Media Mania

By Michael J. Lindsay

Op-ed

Government officials have been complaining about how the media reports on their official actions ever since Gutenberg invented the printing press. This was certainly the case in America’s Revolutionary War years when new ideas about how government should run flooded into 13 tiny colonies. This was also true during those periods in our history when local officials were viewed as out of touch or corrupt (e.g., New York’s “Tammany Hall” in the 1930s). Recently, local police officials have again become a primary target of the media. In previous years, police officials who were inaccurately characterized by the media were largely ineffective in correcting those misconceived portrayals or in exerting any influence whatsoever over journalists.

Surprisingly, the “media” today is the institution that has come under more pressure—with our shifting social structures—than Congress, local politicians or even law enforcement. Many newspapers have reduced their size, eliminated coverage, cut back on their editorial staff, or gone completely out of business. Even large news organizations working for television networks have felt the pinch. The previous belief by some, including law enforcement, that the news institutions were slanted was at least, to a small degree, countered in those years by journalists claiming that they maintained a sense of professional detachment and were largely balanced in their approach to news stories.

With the abolition of the federal fairness doctrine after a push by the media in 1987—which then required broadcast news organizations to give equal time to opposing views and present an “honest, equitable and balanced” account—everything started to change! Many news organizations immediately assumed a posture in which all illusion of balance was discarded. Many of these news organizations really became no different than paid lobbyists. MSNBC is an unashamed champion of liberal thought. FOX News appeals to the conservative element.

An unexpected result for media outlets of having the fairness doctrine repealed occurred when paying consumers were pulled into the developing social media frenzy. That again changed everything! Today, there is little difference in the way many Americans view the accuracy of what is reported by the mainstream news organizations and what is reported by those who operate out of their basements and call themselves journalist. In a system of mega-outlets, none of which are particularly balanced, why should consumers pay for their news? This led to unanticipated crisis in many mainstream news organizations.

Not surprisingly, in the last year or two, mainstream news outlets are again trying to sell the public on the idea that their reporters vet stories and check sources so their reports are inherently more accurate. Whether this will save that troubled industry is yet to be seen, but their tribulation may not be over. It is likely that they may still experience a number of platform shifts as additional technologies develop. For professional journalists, the last two decades have been very unsettling.

A phenomenon that has collaterally developed during this same period is the descent of the industry—because of this competitive frenzy—into reporting the seediest and most deplorable incidents in vivid detail. Nonetheless, one has a hard time blaming media outlets for this approach when this is now what sells in that highly competitive market. Why it sells is an entirely separate question for future discussion, but the combination of these two conditions—our descent into gore-reporting and heavy competition from social media—creates an opportunity for law enforcement that it has never seen before.

It is law enforcement that initially responds to these types of incidents. It is law enforcement that then conducts the follow-up investigations of these incidents. And, when someone is finally prosecuted, it is law enforcement that is again thrust back into the spotlight. Today, most of what the media reports is linked to what law enforcement does. Law enforcement is now their life blood.

I suspect that most of the readers of this article are seeing the direction we are going here. If law enforcement would establish a set of simple ethical standards to which it wanted journalists and their employing agencies to adhere, the problems of fairness and unjustified sensationalism could quickly be addressed. Police officials have always had favorite reporters because they knew that stories would be handled in an evenhanded manner when using these reporters. With society’s present appetite for alarming and appalling news, journalists are dependent on law enforcement more today than ever for most of their stories.

In some ways, the pendulum has already begun to swing back. Real journalists are again beginning to tout the vetting of stories and the use of reliable sources. Oh for those yesteryears when fairness was required! Nevertheless, reporters and media outlets that adhere to some simple rules on fairness and style could be awarded a preferred status with a department, and so long as these ethical standards are fair, transparent and objective, it will be hard for those who operate outside of these standards to bring shame on a department for establishing such standards.

Of course, department administrators and line officers will still occasionally stumble in their official duties or personal lives. All are human! Administrators should expect the spotlight to focus on them after such an incident, but a fair reporting of these events allows departments to correct these problems, professionalize just a little more and move on.

At no time in history has the media been so dependent on law enforcement for the stories they report. With mainstream media truly wanting to reestablish itself as the accurate information source for all that is happening in the world, this is an opportunity for law enforcement to shape how fairly and accurately these stories will be presented in the years to come. Perhaps it is time for law enforcement to rethink its relationship with the media: adversaries or partners?