



**“The Future of Media: It’s in Your Hands”**

**University of the South  
Bryan Viewpoint Series**

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*(as prepared for delivery)*

Good evening, and thank you Libby, for that wonderful introduction.

I’m grateful for the kind words. David Shipps will tell you that usually people only say those kinds of things if I’m their boss. In other words, they depend on me for their job.

Kidding aside, I’m grateful because having a student introduce a guest speaker might seem like a small thing, but I actually believe it says a whole lot.

It tells you about priorities. And here at Sewanee, the priority is where it should be -- on education. On students.

It’s encouraging you to be active and engaged. To pursue knowledge, seek justice and serve others. The priority is on creating the kind of space where, as your motto says, brethren can “dwell together in unity.”

(Kind of like Washington)

Actually, here you really do that. And I thought I knew that about Sewanee before I arrived. Now, I’m more than certain. That’s because when David invited me, he said: Don’t just come for the lecture; spend some time. Really get a feel for this special place.

He said, the surroundings are beautiful.

Then, came the hard sell. He said, it's not the easiest place to get to; you might as well stay a few days.

So I did. I was here all weekend. And I can tell you: Sewanee delivers as promised.

I can also tell you that the things this community holds dear... the search for truth... the encouragement to ask questions... and the freedom to debate the answers... These things matter. They matter greatly.

And in many ways, they bind us. They bind this academic community and what I've come to discuss tonight: the future of media.

Specifically, I'd like to talk about our role, that of a media company navigating today's environment. It's an environment that is fractured both in terms of multiple platforms for content... and fractured, more figuratively, as in the threat that comes from those who claim that not just the new business model but news itself is broken. Fixed.

Fake.

And those who dispense it are enemies of the people.

Obviously, that's not a position I or any of us at McClatchy subscribe to. And I'll talk more about that.

But I'd also like to talk about the future of media as it relates to you. To citizens like you and me -- neighbors -- family -- communities -- who consume our product. To those who use the service we provide.

To what extent is the future of media in your hands, as well as in ours?

I'll start with a few images (and ask that you keep them in mind as we spend the next hour or so together).

Here's the first image.



You may have seen this photo during Hurricane Florence recently. It was taken in New Bern – a town 300 years old, once the capital of North Carolina... and one of the communities hardest hit by the storm.

The Neuse and Trent rivers rose 10 feet in a matter of hours, leaving many waiting to be saved.

Like the man in the photo.

The name of the man, wearing the anguish of someone who fears for his family and the house they've lived in for generations, is Robert Simmons, Jr.

The journalist who took the photo and shared the story works for the News & Observer and the Charlotte Observer, McClatchy newspapers. His name is Andrew Carter.

And the cat? The resilient kitten, sitting on Mr. Simmons' shoulder?

His name is Survivor. (True story)

Image two.



This disturbing photo is of Andrew Holland.

He suffered from schizophrenia and, for years, he had been in and out of County Jail, mostly on low-level offenses.

In the image, captured by the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Office on the Central Pacific coast of California in January 2017, he was 36 years-old. He died just moments later.

County officials ruled the death as "natural," resulting from a blood clot. But a team at The Tribune, another McClatchy newsroom, led by reporter Matt Fountain discovered something else.

Mr. Holland had been strapped to a restraint chair, naked, for nearly two days. Think about that. Two days.

Their reporting – and only because they were reporting -- led to the county changing the way it treats the mentally ill.

The next image...



These people are not in line because they are waiting at the polls... but they are all waiting to vote.

It was in August, and they were about to vote to oust the board of the Tri-County Electric Co-Op, a utility company in South Carolina.

More than 1500 Tri-County customers showed up -- on a Saturday. In August. The line stretched around the company headquarters.

Why? Because The State newspaper revealed that the part-time board had paid itself more than three times the national average. They bought themselves healthcare and retirement plans, treated themselves to expensive steak dinners and signed off on their own Christmas bonuses.

The board even fought – successfully – against a proposal to limit its own pay.

Needless to say, when they found out about the corruption, customers were not happy. But here, in this next image, is how they found out.



This is Avery Wilks. He works for The State. And he's the one who uncovered the massive amounts of corruption and continued to report on it.

He graduated college in 2015, so he's only a couple of years older than many of you.

I think all of these stories have something important in common that speaks to our topic tonight. But I also think they highlight some individual lessons pertinent to the future of media.

So let's take them one at a time, and then discuss them collectively.

Let's start with the image of Robert Simmons, Jr. and his kitten.

The lesson here for the future of media, at least the one I'd like to focus on, is just how we got to know him. The tools we used.

Andrew Carter posted this picture and a video on Twitter, and it went viral. It was retweeted tens of thousands of times. And then it made its way to front pages of newspapers across the country and to websites, like CNN.

Soon, Mr. Simmons was the "Face of Florence."

News – or how we deliver it to the customer -- is a lot different from when I started as a reporter in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. And in many ways, news companies are still figuring out how to deal with that challenge and remain profitable and sustainable.

I once heard someone joke about the news, at least the news as I knew it when I was in college and just getting started.

They said, what did you expect? Your business model was literally throwing yesterday's news at people's houses. How long did you really think that would last?

Joking aside... for me, that's a fascinating challenge. I left journalism to become an entrepreneur and a technology executive. I came back, first to the board of McClatchy and then as its CEO, because I'm excited about bringing that technology expertise to the cause of independent journalism.

And we're hard at work doing that.

Take a look.



*(Click image to navigate to video posted to YouTube)*

We think that's exciting stuff. But I also want to make clear that it's not just bells and whistles. It's not technology for the sake of technology.

What we call the Fourth Estate plays a role in our discourse and in our democracy that no branch of government can. That no other 'agency' of our civic ecosystem can.

That role has not changed. But the question is finding ways to use technology to reinvigorate it. The question is doing that at McClatchy -- a company whose story dates back to the Gold Rush before the Civil War.

We were founded in 1857. Just a year before Sewanee Mining made its grant of 5,000 acres of this beautiful mountain for the founding of this special place. In an America -- like today -- bursting with promise and opportunity. And laden with challenge and oppression that would result in the devastating civil conflict then just over the horizon. And -- I should mention -- a legacy that you -- in the traditions of a demanding liberal arts pursuit of enlightenment -- are wrestling with yourselves in the Sewanee Project on Slavery, Race and Reconciliation whose self-described purpose is to pursue 'a comprehensive examination and reflective consideration of the university's historic entanglements with the institution of slavery and its legacies in the long century of racial injustice after the end of the Civil War.'

Today, at McClatchy, we are driving that kind of technology transformation in a company that now operates a digital network that spans 30 local markets from California to Florida, from Washington state to Washington D.C...

That is something I wanted to be a part of. And it's why we talk about relentless innovation... about what we call "experimenting with purpose." Putting it another way, it means in changing in smart ways that make our products even more essential.

Maybe it's Twitter. Or Instagram. Or podcasts. Or video content, whether in documentary form or streaming a live event.

How do we connect with customers and advertisers?

In this digital age, when technology really must be stamped into our DNA, as it is with our customers, it's all of the above.

The reality, of course, is that we often have to do that with smaller teams and less revenue. The Golden Age of family-owned newspapers is a thing of the past.

But smaller or fewer doesn't mean you can't be better.

In fact, you have to be better.

I joked about the paper boy throwing yesterday's news. Let me ask you to think about that in a different way, one that makes the news business unique. From a product standpoint, anyway.

What other industry do you know where the customer doesn't know what they're going to get each day?

With that being the case, you need to build a relationship. You need trust. You have to be close to the customer. And a big part of that is going to the customer. Even if it requires reinvention, you have to deliver the product in ways that are relevant to their lives.

It's not the only way, though. And reinventing doesn't mean abandoning values.

And that brings me to the second picture I showed you. The image of Andrew Holland, the mentally ill prisoner who died in a jail cell.

Here is something we value – the idea that an independent press in the public interest is not just vital to our democracy, but is also unique to it.

And I would go a step further and say it's more than an independent press... it's a fiercely independent press.

That's what it was when newspapers published the Declaration of Independence.

That's what it was in 1857, during the California Gold Rush, when James McClatchy's newspaper, only days after he became editor, exposed the California state treasurer's corrupt dealings.

And that's what it was in San Luis Obispo when reporters shined a light on what really happened in that prison.

Did they shine that light in a pretty dark corner? Yes, of course.

Did shining that light maybe make some of us uncomfortable? You bet it did.

But sometimes that's exactly what's required when your goal is to help people lead more informed and fulfilling lives. To help strengthen communities and make them better. To speak truth to power. To hold the powerful to account.

That is what an independent press does. And what these reporters do.... Matters.

And it matters to our way of life and our democracy.

Not everyone seems to agree. They hear something that makes them uncomfortable, or that they do not like, and say it must be fake.

Let me suggest this. When you hear "fake," what they really mean is political. And my hope is that term is little more than the pet rock or the chia pet – something that takes the nation by storm... until consumers quickly see it for what it is: a gimmick.

When you hear the term 'fake,' I'd ask you -- as the Liberal Arts brainiacs you are -- to reframe the observation. Ask yourself instead: 'What is the news the person asserting the fakery is actively trying to stop me from considering?'

'And why?'

Put these assertions of fakery to the test. Incessantly. With intention.

And judge for yourselves.

That's not to underestimate the threat of misinformation, or fake news, or the ease in which people buy into fear and the politics of demagoguery.

When a man reads a conspiracy theory online, believed it was "real" news and showed up at a Washington, DC pizza shop with a gun before he was stopped... or even more tragically....

When someone wasn't stopped on time... and he entered a newsroom in Annapolis, Maryland and killed five journalists...

No, we can't ignore a climate where people might think an independent press is political not patriotic.

What then should we do?

Marty Baron of the Washington Post put it well. He said journalists shouldn't go to war, they should go to work.



As a counter to the cries of Fake News, I'll offer this: when people in the Carolinas needed help during Florence... or in Florida during Irma... they didn't read tweets from the News & Observer or the Miami Herald and think in partisan terms.

Instead, because they saw the source as a name they knew well...

Because of a relationship built over time...

Consciously or not, they made a snap decision: this isn't fake news; it's local news. Local news plays it down the middle.

Readers think: they know me. And I trust them.

If anything, perhaps there is a silver lining... maybe, just maybe all the talk of fake news and enemy of the people has forced people to consider just how much they value an independent press, their relationship with that independent press, and the role that press plays in our plurality.

Especially, when it holds the powerful to account, as it did in California... and as it did with the next image ad story I shared with you -- the customers who showed up to oust the board of Tri-County Electric.

Why did I include that? Because it proves you don't need to be in this business a long time to make a huge impact. Avery Wilks is just out of college.

But you also don't even have to be in the media business at all. You just have to be an involved and an informed citizen. And of course you must bring your power -- as a citizen -- to bear: and you must vote.

And that brings me to something I said at the beginning. That each of these stories, in addition to the individual lessons, offers something important about the future of media. That they have something in common.

Each of the journalists had in their hands stories that were all profoundly local. And in part because of that, they were all transcendently human.

Robert Simmons, Jr. and his kitten, Survivor.

Andrew Holland -- the appalling way he was treated and the reforms now in place because someone shined a light.

Citizens coming together to show their collective power to right a wrong.

These are specific to time and place. Yet, each speaks to all of us... our sense of compassion, fairness, humanity.

I have a McClatchy bias – but these stories are indicative of the very best of local news. The very best of a fiercely independent and relentlessly innovative press.

Finding ways to deeply connect with our customer – in both content and delivery.

Being essential to our advertisers and our communities.

Vigorously investigating and confidently reporting on the best knowable version of the truth... doing it the right way..... and dealing with the consequences.

That is an American tradition. It's a patriotic pursuit.

And more of that is the future of media.

Now, I said you had a role, too.

While it's up to us to do our job and execute on the promise of an independent press, you'll be the consumer of it.

The job of holding the powerful to account is hardly the media's responsibility alone.

It's yours, too.

So, vote in a couple of weeks. That's not a political ask, it's a civic one.

Speak up and be heard.

If we're not doing our job, if we drop the ball, if the institutions we depend on do not meet the standard we expect and deserve... tell us.

I'm at Sewanee, so I feel compelled to prove my literary bona fides. So I'll conclude with the novelist, Toni Morrison.

Author of *Beloved*. *Song of Solomon*. *The Bluest Eye*.

And 25 years ago, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In her acceptance speech, she shared a parable. Perhaps you are familiar with it. It was about a young child who thought he could out-smart an old, blind woman known for her wisdom.

He approached her, grasping a small bird in his hands, and asked: "Is this bird dead or alive?"

His plan was, if she said, "It's alive," he would squeeze the life out of the bird. If she said it was dead, he would let the bird fly away.

Either way he would be right.

"Old lady, is this bird dead or alive?" She stood there silent. The boy started to laugh.

Then she spoke. "It is in your hands."

Media companies will have a lot to say about the future of media. But so too will you and others who do what here at Sewanee is a matter of course.

Pursue knowledge, seek justice and serve others.

Create a space where can debate, disagree but still "dwell together in unity."

Can you do that? The answer is in your hands.

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