

Role of the Media in Today's Society

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It is a real pleasure for me to be here today in Pleven at the second of five regional roundtables that the newly formed U.S.-Bulgarian Alumni Association has organized. Thank you, Dr. Passy, for all of your hard work in getting this organization off the ground -- we are really excited at the Embassy about the formation of the alumni association and its ability to contribute to the debate on some of the most important issues of the day.

During my two years in Bulgaria, I have had the pleasure of meeting many graduates from our exchange programs and I've been uniformly impressed with their drive, initiative, and passion to affect change. I recently learned that over the past 20 years, over 1,000 Bulgarians have participated in various programs sponsored by the U.S. Government -- these alumni are natural partners for us at the Embassy and now with the launch of the alumni association, these alums have a platform which they can use to share ideas and initiate projects. The alumni association - comprised of many of Bulgaria's brightest and most energetic leaders from across the professional and political spectrums - will be key to helping the Embassy engage directly with the people of Bulgaria, allowing us to communicate U.S. policy and values while at the same time, better positioning us to learn from Bulgarians about the issues that most affect you.

So, once again, thank you Dr. Passy for your leadership in the Alumni Association and for your steadfast commitment to advancing the U.S.-Bulgarian dialogue. And thank you also to Maya Kostadinova for all of her work in organizing today's seminar on the media -- a perennially important topic. As we all know, a free press and the open exchange of ideas are key to the success of all democracies, and thus something all citizens and governments must continually work to safeguard.

In the United States, I grew up revering the brave journalists I learned about in school who didn't shy away from taking on the establishment and who risked their lives to make sure society was informed and corruption and wrong-doing made public. While my career as a journalist started on my high school newspaper and ended on my college newspaper, I have always believed in the crucial role that

journalism plays as a watchdog in keeping governments honest and the populace well informed on the issues of the day – and thus I’m honored to have the chance to share my thoughts on the role of the media in today’s society.

The United States vigorously supports press freedom everywhere since a free press is essential to the functioning of a democracy. A free press is also a responsible press, whose members are trained and recognized by their peers for upholding international standards including accuracy, salience, and objectivity. Professional conduct and ethics cannot be legislated.

During my time as the Embassy’s Press Attaché I have had the privilege to work with many Bulgarian journalists – many of whom are alumni of U.S. exchanges – who strive every day to practice ethical, professional journalism – often at a potentially high personal and financial cost to them. While there are many brave, courageous Bulgarian journalists, there are also individuals who exert political or economic pressure on journalists, which I believe, is partly responsible for a lack of investigative journalism in Bulgaria as it leads journalists to self-censor. In the future, I hope to see more investigative pieces that target corruption and other illegal activities in both the public and the private sectors that damage society as a whole. At the Embassy, we will continue to monitor the media situation closely, maintaining close contact with local media-monitoring NGOs, as well as the journalists and media outlets that strive to practice solid, ethical journalism.

The United States does not have an unblemished record in ensuring that media plays its essential watchdog role. While Americans place a huge importance on freedom of expression, and have always considered this right to be one of the principle elements of a successful democracy, our history is colored by both courageous journalists as well as episodes which remind us of why we must remain ever vigilant in safeguarding freedom of the press.

In recognizing the fundamental right of every citizen – rich or poor – to exercise freedom of expression, the states demanded that this right, and naturally stemming from it, the right to freedom of the press, be explicitly protected in the Bill of Rights to our Constitution. However, while the nation was still in its infancy, the Alien and Sedition Acts were passed by Congress and signed into law by President Adams in 1798. Their stated purpose was to guard against foreign threats during a revolutionary age, but in reality, the Sedition Act was a direct attack on freedom of speech and freedom of the press – as

publishing “any false, scandalous and malicious writing” against the president or the Congress became punishable by fine and imprisonment. Newspaper editors came under fire on charges of libeling the government and for publishing seditious statements. While the highly controversial acts eventually expired – they provoked a debate about the extent to which the government can limit freedom of speech and the press which continues to this day.

Yellow journalism – a term which originated from a comic carried in the *New York World* – exploded in the United States during the late nineteenth century, a period where big business exerted outsized influence in society and in politics and corruption ran rampant. Yellow journalism is often used to describe the brand of journalism which goes lightly on the facts and heavily on sensationalism in efforts of winning over readers with scandalous material. At the close of the century, a fierce battle reigned between Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*. Both papers were accused of sensationalizing the news in order to drive up circulation – in fact, yellow journalism is considered to be one of the causes for the Spanish-American War as newspapers engaged in widespread propaganda which stoked anti-Spanish sentiment among the American public.

The pendulum swung back the other way on professional journalism with the advent of muckraking journalists in the start of the 20th century. Before World War I, “muckraker” referred to a writer who investigated and published factual reports which performed a watchdog function. The term muckraker came to denote reform-minded journalists – many see investigative journalism to be a continuation of their legacy. Many brave muckrakers published shocking reports on everything from political corruption, to monopoly practices in big business, and to appalling conditions at the work place, in housing tenements, and in public institutions. Upton Sinclair's book “The Jungle” – which was first serialized before being published as a book – exposed such shocking sanitary conditions in the meat packing industry that the government passed legislation to raise standards in the food and drug industries.

Throughout the course of the twentieth century, aspiring American journalists have had plenty of role models who took on the highest reaches of power. During the Cold War, Joseph McCarthy, a senator from Wisconsin, exploited the widespread fear of communism – popularly termed the “Red Scare.” His often savage anti-Communist inquisitions created fear among many and his tactics threatened basic civil liberties – like freedom of the press. McCarthy tried to silence journalist Drew Pearson by calling for a boycott of his radio show and later physically assaulting him. Legendary journalist Edward Murrow took

on McCarthy with a half-hour TV special. The show employed McCarthy's own speeches to illustrate his hysteria and hypocrisy. With public opinion of McCarthy crashing after the TV special, the senator's political influence ebbed. The U.S. Senate adopted a resolution censuring him for conduct unbecoming a senator.

More recently, Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein worked tirelessly to prove that knowledge of the break-in of the Democratic Party Headquarters in the Watergate office complex and the attempts to cover it up led to various federal government agencies – as well as to the White House itself. In their reporting, Woodward and Bernstein exemplified the watchdog role of the government that the press performs. The Watergate scandal eventually led to the only resignation of a U.S. president in history as well as criminal charges being brought against 69 government officials - 48 were found guilty.

Today, as we look at the media landscape in the United States and around the world, what we see is an abundance of voices. The increasing role of the internet, the emergence of new media and the dramatic rise in social networking significantly impact the way news is presented and received. The rise of "citizen journalism" is often cited as the defining element in today's media environment. I understand the phenomenon to be average citizens – you and me – using the reporting tools available to us in an ever more plugged-in world to report on the stories that affect our lives. Many people believe citizen journalism is a response to the crisis facing traditional journalism – the advent of free content and the drying up of advertisement revenue which threatens the existence of media outlets – as well as declining professional standards in the media world.

While I believe that citizen journalists play a crucial role in a rapidly changing world, I still see professional journalists as indispensable to the public's understanding of events. Indisputably, many voices are better than a few and pluralism within the media is crucial. However, it is incumbent upon the citizenry to verify reports from citizen journalist and not to take them at face value just because they appear on the Internet - citizen journalists aren't hampered by a professional journalist's need to verify their facts with multiple sources. Citizen journalists can be considered today's muckrakers in that they report about injustices they see in society, but discerning readers must always ask themselves about the agenda of citizen journalists and the credibility of their sources – as they should also do with more traditional media outlets. Thus, while citizen journalists have the power to affect much positive change

by awakening the consciousness of their fellow citizens through cell phone photos of policemen taking bribes or brave bloggers taking on issues the established media considers far too risky, we need to remember that their reports might not be as credible as reporting from trusted, mainstream media outlets.

Thus, I think the current state of the media offers lots of opportunities as well as risks. If we want to ensure that quality, professional journalism does not become a relic of the past, society at large must demand it. This could mean paying for online content or supporting individual investigative journalists who need funding to write a story. While citizen journalists can often tell us the “what,” the “why” is often a much more complex story. It is not the job of journalists alone to ensure that media plays its watchdog role - it behooves the citizenry at large to ensure that media is not forced to operate in a restrictive environment as well as holding journalists accountable to the highest professional standards. We alone are responsible for the governments we have and for the societies we live in.

I am optimistic that on the whole, the rise of citizen journalism coupled with a societal recognition of the importance of traditional journalism will uncover corruption and other wrongdoing by governments and business on a scale previously unimaginable. I recently met with three extremely motivated Bulgarian journalists - two of the journalists Lora Krumova of bTV and Galya Shtarbeva of NOVA TV who are also alumni of U.S. exchange programs have partnered with a former colleague who is now an independent reporter/producer – Petko Gyulchev – to start an MA program on TV journalism at VUZF. Worried about the inadequacy of journalism studies in leading universities, they did something about it. They selected some of the best and brightest young Bulgarians – many of whom have studied abroad and have returned back to the country determined to make it better – for their MA program. These same three journalists also produced a series of investigative stories on vote buying and other election violations during the local election campaign in 2011 which were aired by both bTV and NOVA – they are planning a similar series for the upcoming parliamentary elections. And finally, they are hoping to launch a web site which will serve as a central repository for all kinds of investigative journalism stories – such as the ones they hope to do during the elections as well as reports from their students and any other interested citizen journalists.

When I think about these inspirational journalists and other courageous, dedicated Bulgarian journalists and activists, a quote from one of our Founding Fathers – Benjamin Franklin – comes to mind. At the

close of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 – during which our Constitution was created - one of Maryland’s delegates to the convention reportedly asked Franklin, “Well, Doctor, what have we got – a Republic or a Monarchy?” Franklin replied “A Republic, if you can keep it.” It’s up to us – as fully engaged citizens of democracies – to take responsibility for the governments we have and to work tirelessly to ensure that they fulfill their governing duties to the letter of the law, in an open, transparent manner. At the same time, governments must protect the right of the media to operate freely and the right of individuals to seek and receive news. Freedom of expression, including for members of the media, is a human right and a pillar of a democratic society. It requires strong support and constant vigilance. We are all potential citizen journalists.