marriage outnumbered those with more statements opposing it by a margin of about 5-to-1.<sup>5</sup>

“This news media focus on support held true whether the stories were reported news articles or opinion pieces,” the Pew study found, “and was also the case across nearly all media sectors studied. All three of the major cable networks, for instance, had more stories with significantly more supportive statements than opposing, including Fox News.”<sup>6</sup>

These developments came as little surprise to this author, whose concerns about the direction of journalism—and its distance from an increasingly distrustful public—have become more acute over the last dozen or so years, as I have witnessed firsthand the financial and existential carnage which public distrust has done to our profession.<sup>7</sup>

### **The “education” of Thomas O’Boyle**

To the extent any journalist can say he had classical journalistic training, I had it. My undergraduate education was in the liberal arts, from a small residential college in Pennsylvania, with a graduate professional degree from a Big Ten university. After obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree from Allegheny College, and a Master of Science in Journalism from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, I spent more than two decades working as a beat reporter, foreign correspondent and senior newsroom editor and also writing a book, which was published by Alfred Knopf. I was employed by three publications during this time: a

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Hitlin, “News Coverage Conveys Strong Momentum for Same-Sex Marriage,” Pew Research Center, June 17, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Hitlin, “News Coverage.”

<sup>7</sup> Distrust of the news media has risen uninterrupted for at least thirty-five years. According to the most recent data from the Pew Research Center (“Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government,” November 23, 2015), 65% of those polled say the national news media has a negative effect on the country. That mirrors declining trust in many other national institutions, most notably the government. The Pew poll found that just 19% say they can trust the government always or most of the time, among the lowest levels in the past-half century.

weekly, *Crain's Chicago Business*; a national daily, *The Wall Street Journal*; and a daily newspaper in the major metro market of my adopted hometown, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

In 2002, after twenty-three highly rewarding years in journalism (which included having edited a project which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1998), I had grown weary of the newsroom. Eager to see if I could provide solutions (rather than contributing to the problems), I left the grind of daily journalism for what erstwhile colleagues only half-jokingly called “the dark side”—the business operations of the *Post-Gazette*, specifically Circulation, as the manager charged with selling what was then, exclusively, the printed newspaper. I had no idea that the news business was on the verge of the greatest era of change at any time since Gutenberg—a cataclysm which was about to engulf all facets and elements of “news.”

### **Turning “print into pixels”**

As the audience for print has fallen in recent years, we have turned “print into pixels,” according to our most recent marketing slogan, adding many digital products to adapt to reader preferences and embracing new media and social media, while seeking to offset declines in print readership. Reflecting this evolution, my department changed from Circulation to Audience and my title changed too, to Senior Manager of Audience and Associated Strategies.

There can be little doubt, however, that reader distrust has done as much to erode the typical paper's news franchise as has distaste for print. I sadly discovered as much in my new assignment. Many customers who do not get the *Post-Gazette* refuse to purchase it because of its perceived liberal bias. The statistics we track and the studies we have commissioned confirm this. I cannot begin to count the number of personal contacts I've had with customers unhappy with some aspect of our coverage, but it would easily number in the hundreds. Tens of thousands more have jumped to the conservative alternative, the *Tribune-Review*—and again, most of their

readers are former customers of ours because of damage we have intentionally (though sometimes unconsciously) inflicted on ourselves.

It is a story which has been repeated in newsrooms across the country, and it is a trend I find alarming not just because of the threat it poses to the institution and the jobs which depend upon it but as a citizen as well, for I believe that democracy benefits most when news organizations have strong trust relationships with the public they serve. In most cities, regrettably, there is no conservative alternative. When subscribers stop subscribing, they quit reading newspapers altogether. My experience has taught me that hewing to the standards of fairness, balance and impartiality is the absolute best way to engender the trust of the public, and all too often the profession has failed in its stewardship of those standards.

### **Sad reminder**

For this reason, from the perspective of a veteran newsman who still clung to the fanciful hope that the news media might refrain from taking sides in that which they cover, the morning of Saturday, June 27, 2015, was a sad reminder that the profession I have inhabited and cherished as a newsman and executive does not play it straight. Triggering my revelation was a clinical review of how fifty front pages from all fifty states treated news of the Supreme Court decision, which the respected Poynter Institute compiled from online archives maintained by the Newseum in Washington, D.C.<sup>8</sup>

As a former Assistant Managing Editor for the *Post-Gazette*, I used to supervise the compilation and presentation of the front page on the evening news desk. As a result, I have more than casual knowledge of the criteria, responsibilities, judgments and appropriate

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<sup>8</sup> Kristen Hare, "Front Pages From All 50 States on the Same-Sex Marriage Ruling," Poynter.org, June 27, 2015. The Poynter Institute, in St. Petersburg, Florida, is one of journalism's leading educators and promoters of sound professional practice.

sensibilities engaged in such work. Examining the fifty front pages was an “aha moment” for me, and an unpleasant one at that. Taken together, they are a vivid and striking display of what journalists once eschewed above all else: unabashed cheerleading.

In paper after paper, banner headlines in point sizes usually reserved for war and calamity, joyfully, exultantly, effusively proclaimed victory, embracing the “love wins” banner under which advocates for same-sex marriage had carefully orchestrated and crafted their triumphant media message.

“So many papers showing photos of so MANY happy people!”<sup>9</sup> was how one commenter on the Poynter site summed up the overall sentiment, accurately and concisely. Perhaps most shocking is only fourteen papers among the fifty even bothered to run a second story on their front page acknowledging there was another viewpoint to be represented, which seems at the least an outright denial of reality in that the issue had proven so divisive.

Curiously, there was more flagrant bias apparent on the front pages of newspapers serving smaller red-state communities. For instance, the page-one headline of the *Montgomery Advertiser* in Alabama proclaimed “LOVE WINS,” next to the photo of a lesbian couple who’d just married after getting a marriage license at the Montgomery County Courthouse.<sup>10</sup>

“A FORBIDDEN RITE NO LONGER,” gushed *The Hutchinson News* in Kansas,<sup>11</sup> while the *Hattiesburg American* in Mississippi exclaimed, “SAME SEX, SAME RIGHTS,” above the photo of a jubilant lesbian couple who’d just married on the steps of the Forrest County Courthouse, their fists raised defiantly.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>10</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>11</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>12</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

A few front pages in the survey played it straight. *The Washington Post* (“Gays’ right to wed affirmed,”<sup>13</sup>), *The Plain Dealer* of Cleveland (“Gay marriage now legal nationwide, court rules”<sup>14</sup>) and *The Providence Journal* in Rhode Island (“Gay marriage is U.S. law”<sup>15</sup>) were notable for their even handed treatment, devoid of celebration. But the Poynter survey is most noteworthy for how many among the fifty papers portrayed the Supreme Court’s decision as if it were a cage match, with the victor thumping his or her chest amid the approving roar of jubilant spectators.

It likely comes as no surprise that readers of the *San Francisco Chronicle* saw a front page which exclaimed “WE DO.”<sup>16</sup> But dozens of other papers also embraced a similarly celebratory tone. “PRIDE AND JOY,” thundered *The Tampa Tribune* in Florida.<sup>17</sup> “LOVE FOR ALL,” proclaimed the *Star Advertiser* in Honolulu.<sup>18</sup> “HAPPILY EVER EQUAL,” said *The Courier-Journal* in Louisville.<sup>19</sup> “AT LAST: ‘I DO,’ ” enthused the *Battle Creek Enquirer* in Michigan.<sup>20</sup> The *Citizen-Times* of Asheville, North Carolina, *Victoria Advocate* in Texas and the *Burlington Free Press* in Vermont all gushed “LOVE WINS” or variants thereof.<sup>21</sup>

Readers of *The New York Times* were treated to the most egregious and celebratory display of all. The photo montage of twelve kissing couples on its front page outnumbered any other paper by ten. To the left of the lead right-column news story, below the photo montage, there was no analysis of the event as would be typical for *The Times* in its treatment of

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<sup>13</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>14</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>15</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>16</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>17</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>18</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>19</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>20</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>21</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

significant news. Instead, incredibly on this historic day, their second play story was a feature lamenting that the ruling might signal a “loss for gay culture.”<sup>22</sup>

“Historic day for gay rights,” *The Times*’ secondary headline said, “but a twinge of loss for gay culture.”<sup>23</sup> Quoting Andrew Sullivan, described as “one of the intellectual architects of the [same-sex] marriage movement,”<sup>24</sup> the story conveyed concern expressed by some in the gay community that gay identity might dim, overtaken by its own success.

“What do gay men have in common when they don’t have oppression?” Sullivan was quoted as saying. “I don’t know the answer to that yet.”<sup>25</sup>

### ***The New York Times*’ value system**

The *Times*’ treatment of the Supreme Court decision on its front page would not have come as a surprise to Daniel Okrent, a veteran book and magazine editor who in 2003 was named the first Public Editor of *The Times* as the paper sought to repair damage done to its reputation in the aftermath of the worst scandal in its history, in which reporter Jayson Blair fabricated and plagiarized many of his stories.

In a column Okrent authored shortly after his arrival, under the headline “Is *The New York Times* a liberal newspaper?” he cleverly began his piece by answering the question posed in the headline. “Of course it is,” he wrote in the lead paragraph.<sup>26</sup>

The fattest file on my hard drive is jammed with letters from the disappointed, the dismayed and the irate who find in this newspaper a liberal bias that infects not just political coverage but a range of issues from abortion to zoology to the appointment of an admitted Democrat to be its watchdog. (That would be me.) ... My concern is the flammable stuff that ignites the right. These are the social issues: gay rights, gun control, abortion and environmental regulation, among others. And if you think *The Times* plays it down the middle on any of them, you’ve been reading the paper with your eyes closed.

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<sup>22</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>23</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>24</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>25</sup> Hare, “Front Pages.”

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Okrent, “Is The New York Times a Liberal Newspaper?” *The New York Times*, July 25, 2004.

But if you're examining the paper's coverage of these subjects from a perspective that is neither urban nor Northeastern nor culturally seen-it-all; if you are among the groups *The Times* treats as strange objects to be examined on a laboratory slide (devout Catholics, gun owners, Orthodox Jews, Texans); if your value system wouldn't wear well on a composite *New York Times* journalist, then a walk through this paper can make you feel you're traveling in a strange and forbidding world.<sup>27</sup>

Okrent singled out for criticism the paper's gay-marriage coverage, which he said was unbalanced. Critiquing its treatment, he wrote:

I've learned where gay couples go to celebrate their marriages; I've met gay couples picking out bridal dresses; I've been introduced to couples who have been together for decades and have now sanctified their vows in Canada, couples who have successfully integrated the world of competitive ballroom dancing, couples whose lives are the platonic model of suburban stability. Every one of these articles was perfectly legitimate. Cumulatively, though, they would make a very effective ad campaign for the gay marriage cause. You wouldn't even need the articles: Run the headlines over the invariably sunny pictures of invariably happy people that ran with most of these pieces, and you'd have the makings of a life insurance commercial. This implicit advocacy is underscored by what hasn't appeared. Apart from one excursion into the legal ramifications of custody battles, potentially nettlesome effects of gay marriage have been virtually absent from *The Times* since the issue exploded last winter.<sup>28</sup>

[The explosion Okrent referred to was President Bush's statement seven months earlier in his 2004 State of the Union speech, which rebuked "activist judges [who] have begun redefining marriage by court order, without regard for the will of the people and their elected representatives."<sup>29</sup> In declaring opposition to same-sex marriage, Bush urged Congress to consider amending the U.S. Constitution to mandate that marriage be restricted between a man and a woman. Massachusetts the year before had joined Hawaii (in 1993) and Vermont (in 1999) as the third state to find that state laws restricting same-sex marriage were unconstitutional.]

Okrent's scathing critique caused an uproar in *The Times* newsroom. "On a topic which has produced one of the defining debates of our time," he concluded, "*Times* editors have failed

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<sup>27</sup> Okrent, "*Times Liberal*."

<sup>28</sup> Okrent, "*Times Liberal*."

<sup>29</sup> Tom Witosky and Marc Hansen, *Equal Before the Law: How Iowa Led Americans to Marriage Equality* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 50.

to provide the three-dimensional perspective balanced journalism requires. This has not occurred because of management fiat, but because getting outside one's own value system takes a great deal of self-questioning."<sup>30</sup>

### **Truth, activism, and trust**

To a public whose distrust of journalism has never been deeper, and whose anger over journalistic bias has never been greater, Okrent's observations—as well as my own revelation described earlier—would be greeted by rolling eyes and a snarky comment such as, “Duh. Where have you been?”

Where I've been is toiling away in a deeply wounded profession whose crisis is as much existential as financial. While I had been acutely aware of the problems which pervade my profession—how could one not be, especially when it is your job to sell the newspaper to customers who regularly malign it?—I was also similar to the proverbial frog in a pan of warming water. Press bias is like the air you breathe. It is so omnipresent in the media environment that any inhabitant tends to develop a thick hide which numbs you to the multitudinous layers of bias in its many dimensions, permutations and manifestations. It is only when a person leaves the newsroom that one begins to perceive bias with a more public-oriented perception. The addition of new media, social media and the technologies which empower them, has added yet another layer of complication and subtlety.

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<sup>30</sup> Okrent. He offers the following explanation for his departure from *The Times*, ten months after the column was published: “Yes, the column caused quite a stir in the newsroom and elsewhere in the building—a modest but noticeable amount of positive reaction, and a torrent of negative. One member of the editorial board considered the headline on the column to be a conscious act of sabotage for which I should be forever scorned. I, in fact, noted in my farewell column that the headline was a needless provocation that could be (and had been) so easily taken out of context. But the reaction had nothing at all to do with my departure from the paper. In my very first column, in December 2003, I had stated that my last column would appear at the end of May 2005—that I was signed up for a term-certain 18 months, would not under any conditions stay longer, and that one of the reasons I was doing this was to make certain no one would feel I was pulling punches in order to keep my job.”

As technology changes how news is gathered and delivered, even journalists cannot seem to agree any longer on what exactly constitutes “journalism.” Is blogging journalism? What’s the difference between activism and journalism? Is a fellow such as Julian Assange, whose WikiLeaks website published tens of thousands of classified U.S. military and diplomatic documents, a “journalist”? According to his Wikipedia entry, he describes himself as a journalist, but is he?

In the midst of this murky situation, the very roots of journalism have been shaken to their core as bloggers masquerade as journalists; as polarities between Left and Right become more Balkanized; and as the public gets less credible information, more opinion, and seems quite confused as to what represents a reliable source of “truth.”

This is not how public discourse—between a Fourth Estate which provides information and a public which consumes it and makes judgments accordingly—is supposed to function. This theory is itself a modern creation, born in a time when it didn’t function that way. In the early days of the United States, the press was overtly biased. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was common to have political parties supporting and even owning newspapers. Early press barons such as William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer didn’t care about being fair and balanced—their primary objective was to increase circulation and beat the others by printing the most sensational stories which would sell as many newspapers as possible.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the ideals changed. Some argue that it was the emergence of mass markets, and the desire of advertisers to reach those customers, which helped drive the early news industry toward an ethic of objectivity. With greater neutrality, it was thought, there would be less to offend potential customers. In 1920, Walter Lippmann, often called the father of modern journalism, was an early advocate of neutrality and objectivity in

news reporting. In an essay he wrote that year entitled “Liberty and the News,” he used the terms *truth* and *news* interchangeably.<sup>31</sup> In it, he argued that the press threatens democracy whenever it has an agenda other than the free flow of ideas (though he backed away from such lofty ideals two years later when he published *Public Opinion*, in which he said that participatory democracy was impossible in an age of propaganda, spin and widespread public indifference).

While objectivity is still considered the gold standard that anyone calling himself a “journalist” should embrace, it is an ideal which has come under fire as false since at least the 1950s, as Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel note in *The Elements of Journalism*, their seminal study on the relationship of journalism and democracy published in 2001.

“After decades of debate and argument, sometimes guided by political ideology and sometimes guided by post-modern deconstructionist academics, we have come to the point where some deny that anyone can put facts into a meaningful context to report the truth about them,”<sup>32</sup> Kovach and Rosenstiel write. “An epistemological skepticism has pervaded every aspect of our intellectual life, from art, literature, law, physics, to even history.”<sup>33</sup> Columbia

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<sup>31</sup> Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Three Rivers, 2001), 40.

<sup>32</sup> Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements*, 40.

<sup>33</sup> This “epistemological skepticism”—so characteristic of modern times and modern thought, as Kovach and Rosenstiel note—was evident to C. S. Lewis as early as 1943. “No one saw more clearly what was going on,” writes his friend Owen Barfield in *Owen Barfield on C. S. Lewis* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 91. Barfield cites Lewis’ essay, “The Poison of Subjectivism,” published in 1943, in which Lewis wrote: “After studying his environment man has begun to study himself. Up to that point, he had assumed his own reason and through it seen all other things. Now, his own reason has become the object: It is as if we took out our eyes to look at them. Thus studied his own reason appears to him as the [byproduct] which accompanies chemical or electrical events in a cortex which is itself the byproduct of a blind evolutionary process. His own logic ... becomes merely subjective. There is no reason for supposing that it yields truth.” Commenting on Lewis’ rejection of subjectivism, Barfield writes (92-93): “It was this nonsensical foundation ... that Lewis excelled in laying bare.... You cannot *prove* that there is no such thing as proof, or *argue* that argument is merely a biological process. You cannot hold it *true* that there is no such thing as truth.... I can think of no writer living or dead (for Socrates was not a writer), who has performed that duty [the debunking of subjectivism] more faithfully or so brilliantly as C. S. Lewis.”

University historian Simon Schama has suggested that ‘the certainty of an ultimately observable, empirically verifiable truth’ is dead.”<sup>34</sup>

But if facts are dead, where does that leave us, the public, as discerning consumers of news? Does the entire enterprise cease to function? One remedy Kovach and Rosenstiel recommended was a “Citizen’s Bill of Rights”<sup>35</sup>—what the public can reasonably expect of the information they consume—and one pillar of these rights is that of independence. It is imperative that journalists maintain an independence from those they cover, a bedrock principle that any ethical practitioner of journalism knows to be self-evident, as well as its cousins, neutrality and skepticism. In the classic newsroom vernacular, in other words, “If your mother says she loves you, check it out.”<sup>36</sup>

According to this tradition, strict rules have been enforced to ensure the integrity of the information provided to the public. In 1989, for instance, when it was discovered that Linda Greenhouse, then the Supreme Court reporter for *The New York Times*, had participated in a demonstration in support of abortion rights; *The Times* reprimanded her.<sup>37</sup>

News editors traditionally took a hard line against such activism because the process through which the public receives its information is considered a “public trust”—the public has a right to trust that the information provided to it is reliable and credible. If that trust is broken, its loss can be irretrievable, and it can have grave financial consequences because if information is not trustworthy (as *The Times* found in the Jayson Blair affair), then there is no economic reason for journalism and the enterprises which depend upon it to exist. Trust is the lifeblood of the institution.

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<sup>34</sup> Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements*, 40.

<sup>35</sup> Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements*, 194.

<sup>36</sup> Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements*, 90.

<sup>37</sup> Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements*, 99.

So when Editor Phil Bronstein, of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, in 2004 removed two female reporters covering same-sex marriage off of the beat after they married, he was ensuring the paper did not damage the trust that supports its economic reason to exist. “The issue here is not about gay and lesbian rights. Nor is it about the paper determining whether anyone should get married or not. We can’t, shouldn’t and won’t determine that.... But the issue is the integrity and credibility of the paper,” Bronstein said at the time, explaining his decision.<sup>38</sup> (Ironically, it is a decision for which he would likely be pilloried today.)

In the past, there was near universal agreement on these matters. For instance, when Suzy Wetlaufer, then editor of the *Harvard Business Review*, was discovered in 2002 to be having an affair with former General Electric CEO Jack Welch while writing a profile of him for the magazine—a relationship revealed by the cuckolded wife, Jane Welch—there was nothing to discuss. The relationship was not just a gross violation of taste but also of this ethic of maintaining one’s independence. Wetlaufer was summarily fired.

Another celebrated violation of this code of conduct occurred in 1980 during the presidential election that year when conservative columnist George Will, a strong supporter of Republican candidate Ronald Reagan, coached Reagan in preparation for the candidate’s debate with President Jimmy Carter.<sup>39</sup> Secret coaching wasn’t new: Walter Lippmann had written speeches for several presidents, among them Lyndon Johnson.<sup>40</sup> Will then took to the airwaves after the debate as an ABC commentator and hailed Reagan’s performance, calling him a “thoroughbred.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Jim Romenesko, “SF Chron Pulls Lesbian Couple Off Same-Sex Marriage Beat,” Poynter.org, March 15, 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements*, 100.

<sup>40</sup> Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements*, 100.

<sup>41</sup> Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements*, 100.

Will had kept his coaching of Reagan secret. When it was revealed he hadn't disclosed his role in a performance he had glowingly reviewed, he shrugged off criticisms that his impartiality had been compromised. "Journalism is now infested with persons who are 'little moral thermometers,'" Will said, "dashing about taking other persons' temperatures, spreading, as confused moralists will, a silly scrupulosity and other confusions."<sup>42</sup>

"Will was not making an ideological argument," Kovach and Rosenstiel argue in their book. "Rather, he was implying something else, something that others, regardless of ideology, would echo: that the morality or ethics of journalism was subjective and [therefore] invalid."<sup>43</sup> In other words, objectivity itself was an outdated and harmful ideal, for many of the same reasons that a new generation accustomed to the freedoms of social media would argue decades later: that it muzzles journalists, reinforces the status quo and restricts rights of expression.

### **The generational divide**

In the thirty-five years which have elapsed since that event, every aspect of the news media landscape—ethical, technological, financial—has changed so profoundly it is hard to discern and fully fathom. I know this to be the case because I have lived it. When I entered the news business as a cub reporter in 1979, I composed my stories on a manual typewriter. I was such a dinosaur, ethically speaking, that according to the standards I observed throughout my career, I refused to register as either a Democrat or Republican because I thought it inappropriate to declare allegiance to either party, which was common practice among journalists of my

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<sup>42</sup> Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements*, 100.

<sup>43</sup> Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements*, 100.

generation.<sup>44</sup> I thought such a declaration would bias me, and to this day I remain an independent.

While many of the practices I maintained may be considered hopelessly Paleolithic now, there can be no denying that when it came to providing the public with news then, print journalism was king. Only television newscasts challenged the supremacy of print. Publishing a newspaper was a license to print money, with profit margins often exceeding 30%.

But the emergence of the Internet has done more damage than merely eviscerating the former business model. As profits slipped to single-digits and, in some instances, turned to losses, jobs have been eliminated. The American Society of Newspaper Editors counts 38,000 full-time newsroom jobs in the print sector of the news business in 2012, down from more than 54,000 a decade earlier.<sup>45</sup> Since 2001, the total loss of traditional newsroom jobs has been more than 20,000—a work force drop of 42%.<sup>46</sup> The mean salary of reporters in 2013 was \$44,360; journalists now earn less than the national average for all U.S. workers, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, thousands of jobs have been added in the emergent digital news sector. According to the Pew Research Center, these so-called native digital news enterprises have added around 5,000 full-time editorial jobs.<sup>48</sup> “The digital age has expanded the audience of most media outlets. In that sense, journalism has never been more successful. But the crash of traditional business models has impoverished the practitioners of daily journalism,” writes columnist Timothy Egan in *The New York Times*.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Amanda Bennett in “Media Bias Is Nothing New: The American Press Has Been Partisan More Often Than Not,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, December 23, 2015, reports that Leonard Downie Jr., former editor of *The Washington Post*, took this practice a step further: He declined to vote at all.

<sup>45</sup> Mark Jurkowitz, “The Growth in Digital Reporting: What it Means for Journalism and News Consumers,” Pew Research Center, March 26, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Timothy Egan, “Beat the Press,” *The New York Times*, November 13, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Egan, “Beat the Press.”

<sup>48</sup> Jurkowitz, “Digital Reporting.”

<sup>49</sup> Egan, “Beat the Press.”

Add into this mix the vast array of bloggers and users of social media and you have an ecosystem whose standards are far different from those advocated by Kovach and Rosenstiel. Even among those who call journalism their livelihood, this new generation of journalists—working at places like *Vice*, the *Huffington Post*, *Politico* and *BuzzFeed*—consider many of the standards my generation accepted as gospel, the moral equivalent of composing stories on a manual typewriter.

This new generation was raised in an environment where the distinctions between news media and social media have blurred beyond recognition. It holds less traditional news values and ethics than the generation which preceded it. One intriguing illustration of this is found in how journalists reacted to a social-media push launched by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) organization in March of 2013, as the Supreme Court began to hear the case challenging California’s Proposition 8 banning same-sex marriage. The organization encouraged marriage equality supporters to change their Facebook profile pictures to a red version of HRC’s logo, an equal sign, to show their support for marriage equality.

“The campaign quickly went viral, with thousands of Facebook and Twitter users changing their avatars to the red HRC logo over the span of a few hours,”<sup>50</sup> Nisha Chittal reported on the Poynter.org website. “In looking through the social-media profiles of journalists who have changed their profile pictures, I noticed that many are affiliated with entrepreneurial, digital, and nontraditional media outlets. Journalists from traditional media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, Associated Press and others largely appeared to refrain from participating.”

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<sup>50</sup> Nisha Chittal, “Journalists Share Arguments For, Against Using Same-Sex Marriage Symbols on Social Media Profiles,” Poynter.org, March 27, 2013.

Chittal quoted Sara Morrison, an assistant editor at *Columbia Journalism Review* who had changed her Facebook profile photo to the HRC logo, and explained her rationale thusly: “I don’t think changing my avatar compromises my objectivity since it wasn’t there to begin with. I have opinions about things. We all do.... If a few potential sources feel antagonized by my avatar, well, of course that’s not good. But I feel strongly enough about this—and know and love too many people affected by this—that it really would’ve been dishonest for me not to do it.”<sup>51</sup> One can hear the echoes of the George Will argument in Morrison’s response: Because objectivity is not possible, ethics are not, either. To state the obvious, however, this represents quite a departure from the standard of my generation mentioned earlier, when it was common for reporters and editors to refrain from registering with either political party.

Summing up Morrison’s reasoning, Chittal said it was “similar to the reason other journalists [who had changed their avatars] gave: They feel that same-sex marriage is not a political issue but an issue of basic human rights and equality, and that supporting equal rights does not compromise their journalistic objectivity.”<sup>52</sup> Chittal, however, averred, saying those who had done so “blurred the lines between personal views and professional objectivity in social media.”

As Chittal herself concluded, the HRC campaign points to a generational divide among journalists in terms of the standards separating and distinguishing news media from social media. Indeed, studies show the politics of this younger cohort skew more progressive; they are likely to be Balkanized in their social contacts, choosing to associate mostly with people who share their views (and showing less tolerance for those who don’t support their views); they engage in

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<sup>51</sup> Chittal, “Journalists.”

<sup>52</sup> Chittal, “Journalists.”

“slacktivism,” activism spread through shared social-media networks<sup>53</sup>; and they generally show more support for same-sex marriage.<sup>54</sup>

And as buyouts have excised many of an older age, it is this younger generation which increasingly calls more of the shots, not just in new media enterprises, but in some vestiges of old media, too. This thinning of the ranks has hollowed out the collective intelligence of many news-gathering organizations (which may explain why some larger newspapers, which have deeper benches, showed more restraint in their treatment of the Supreme Court decision in the front-page survey than some smaller ones). There is more polarity—and fewer voices of dissent—in the front-page meetings which determine how stories of significance get played.

### **Journalistic support for same-sex marriage**

This rush to embrace same-sex marriage was clearly evident in the news media’s coverage of the topic at least several years before the Supreme Court’s historic 2015 ruling, according to the most comprehensive study conducted by the Pew Research Center early in 2013. The study concluded that coverage of the issue had been overwhelmingly tilted toward support for same-sex marriage.

Almost half (47%) of the nearly 500 stories studied from March 18, 2013, through May 12, primarily focused on support for gay marriage, while 9% largely focused on opposition and 44% had a roughly equal mix of both viewpoints or were neutral.<sup>55</sup> The study—which examined coverage in the mainstream media as well as cable outlets and Twitter, the *Huffington Post* and a mix of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) news outlets—found that support for same-

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<sup>53</sup> Inga Kiderra, “Facebook Boosts Voter Turnout,” UC San Diego News Center, September 12, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Hitlin, “In Social Media, Support.”

<sup>55</sup> Hitlin, “In Social Media, Support.”

sex marriage “held true whether the stories were reported news articles or opinion pieces, and was also the case across nearly all media sectors studied.”<sup>56</sup>

“Twitter postings on the subject were nearly evenly split between support and opposition, aligning much more closely with public opinion than the news media. Coverage on the *Huffington Post*, on the other hand, was even more tilted toward support of same-sex marriage than the rest of the news media. Indeed, 62% of the 365 stories on the site were dominated with statements of support—very close to the level of support in the LGBT news outlets studied.”<sup>57</sup>

What the Pew study makes emphatically clear is that advocates for same-sex marriage were more passionate in their advocacy of it than opponents were in their opposition to it.

“Commentators who favored same-sex marriage, such as Rachel Maddow and Chris Matthews, spent more time discussing the issue than commentators who opposed it, such as Sean Hannity and Bill O’Reilly,” the 2013 study concluded.<sup>58</sup>

### **New beat structures and cultural sympathies**

A separate analysis published one year earlier by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism examined exclusively social-media content. It suggests these posts provided the early groundswell of support for same-sex marriage which then fueled sympathetic news coverage of the topic. Same-sex marriage and gay rights were routinely hot-button topics on social media, Twitter and blogs dating back to at least 2009, this study found. “Since PEJ [New Media Index] began monitoring social media at the beginning of 2009, there have been

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<sup>56</sup> Hitlin, “News Coverage.”

<sup>57</sup> Hitlin, “News Coverage.”

<sup>58</sup> Hitlin, “News Coverage.”

nine previous weeks when the subject was among the most discussed on blogs or Twitter,” the study found.<sup>59</sup>

To keep pace with their social-media brethren, new media entrants devoted more resources and more attention than ever before to gay rights and same-sex marriage. The *Huffington Post*, for instance, had a dedicated microsite to “Gay Voices” and produced so much coverage on the subject that Pew, in its 2013 study, examined it separately from the rest of the news media.<sup>60</sup>

The stars aligned in that coverage of the issue were burgeoning at the very moment new media enterprises were being formed. When Ben Smith became Editor-in-Chief of *BuzzFeed* in 2011, the website formerly known for its listicles and cat photos got into the business of breaking news. Smith built a reporting staff which was not encumbered by past practices in terms of how news coverage had been done before.

During a talk at Harvard’s Nieman Foundation for Journalism in 2014, Smith discussed social media as a news distribution channel and the evolution of beats, of which gay-rights and same-sex marriage became a focal point for his emergent news enterprise. Social media posts were an essential dynamic of increasing distribution of the news *BuzzFeed* generated by increasing traffic to its site and thereby building a larger revenue base—and what better way to build likes and traffic amid this Balkanized universe than by providing news and views which are in sync with the cultural sympathies of your target audience. “One of the advantages of starting from scratch is that you can rethink beat structures,”<sup>61</sup> Smith told the Nieman Fellows. “Gay rights is this huge story of the last ten years, but it’s covered as a B-list beat at a lot of

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<sup>59</sup> Hitlin, “In Social Media, Support.”

<sup>60</sup> Hitlin, “News Coverage.”

<sup>61</sup> Jonathan Seitz, “12 Things BuzzFeed’s Ben Smith Thinks You Should Know About Journalism,” *Nieman Reports*, February 28, 2014.

publications just because it always has been. For us, it's very much a frontline beat and we're able to hire the best reporters who really own that beat."

### **Less respect for free speech on college campuses**

One cultural aspect of social media usage is that it conditions users towards an "echo effect." That is, more bombardment of views which coincide with their own—and less exposure, and hence, less tolerance and more hostility towards views which don't—even if those views represent opinion freely expressed under the First Amendment. Indeed, as the recent unrest on university campuses across the country underscores, the younger generation exhibits far less respect for free speech (and less comfort with the contentious give-and-take which can sometimes accompany it), as well as for the conventions which have traditionally provided a conduit for free speech: a free press.

From a media analysis perspective, among the more noteworthy disturbances have been those at Missouri and Wesleyan Universities as well as Smith, Amherst and Claremont McKenna Colleges, in which students—and even one journalism professor—have employed harsh tactics of press censorship and have generally demonstrated shockingly little respect for, and understanding of, the principles of free speech.

At the University of Missouri—one of the nation's top journalism schools—one person caught on video calling for the removal of a journalist from filming a public demonstration, was none other than a journalism professor there. The viral video shows Melissa Click, an assistant professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, screaming "get this reporter out of here"—the "here" being a public space, at a public event. "I need some muscle over here," she cries.<sup>62</sup> The student photographer, asserting his First Amendment right to be there, stood his ground.

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<sup>62</sup> Richard Perez-Pena and Christine Hauser, "University of Missouri Professor Who Confronted Photographer Quits Journalism Post," *The New York Times*, November 10, 2015.

Threatening to use force against a student journalist for doing what the school teaches its students to do is apparently frowned upon even in the academy, as she was compelled to recant, then resigned.

The demonstrators who blocked photographers from taking pictures of their assembly “apparently believed that public assemblies ought to be ‘safe places,’ meaning, safe from photography, which might have been thought to be useful for bringing the news to a larger public,”<sup>63</sup> Todd Gitlin, a journalism professor at Columbia University, wrote in *The New York Times*. “Their starting assumption was that the press had it in for them.”

Commenting on the situation at Wesleyan University, in which undergraduates tried to get the student newspaper defunded for an op-ed critical of the Black Lives Matter movement, columnist Catherine Rampell wrote in *The Washington Post*: “Even President Obama has decried illiberal tendencies in liberal arts settings, fretting that college students are ‘coddled and protected from different points of view.’”<sup>64</sup> The protest did manage to halve the publication’s funding. “The essay was provocative, but it contained neither name-calling nor racial stereotypes. It was no more radical than the conservative commentary you might see on mainstream op-ed pages such as this one.... As someone who once wrote inflammatory columns for school newspapers, I find this retribution deeply saddening.... Crippling the delivery of unpopular views is a terrible lesson to send to impressionable minds and future leaders.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Todd Gitlin, “Why Are Student Protesters So Fearful?” *The New York Times*, November 21, 2015.

<sup>64</sup> In an interview with NPR (“Obama Warns Campus Protesters Against Urge to ‘Shut Up’ Opposition, December 21, 2015), President Obama offered this advice to college protesters: “I think it’s a healthy thing for young people to be engaged and to question authority and to ask why this instead of that, to ask tough questions about social justice. So I don’t want to discourage kids from doing that. As I’ve said before, I do think that there have been times on college campuses where I get concerned that the unwillingness to hear other points of view can be as unhealthy on the Left as on the Right.... What I don’t want is a situation in which particular points of view that are presented respectfully and reasonably are shut down, and we have seen that sometimes happen.”

<sup>65</sup> Catherine Rampell, “Free Speech is Flunking Out on College Campuses,” *The Washington Post*, October 22, 2015.

Student protesters at Amherst in Massachusetts demanded that the college president issue a statement denouncing the “free speech” posters which had been posted on campus,<sup>66</sup> while at neighboring Smith College, journalists were barred from covering protests unless they agreed to provide favorable coverage because “by taking a neutral stance, media are being complacent in our fight,”<sup>67</sup> one organizer told a Massachusetts news outlet.

At California’s Claremont McKenna College, meanwhile, the ouster of its dean of students, Mary Spellman, over an email which fueled student accusations of racial insensitivity caused a backlash<sup>68</sup>—from the student-run press, of all places. The leadership of *The Claremont Independent*, a Right-leaning student publication, issued a full-throated denunciation of the administration, the protests and the protesters, which included the use of hunger strikes to compel Spellman to resign. “The hypocrisy of advocating for ‘safe spaces’ while creating an incredibly unsafe space for President Chodosh, former Dean Spellman ... and the news media representatives who were verbally abused unfortunately seemed to soar over many of your heads,”<sup>69</sup> the three student editors wrote. Their editorial, “We Dissent,” generated 300 signatures on a petition which called the protesters’ use of hunger strikes “extremely inappropriate.”<sup>70</sup> “We are disappointed in students like ourselves, who were scared into silence. We are not racist for having different opinions. We are not immoral because we don’t buy the flawed rhetoric of a spiteful movement. We are not evil because we don’t want this movement to tear across our campuses completely unchecked. We are no longer afraid to be voices of dissent.”

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<sup>66</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, “The Illiberal Demands of the Amherst Uprising: Fighting Racism Doesn’t Require Censoring Critics,” *The Atlantic*, November 18, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in “A Campus Mayhem Syllabus,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 22, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Andy Thomason, “On 2 Campuses Where Heads Rolled, Opposition to Protests Reverberates,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 17, 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Hannah Oh, Steven Glick and Taylor Schmitt, “We Dissent,” *The Claremont Independent*, November 13, 2015.

<sup>70</sup> Thomason, “On 2 Campuses.”

## News is liberal by nature

With so many things happening at once both culturally and within the journalism community itself, it is impossible to pinpoint exactly why news media coverage of issues such as same-sex marriage has moved further left. The reality, though, is while it has undoubtedly moved to the left, it has always been tilted leftward, for one fundamental reason.

Indeed, any honest newspaper editor if asked a variation of the question Daniel Okrent posed, “Is the news media liberal?” would have to respond, “Of course it is.” Not as a critique of the specific views expressed on a newspaper’s opinion pages (overtly liberal or conservative, as they may be), nor as a summing up of the politics of a newspaper’s staff. Rather, it would be simple acknowledgment that the news business is engaged in chronicling change and change, by definition, is not about nothing happening but about *something* happening. The status quo rarely yields news, but change usually does. Reporters instinctively and reflexively look for change, movement and controversy in the stories they write, and the subjects they cover, for something happening is easier to write about and sexier than nothing happening.

“News is liberal by its very nature,” writes C. John Sommerville in *How the News Makes Us Dumb*. “We may speak of ‘conservative newspapers,’ but that only reveals confusion in our thinking. Anyone who publishes a daily paper has accepted the idea that change is the really important feature of life, and this is not a conservative sentiment.”<sup>71</sup>

Even the most cursory reading of the history of journalism over the last two centuries reveals a clear and unmistakable bias towards progressivism. Journalism during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries—“the golden age of journalism,” as Doris Kearns Goodwin calls it in *The Bully Pulpit*, her history of Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft and the scribes who

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<sup>71</sup> C. John Sommerville, *How the News Makes Us Dumb: The Death of Wisdom in an Information Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 61.

covered them—was the succession of championing one progressive cause after another. Emancipation, women’s suffrage, union rights, workplace and product safety, trustbusting, muckraking—the crusading journalists of that era “turn[ed] the microscope on humanity, on the avarice and corruption that stunted the very possibility of social justice in America,” Goodwin writes. “Their novel, vivid, and fearless explorations of the American condition would sound a summons and quicken the Progressive movement.”<sup>72</sup>

### **“A story of tenacity and courage”**

When it came to covering the legal maneuverings which preceded the Supreme Court’s decision, advocates of same-sex marriage had a distinct tactical advantage over their change-averse opponents. As recounted in *Equal Before the Law*, authors Tom Witosky and Marc Hansen, two former reporters at the *Des Moines Register*, draw a stark contrast between the opposition to change of those who fought against repealing Iowa’s Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) with that of change advocates whose challenge to the constitutionality of the law culminated in victory when, in 2009, the Iowa Supreme Court ruled unanimously against the state DOMA.

Not only were the challengers agitating for change but even better, from the standpoint of their public relations campaign, they could be portrayed as crusaders for civil rights. It was the sort of David and Goliath story—a “story of tenacity and courage,”<sup>73</sup> Witosky called it—which the press delights in.

The media portrayal as it played out in Iowa was consistent with the newspaper presentation across the country. Advocates for same-sex marriage crafted a public narrative

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<sup>72</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft and the Golden Age of Journalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 202.

<sup>73</sup> Tom Witosky, “Tom Witosky, NF ’92, Collaborated With Another Veteran Sportswriter to Chronicle the Battle Over Same-Sex Marriage,” *Nieman Reports*, May 27, 2015.

which was far more compelling than those opposed to it. They told deeply personal stories of the bond between human beings, setting the stage for legal and legislative victories celebrated under the banner “love wins.” Those courageously crusading for their civil rights were opposed by religious traditionalists standing athwart change.

Witosky and Hansen recount the “Take a Stand for Marriage” event at which James Dobson, the evangelical founder of the Focus on the Family organization, told a large crowd in Sioux City: “Now judges are telling us they want to redefine the definition of marriage. We say not in our lifetime.”<sup>74</sup>

Meanwhile, the six couples who were the plaintiffs in *Varnum v. Brien*, the lawsuit which was brought by the gay-rights advocacy firm Lambda Legal, were “a carefully chosen ensemble of productive citizens with everyday lives and dreams who wanted only what society offered heterosexual couples,”<sup>75</sup> Witosky and Hansen write. Weeks before filing the twenty-page lawsuit on December 13, 2005, Lambda Legal orchestrated the demonstration at which the Iowa plaintiffs filed for marriage applications.

Witosky and Hansen describe this meticulous choreography thusly:

“With some ten television cameras from around the state watching every move, forty same-sex couples arrived at the recorder’s office, each with a witness and the thirty-five-dollar marriage license fee. ‘I couldn’t believe what I was watching,’ [gay and lesbian rights activist Janelle] Rettig remembered. ‘We’d packed the place, and everything went perfectly.’ As each couple approached [Johnson County Recorder Kim Painter, herself a lesbian], who stood behind the office counter, friends would start singing “Chapel of Love,” the old Dixie Cups hit. ‘Goin’ to the chapel and we’re gonna get married ...’ When a couple asked for a marriage license, Painter would read from a script: ‘Due to the Iowa Code of the State of Iowa, marriage is only allowed between a man and a woman, and I am not allowed to issue you a license.’ Then she would repeat the drill for the next couple, and the next.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Witosky and Hansen, *Equal*, 95.

<sup>75</sup> Witosky and Hansen, *Equal*, 92.

<sup>76</sup> Witosky and Hansen, *Equal*, 57.

Given this dynamic between those advocating change and those opposed to it, is it any wonder that *Time* magazine reported on its cover in April 2013—more than two years before the Supreme Court’s decision—that the outcome of same-sex marriage was settled. There can be little doubt *Time* was merely voicing the opinion of most in the “lamestream media,” as Sarah Palin has dubbed it.<sup>77</sup> “GAY MARRIAGE ALREADY WON: The Supreme Court hasn’t made up its mind—but America has,” *Time* proclaimed on the provocative cover, which featured two images, one distributed in some parts of the country with the photograph of kissing men, the other of kissing women. “We had a long debate in our offices about this week’s cover images of two same-sex couples,” *Time* Managing Editor Rick Stengel wrote in an explanatory editor’s note. “Some thought they were sensationalist and too in-your-face. Others felt the images were beautiful and symbolized the love that is at the heart of the idea of marriage. I agree with the latter, and I hope you do too.”<sup>78</sup>

### **Without fear or favor**

Whether you agree or not, one would hope liberals and conservatives are able to find common ground on the value of free speech and a free press. It is, after all, the ultimate democratic and republican virtue, without which all other rights collapse. It is a noble endeavor to provide and convey information in a free society to an informed, civic-minded citizenry which respects press rights and responsibilities. But that information must come from providers whose motives are not widely suspect, as is the situation now.

Regrettably, we have entered a strange moment in the history of our democracy when vast segments of both the Left and the Right are so suspicious of bias on the part of the messengers that political candidates actually benefit when the press questions some aspect of

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<sup>77</sup> Egan, “Beat the Press.”

<sup>78</sup> Andrew Beaujon, “Time Magazine’s Stengel: This Week’s Covers ‘Symbolized the Love’ in Marriage,” Poynter.org, March 28, 2013.

their integrity. Support for individual candidates rises and donations increase, so great is the suspicion that the messengers are motivated not by doing their jobs honestly and forthrightly—by being truthful, accurate and fair—but by hidden or sometimes overt agenda.

To state the obvious, it is not the proper role of any educational or journalistic institution to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they may find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even offensive. Nor is it the proper role of the news media to pledge allegiances with protesters, or solidarity with any aggrieved party, to obtain access to information or as a quid pro quo for the free exercise of rights we and they enjoy under the First Amendment.

There was a time not too long ago (within the memory of this writer) when exercising skepticism was considered one of journalism's most hallowed and cherished virtues. Most journalists saw it as their mission not only to exercise skepticism but to embrace it with the kind of gleeful enthusiasm that a novelist reserves for writing or a scientist for inquiry. Now the only skepticism most journalists gleefully embrace is when it applies to religion.

In many, if not most, media circles today, being a skeptic is no longer seen as a badge of courage but rather as an emblem of derision and scorn. One need look no further for evidence of this than the subject of climate change, where many in the media persist in calling those who voice skepticism of climate change *deniers*<sup>79</sup> (equating them with those who insist the Holocaust did not occur or the planet is flat). It is impossible to ignore the enormous impact social media has played tipping the scales in this regard, reinforcing a rigid political correctness; devaluing if not eradicating skepticism; and disseminating inviolate conventions of thought.

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<sup>79</sup> Use of the phrase “climate change denier” is so widespread that the Associated Press has recently weighed in and advised against its use. The AP Stylebook editors said (Paul Colford, “An Addition to AP Stylebook Entry on Global Warming,” September 22, 2015): “We are adding a brief description of those who don’t accept climate science or dispute the world is warming from man-made forces: Our guidance is to use *climate change doubters* or *those who reject mainstream climate science* and to avoid the use of *skeptics* or *deniers*.”

There's little doubt I speak for many inside the profession and beyond it that if journalism is to have a vibrant and robust future—if it is to provide the appropriate checks and balances which the framers of our Constitution rightly envisioned for the Fourth Estate—it must reclaim its role as an impartial and skeptical guardian of free speech—without agenda or bias, “without fear or favor,” the famous *New York Times* adage from days of yore. No motto better captures the ethos of that bygone era than the sign said to be posted in the newsroom of Joseph Pulitzer's old *New York World*: “The World has no friends.”<sup>80</sup>

It wasn't entirely true then—indeed, *The Times* standard was itself a reaction to Pulitzer's frequent fudging of the truth—but it is even less true now, for one cannot help but think that the telling of stories and reporting of facts, straight up, without fear or favor, was a more principled endeavor in that bygone era. While the providers of news have done great harm to themselves in the current environment, the consumers of it are the biggest losers of all.

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<sup>80</sup> Tom O'Boyle, “When the Media Are the Message,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 10, 2005.