

Harvard Graduation. 2020

369th Commencement Address by Martin Baron

Good morning from my home. Like you, I wish we were together on campus.

There is so much now we can no longer take for granted. The air we breathe is first among them. So, those of us who are healthy have ample reason to be grateful.

I am also grateful to Harvard and to President Bacow for inviting me to be with you. To the Harvard Class of 2020, congratulations. And congratulations to the parents, professors, mentors and friends who helped you along the way. Joining you for graduation is a high honor.

For me, this is an opportunity – an opportunity to speak about subjects that I believe are of real urgency. Especially now during a worldwide health emergency.

I would like to discuss with you the need for a commitment to facts and to truth.

Only a few months ago, I would have settled for emphasizing that our democracy depends on facts and truth. And it surely does. But now, as we can plainly see, it is more elemental than that.

Facts and truth are matters of life and death. Misinformation, disinformation, delusions and deceit can kill.

Here is what can move us forward: Science and medicine. Study and knowledge. Expertise and reason. In other words, fact and truth.

I want to tell you why free expression by all of us and an independent press, imperfect though we may be, is essential to getting at the truth. And why we must hold government to account. And hold other powerful interests to account as well.

When I began thinking about these remarks, I expected, of course, to be on Harvard's campus. And I thought: Not a bad place to talk about a free press. Not a bad place to talk about our often-testy relationship with official power.

It was in Boston, after all, where the first newspaper of the American colonies was founded. Its first edition was published September 25th, 1690. The very next day, the governor and council of Massachusetts shut it down.

So, the press of this country has long known what it means to face a government that aims to silence it.

Fortunately, there has been progress. With the First Amendment, James Madison championed the right of “freely examining public characters and measures.”

But it took a very long time before we as a nation fully absorbed what Madison was talking about. We took many ominous turns. We had the Alien and Sedition acts under John Adams, the Sedition and Espionage Acts under Woodrow Wilson, the McCarthy era. It was not always clear where we as a nation would end up.

Finally, witnessing the authoritarianism of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, we began to secure a free press in this country. The Supreme Court would forcefully emphasize the press' role in guaranteeing a democracy.

Justice Hugo Black said it well decades later: "The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people."

Not only the secrets of government, I would add. Our duty to inform the public does not stop there. Not by a long shot.

That was evident during my years as a journalist in Boston. Amid today's crisis, it seems like another era. And I guess it is. But I want to tell you about it -- because I think it remains instructive about what a strong, independent press must do.

I started as editor of the Boston Globe in the summer of 2001. One day prior to my start date, a Globe columnist wrote about a shocking case. A priest had been accused of abusing as many as 80 kids. A lawsuit alleged that the cardinal in Boston at the time knew about the serial abuse, didn't do anything about it -- and repeatedly reassigned this priest from parish to parish, warning no one, over decades.

The Archdiocese called the accusations baseless and reckless.

The Globe columnist wrote that the truth might never be known. Internal documents that might reveal it had been sealed by a judge.

On my first day of work, we asked the question: How do we get at the truth? Because the public deserved to know.

That question led us to challenge the judge's secrecy order. And our journalists launched an investigation of their own.

In early 2002, we published what we had learned through reporting and by prevailing in court. We published the truth: The cardinal did know about the abuse by this priest. Yet he kept him in ministry, thus enabling further abuse.

Dozens of clergy in the diocese had committed similar offenses. The cardinal had covered it all up.

And a bigger truth would emerge: Covering up such abuse had been practice and policy in the Church for decades.

Only now the powerful were being held to account.

Late in 2002, after hundreds of stories on this subject, I received a letter from a Father Thomas P. Doyle. Father Doyle had struggled for years – in vain -- to get the Church to confront the very issue we were writing about.

He expressed deep gratitude for our work. “It is momentous,” he wrote, “and its good effects will reverberate for decades.”

Father Doyle did not see journalists as the enemy. He saw us an ally when one was sorely needed. So did abuse survivors.

I kept Father Doyle’s letter on my desk -- a daily reminder of what journalists must do when we see evidence of wrongdoing.

Harvard’s commencement speaker two years ago, civil rights pioneer John Lewis, once said this: “When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something.”

We as journalists have the capacity – along with the constitutional right -- to say and do something. We also have the obligation. And we must have the will.

So must you. Every one of you has a stake in this idea of free expression.

You want to be free to express your views. You should be free to hear the views of others, the same or different. You want to be free to watch any movie. To read any book. To listen to any lyrics. You should be free to say what you know is true without threat of government reprisal.

And you should acknowledge this if you value these freedoms that come with democracy: Democracy cannot exist without a free and independent press. It never has. Leaders who crave more power for themselves always move quickly to crush an independent press. Next, they destroy free expression itself.

Sadly, much of the world is on that worrisome path. And efforts in this country to demonize, delegitimize and dehumanize the press give license to other governments to do the same – and to do far worse.

By the end of last year, a near-record 250 journalists worldwide were sitting in prison. Thirty of them faced accusations of “false news,” a charge virtually unheard-of only seven years earlier.

Turkey has been trading places with China as No. 1 on the list of countries that jail the most journalists. The Turkish government has shut down more than 100 media outlets and charged many journalists as terrorists. Independent media have been largely extinguished. China, of course, imposes some of the world’s tightest censorship on what its citizens can see and hear.

In Hungary, the prime minister has waged war on independent media. Harvard Nieman fellow Andras Petho, who runs an investigative reporting center there, notes that the prime minister's business allies are "taking over hundreds of outlets and turning them into propaganda machines."

Like other heads of state, Hungary's prime minister has exploited the pandemic to grab more power, suppress inconvenient facts, and escalate pressure on news outlets. A new law threatens up to five-year jail terms against those accused of spreading supposedly false information. Independent news outlets have questioned how the crisis was managed. And the fear now is that such accountability journalism will lead to harassment and arrests, as it has in other countries.

In the Philippines, the courageous Maria Ressa, who founded the country's largest online-only news site, has been battling government harassment for years on other fronts. She now faces prosecution on bogus charges of violating foreign ownership laws. By the end of last year, she had posted bail eight times. Her real violation? She brought scrutiny to the president.

In Myanmar, two Reuters journalists -- Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo -- were imprisoned for more than 500 days for investigating the killing of 10 Rohingya Muslim men and boys. Finally, a year ago, they were released.

In 2018, an opinion writer for The Washington Post, Jamal Khashoggi, walked into Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul to get documents he needed to marry. He was murdered there at the hands of a team sent by highest-level Saudi officials. His offense? He had sharply criticized the Saudi government.

In Mexico, murderous vengeance against journalists is common. Last year, at least five were killed, more than in any other country.

I think also of the risks that American journalists have taken to inform the public. Among them are colleagues I can never forget.

One is Elizabeth Neuffer. Seventeen years ago this month, I stood before her friends at the Boston Globe to report that she had died covering the war in Iraq.

Elizabeth was 46, an experienced foreign correspondent, a mentor to others; vivacious and brave. Her Iraqi driver was traveling at high speed because of the risk of abductions. He lost control. Elizabeth died instantly; her translator, too.

Elizabeth had a record of fearlessness in investigating war crimes and human rights abuses. Her goal: Reveal the world as it is -- because someone might then make things better.

Another colleague was Anthony Shadid. In 2002, I visited Anthony, then a reporter for the Globe, after he was shot and wounded in Ramallah. Lying in a hospital in Jerusalem, it was clear that he had narrowly escaped being paralyzed.

Anthony recovered and went on to report from Iraq, where he won two Pulitzer Prizes for The Washington Post. From Egypt, where he was harassed by police. From Libya, where he and three New York Times colleagues were detained by pro-government militias and physically abused.

He died in 2012, at age 43, while reporting in Syria, apparently of an asthma attack. Anthony told the stories of ordinary people. Without him, their voices would have gone unheard.

And now I think constantly of reporters, photographers and videographers who risk their own well-being to be with heroic frontline health workers -- frontline workers of every sort – to share their stories.

Anthony, Elizabeth and my present-day colleagues sought to be eyewitnesses. To see the facts for themselves. To discover the truth and tell it. As a profession, we maintain there is such a thing as fact, there is such a thing as truth.

At Harvard, where the school's motto is "Veritas," presumably you do, too.

Truth, we know, is not a matter of who wields power or who speaks loudest. It has nothing to do with who benefits or what is most popular. And ever since the Enlightenment, modern society has rejected the idea that truth derives from any single authority on Earth.

To determine what is factual and true, we rely on certain building blocks. Start with education. Then there is expertise. And experience. And, above all, we rely on evidence. We see that acutely now when people's health can be jeopardized by false claims, wishful thinking and invented realities. The public's safety requires the honest truth.

Yet education, expertise, experience and evidence are being devalued, dismissed and denied. The goal is clear: to undermine the very idea of objective fact, all in pursuit of political gain.

Along with that is a systematic effort to disqualify traditional independent arbiters of fact.

The press tops the list of targets. But others populate the list, too: courts, historians, even scientists and medical professionals – subject-matter experts of every type. And so today the government's leading scientists find their motives questioned, their qualifications mocked -- despite a lifetime of dedication and achievement that has made us all safer.

In any democracy, we want vigorous debate about our challenges and the correct policies. But what becomes of democracy if we cannot agree on a common set of facts, if we can't agree on what even constitutes a fact?

Are we headed for extreme tribalism, believing only what our ideological soulmates say? Or do we become so cynical that we think everyone always lies for selfish reasons? Or so nihilistic that we conclude no one can ever really know what is true or false; so, no use trying to find out?

Regardless, we risk entering dangerous territory. Hannah Arendt, in 1951, wrote of this in her first major work, “The Origins of Totalitarianism.”

There, she observed “the possibility that gigantic lies and monstrous falsehoods can eventually be established as unquestioned facts . . . that the difference between truth and falsehood may cease to be objective and may become a mere matter of power and cleverness, of pressure and infinite repetition.”

One hundred years ago – in 1920 – a renowned journalist and leading thinker, Walter Lippmann, harbored similar worries. Lippmann, once a writer for the Harvard Crimson, warned of a society where people “cease to respond to truths, and respond simply to opinions . . . what somebody asserts, not what actually is.”

Lippmann wrote those words because of concerns about the press itself. He saw our defects and hoped we might fix them, thus improving how information got to the public. Ours is a profession that still has many flaws. We make mistakes of fact, and we make mistakes of judgment. We are at times overly impressed with what we know when much remains for us to learn.

In making mistakes, we are like people in every other profession. And we, too, must be held accountable.

What frequently gets lost, though, is the contribution of a free and independent press to our communities and our country -- and to the truth.

I think back to the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in 1992 when the Miami Herald showed how lax zoning, inspection and building codes had contributed to the massive destruction. Homes and lives are safer today as a result.

In 2016, the Charleston Gazette-Mail in West Virginia exposed how opioids had flooded the state’s depressed communities, contributing to the highest death rates in the country.

In 2005, after Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana’s newspapers were indispensable sources of reliable information for residents.

The Washington Post in 2007 revealed the shameful neglect and mistreatment of wounded veterans at Walter Reed Hospital. Corrective action was immediate. The Associated Press in 2015 documented a slave trade behind our seafood supply. Two thousand slaves were freed as a result.

The New York Times and The New Yorker in 2017 exposed sexual predators in elite boardrooms. A movement of accountability for abuses against women took root. The New York Times in 1971 was the first to publish the Pentagon Papers, revealing a pattern of official deceit in a war that killed more than 58,000 Americans and countless others.

The Washington Post broke open the Watergate scandal in 1972. That led ultimately to the president's resignation.

Those news organizations searched for the truth and told it, undeterred by pushback or pressure or vilification.

Facing the truth can cause extreme discomfort. But history shows that we as a nation become better for that reckoning. It is in the spirit of the preamble to our Constitution: "to form a more perfect union." Toward that end, it is an act of patriotism.

W.E.B. Du Bois, the great scholar and African American activist --- and the first African American to graduate with a PhD from Harvard -- cautioned against the falsification of events in relating our nation's history.

In 1935, distressed at how deceitfully America's Reconstruction period was being taught, Du Bois assailed the propaganda of the era.

"Nations reel and stagger on their way," he wrote. "They make hideous mistakes; they commit frightful wrongs; they do great and beautiful things. And shall we not best guide humanity by telling the truth about all this, so far as the truth be ascertainable?" At this university, you answer that question with your motto -- "Veritas." You seek the truth -- with scholarship, teaching and dialogue -- knowing that it really matters. My profession shares with you that mission -- the always arduous, often tortuous and yet essential pursuit of truth. It is the demand that democracy makes upon us. It is the work we must do.

We will keep at it. You should, too. None of us should ever stop.

Thank you for listening. Thank you for honoring me. Good luck to you all. And please, stay well.

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/05/29/facts-truth-are-matters-life-death-harvard-students-hear-sobering-commencement-speech-read-it/>