

By James Walker

October 24, 2020

This column first appeared in Hearst Connecticut newspapers.

Essential? Journalist belong in the conversation

I have something I want to get off my chest and I think now is the right time to do it.

I was browsing the Web and came across photos of emergency room doctors and nurses trying to save the lives of COVID-19 patients as the deadly virus swept across the nation.

The photos portrayed a sense of urgency as doctors and nurses swathed in blue disposable gowns, face masks and gloves bent over patients surrounded by hospital equipment.

They were just a few of the thousands of photos appearing in print and on TV screens along with stories detailing the deadly impact of the coronavirus.

But those photos did not take themselves, nor were they shot from across a street using long lenses from a camera; they were shot by a video-journalist down in the trenches right along with health care personnel.

But somehow, the bravery of those journalists — along with the reporters who also are putting their lives on the line to keep the public informed — never gets mentioned.

And I would like to know why.

With all the talk about which employees should be considered essential, I am shocked that journalists are not in that conversation.

And nobody is talking about that.

Call it a pet peeve or a gripe or just flat-out angst, but this ignoring of journalists has been bothering me in one way or another since I was city editor at The Hour newspaper in December 2012.

That was when the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings occurred, and weeks after the horror was over, the conversation turned to getting mental health services for first responders and the citizens of Newtown to cope with the tragedy.

But nothing was mentioned about the mental health of the journalists who covered the event and its aftermath.

Anyone who thinks that journalists are not affected by this type of incident or other violent exposures they are reporting on is insane.

I realize that many people who think journalists are the bearers of what has been labeled fake news and for pushing liberal agendas while disregarding conservative views.

I won't argue that point because there are cases where that is true, whether you work for a liberal or conservative news agency.

But reporters don't work ungodly hours and get killed, beaten, pepper-sprayed, spit on and shot at to pass on misinformation.

Let me assure readers that regardless of what they may think, journalists do not sit around holding hands and singing "Kumbaya" with the people they are reporting on.

Nor do they sit in newsrooms trying to drum up liberal scenarios to goad conservatives.

And I can't imagine that anybody reading this newspaper believes they do — because you wouldn't be reading if you didn't think there was some truth or value in what is being reported.

This isn't the first time I have gone to bat for my colleagues.

The last time was when Greg Gianforte, the then-Republican House candidate in Montana, body-slammed and punched a reporter in the face so hard his glasses broke.

Some people cheered that action.

I did not and there is a good reason for it.

Every single politician — whether walking the halls of Congress, into state capitols, or the mayor's or governor's office — has made a call to a journalist to announce his or her candidacy.

Every single one of them calls a journalist when they need a story told or a piece of legislation they are proposing presented to the public.

The same goes for the public.

So how in the world can we be these torchbearers of fakery when we are the first to get a call?

Journalists make mistakes, of that there is no doubt.

But for the most part, we get it right.

When we see smoke, very seldom doesn't fire follow (read the latest about corruption in the Bridgeport Police Department). It just depends in which direction the fire is burning whether people choose to believe it.

Nearly 1,400 journalists have been killed covering a story since 1992, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

And they certainly didn't meet their end so violently because they were trying to deceive the public.

I don't care whether you lean to the left or to the right when it comes to getting your news; what matters is, it is coming from journalists who have been trained and educated in the news business.

I think we should be celebrated, not berated, for our efforts to bring information to the public.

One thing is for sure: If people woke up tomorrow morning with no newspapers, no TV news or dead air when they turned on the radio to get the latest during their early morning commute, there would be no question as to the value of journalism.

And that value cannot not be diminished.

Essential? Journalists belong in the conversation.