

Real World Graduation: Question 50: The Media

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Question 50

Suppose a famous nationally-distributed newspaper publishes a news article. This particular story is about a series of arsons and burglaries committed by specific persons, who are named in the story. It is based on information provided to the newspaper by the local police department. This information was provided to the newspaper editors because he is on friendly terms with officials at the police department. Because this newspaper is regarded as the standard for integrity, its' story is picked up by other newspapers, and then by various radio and television stations. The broadcast and cable television networks accurately repeat the story in their broadcasts, with full audio and video "dramatic re-creations" of the events described in the story.

A few days later, the truth came out. The police officers who provided the information to the newspaper had lied under orders from their superiors in the police department. The officers knew that the subjects in the story were innocent, but obeyed the chief's order to relay the information to the newspaper. The persons named in the story were in fact completely innocent; the upper echelon of the police department held a personal grudge against them because they were frequent critics of the department. The newspaper editors did not know the people in the story were innocent, but did not investigate to verify the information. They were happy to go ahead and publish it although unverified because the subjects in the story held political views contrary to those of the official position of the newspaper. This story was also widely distributed on the internet, including all of the "social networking" sites. The subjects of the article were libeled, slandered, and publicly vilified until they were completely exonerated by the court. Unfortunately, they experienced considerable loss of income and legal expenses. The Police Chief who created the false allegations, and the officers who carried out the politically-motivated orders were subsequently fired. The editors at the newspaper were all subsequently given raises and promotions. But the public was misled and misinformed all along, and some still believe the people mentioned were guilty, since the initiating newspaper never was required to issue a formal retraction or apology. What should be done to prevent this kind of attack upon innocent people and the spreading of false information to the public?

a) Implement qualification controls to prevent inaccurate reporting, such as:

- 1) All journalists, editors, and commentators shall require a journalism license, to be renewed annually;
- 2) Persons who are not licensed journalists shall be prohibited from publishing in any format (except for works clearly labeled as fiction).

b) Implement reasonable content controls to prevent political bias, such as:

- 1) All newspaper, magazine, and printed publications shall be reviewed for news relevance and censored if appropriate, including a prohibition on "editorial opinion";
- 2) Radio and TV broadcasts shall be subject to the same controls, except for live sporting events (without play-by-play).

c) Implement technological controls in order to reduce the occasions under which this type of crime could occur, such as:

- 1) Manufacture and possession of high-speed printing presses (above a certain number of pages per hour) shall be prohibited;

- 2) Manufacture and possession of broadcast equipment, including cameras, microphones, and lighting systems for studios shall be controlled by suitable authorities, to be released to users when required.
 - 3) Social networking sites shall be prohibited from linking to news articles;
 - 4) The internet shall be regulated as a public utility.
- d) Implement capacity controls in order to reduce the magnitude of crimes when they do occur, such as:
- 1) Newspapers shall be restricted to publishing once per month, with a maximum page count based on community population;
 - 2) Magazines shall be published once per year with a page count limit proportional to the number of paid subscribers;
 - 3) Radio and television broadcast talk show hosts shall be restricted to one five-minute segment per month, to make room for greater diversity in broadcasting.

Answer to Question 50

This is a trick question. All of the provided answers are wrong because all of them violate the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution. Special note: if you chose any of the provided answers, the only thing remaining for you to do is choose your preferred political ideology: communist, socialist, totalitarian dictatorship, or absolute monarchist.

First, let's review the facts. The Police Chief committed a crime and violated his oath of office when he fabricated allegations against his political enemies. The police officers under him violated their oath of office and displayed uncommon cowardice because they knowingly passed false information to the newspaper to placate the Police Chief. The newspaper editor who received the information and then published it without verification demonstrated laziness and journalistic irresponsibility. None of this is good for the public. But, if any of the controls mentioned in the candidate answers were adopted, the situation would be much worse, because the government would ultimately be in control of what information was allowed to the public, either directly or indirectly. Governments do not tolerate competition, and you can be sure that when the government regulates "for the public good", it actually regulates in the interest of acquiring more power.