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Setting the Record Straight

— *Ritch K. Eich, Member of the JVL International Editorial Board*

True leaders – in business, government, and in the press – seek the truth to communicate an accurate accounting to others, i.e., to relate the truth with a high degree of certainty.

We are living in a time unlike any other when the sheer number and viciousness of conspiracy theorists and “fake news” true believers know no bounds; where so-called “leaders” regularly espouse hatred of many traditional media and treat reporters with disgust and disrespect. Wild, unsubstantiated claims bombard the news waves every day and night. And, all too often, they are going unchecked with more accepting the ratcheted-up rhetoric of lying and deceit. While I am not a psychologist, I do worry that not only may the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution be in jeopardy but also that criminal behavior will increase.

Traditional or mainstream media, like us, are imperfect and make mistakes. And when they do, they must acknowledge their errors. To paraphrase what my colleague Norm Hartman once said, reporters and editors must increasingly hold our leaders accountable for real answers rather than change-the-subject techniques that are taught in basic media training.

When you are the press secretary to the President of the United States, or the public affairs officer for a Fortune 100 company, much of your success relies upon your ability to effectively communicate with the media. As a former public affairs officer in the naval reserve and the private sector, I understand the very real challenges of being a conduit between the press and the organization you represent. However, if there’s one lesson I’ve learned, it is that credibility, respect, and integrity are paramount. Without these qualities, reporters will always second-guess you, and you will have difficulty getting your message heard.

The press secretary to the President of the United States is charged with communicating the Commander-in-Chief’s message to the American people through his interactions with the press. Sean Spicer is a classic case study in how not to deal with the media. The White House has a responsibility to communicate with U.S. citizens, as well as our allies around the world. One of the tenets of the founders of the U.S. was to ensure that no one, including the President, would ever be able to secure absolute power. Freedom of the press plays a major part in guaranteeing that the U.S. remains a democracy. Working with the press is seldom easy, whether you agree or disagree with what they are reporting.

I suspect like many of you I was taught to not only place a very high value on the importance of a free press, but to depend on it. Inherent in that trust, however, was to make sound judgments about what I read, listened to or watched, always carefully evaluating its veracity as best as I could determine.

Changes in media organizations – new and old – have been frequent and profound. And, the process continues. With the decline of dailies across our country, a few mainline news

organizations like the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* seem to be holding their own, in print and online. They appear to be as committed as ever to the pursuit of the truth. That said, they are being challenged as never before.

When Mike McCurry was press secretary to former President Bill Clinton, he used his dry sense of humor, combined with an interpersonal style and a high degree of cooperation to enable him to succeed in his position. He told me that his goal was always to provide the press with honest, credible information, and that he worked arduously inside the White House to get key players, including the president, to level with him. Mr. McCurry never felt as if he had been blindsided. I'm not sure the same can be said for Mr. Spicer.

If you want to get your message out, it is important to work with the outlets you use for communicating your message. You cannot expect the media to listen to you if you are not perceived as credible, respectful, or honest. What my fellow public affairs colleagues and I have learned, is that if you embrace the following, you will likely enjoy a more productive relationship with the press as well as your constituents:

- **Be Consistent.** Just because you do something every day, doesn't mean you're being consistent. If press briefings or press releases are perceived as unreliable or and in constant chaos, your message will never be heard. Recent White House press briefings have been inconsistent in messaging, and haphazard in presentation. According to Bill Wilson, a former naval reserve public affairs officer and television newsman with many decades of experience, if you want your message to be heard, it needs consistency. Get your facts – and story – straight.
- **Be Empathetic.** If you've been in someone else's shoes, you'll have a better understanding of the challenges that person or persons face. As a former newsman and company CEO, Wilson understood how the media worked, and as a result, could empathize with them – even if they didn't always see eye-to-eye. While not every press secretary or public affairs officer has the kind of experience Wilson does, they can show respect for journalists who have a job to do, and try to put themselves in their shoes. Interestingly, Wilson learned the importance of trust early on as a pilot and now as a flight instructor.
- **Respect Your Audience.** The press is on the frontline, and considers it their mission to uncover the truth. The news media also happens to be big business. Breaking stories sell, so it's unlikely the media is going to back off easily. According to Wilson, it's not the press secretary's job to do the reporter's job for him or her. But it is important to be responsive – and honest. If not, your reputation will suffer. Respect the needs of the media, and they will generally respond in kind.
- **Be Honest.** Dealing with the media can be challenging and frustrating. According to Larry Ames, former assistant sports editor at the *Boston Globe*, retired sports editor of the *Ventura County Star* and author of the forthcoming book, *Never Dull*, it is crucial to be open in all matters: "Honesty, quickly delivered, is all you ever need to know." When the media knows you're being upfront, even if it's to say that you can't comment on something or share information, your honesty leads to trust. Trust is essential in any relationship.
- **Learn from Your Mistakes.** Everyone makes mistakes – it's what makes us human. Learning from them makes us better at what we do. If you make a mistake, own up to

it, correct it, and move on. And be sure you do it quickly! Don't ever let a mistake linger because you are embarrassed or hope it will just disappear. The media will respect you for it, and understand. After all, it is no secret that they also make mistakes. The difference is that the real professionals are not afraid to admit it, make it right, and move on. Continuous learning is important to working with reporters.

According to Jim Noone, a civilian public affairs practitioner (ITT Washington office), D.C. reporter (*National Journal*) and also a retired naval reserve public affairs captain, it is important to cooperate with the press: "The media should be treated with respect as an independent check on our institutions, including the U.S. government, the Department of the Defense, and the Navy. Put differently, the news media is the eyes and ears of the citizens." McCurry feels that relationships with the press, by definition, are adversarial, but that doesn't mean they can't be amicable and professional. Hostility will only breed more hostility.

Everyone I spoke with insisted that having a supportive organization behind your efforts is essential to working with the media. Unfortunately, if the top of an organization has a hostile view of the press, it is a daunting challenge for even the best press secretary or public affairs professional to succeed.

The press and the press secretary don't have to be the best of friends – in fact, they shouldn't be. There needs to be a respectful amount of distance to ensure fair reporting. But real leaders, including press secretaries, understand the value of the media in communicating with clients, constituents, and even those who disagree with them.

According to Norm Hartman, a business pioneer in media training and crisis communication, as well as an award-winning broadcast journalist, there is an obligation that arises out of the presidency to answer questions unless personnel matters, or matters involving national security, prevent you from doing so. Author of "The Media and You – A Basic Survival Guide," distributed worldwide by the Centers for Disease Control, Hartman has trained countless industry executives for interviews on *60 Minutes*, *The Today Show*, *Dateline*, *Nightline*, *CNN*, *CNBC*, the *Wall Street Journal* and many other media.

James Madison, the 4th president of the United States, once wrote that freedom of the press is the right that guarantees all the others. And, as we try to forge ahead along a path fraught with peril from practically every direction, the stakes for the U.S. – and for the most part, the entire global community – have never been higher.

About the Author

Ritch K. Eich, founder of Eich Associated, is a retired captain, U.S. Naval Reserve, who commanded three naval reserve units and served in NATO, JCS, Atlantic, and Pacific Fleets. He is the author of *Real Leaders Don't Boss* (with Career Press, 2012); *Leadership Requires Extra Innings* (Second City Publishing Services, 2013); and *TRUTH, TRUST + TENACITY* (with Create Space, 2015). He has a Ph.D. in organizational behavior and communication from the University of Michigan. Ritch is a regular contributor to the *JVBL* and a member of the journal's International Editorial Board. He can be contacted at ritcheich@gmail.com.

