

Editorial: Changing world, unchanging goal—report the truth

November 1, 2014

This editorial, ironically, is a week late.

That's because it's partly about Ben Bradlee, the greatest newspaper editor of the 20th century. He would've thrown a reporter through a *Washington Post* office window for missing a deadline by a week.



Editor Marv KnoxBradlee died Oct. 21 at age 93. To be fair, of all the coverage about Bradlee and his life and death, [the piece](#) that prompted this editorial—written by his famous protégés Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein—ran on the *Post's* website Oct. 28, the day before his funeral.

Bradlee took the helm of the mediocre *Post* in 1965 and served as executive editor until 1991, long after it became known as one of the most respected and influential newspapers in the world. If you recognize his name, it's probably because he fought colossal battles and resisted indescribable pressure so Woodward and Bernstein could cover the Watergate scandal, which led to President Richard Nixon's resignation.

Bradlee's, Woodward's and Bernstein's courage and passion for truth

changed U.S. history and altered American journalism. Nixon resigned for covering up Watergate. Inspired by Bradlee's *Post*, countless editors and reporters strengthened their resolve to report news boldly, thoroughly and fairly.

The Watergate effect

Thanks to the *Post*, Watergate and the movie *All the President's Men*, journalism became an attractive career for idealistic young Americans in the mid- to late 1970s. Back then, the number of journalism students on U.S. campuses reportedly outnumbered the workforce of all the nation's newspapers.

You can count me among them. Although most have gone on to other careers, I've been blessed to earn a living by writing and editing stories 39 years.

It happened because I resonated with Bradlee's belief in the importance of reporting news freely, without fear or favor. Of course, I'm no Ben Bradlee, but I've covered religion news on a smaller, but no less important, scale. The principles that apply to a democracy like the United States or a community like Washington apply to a voluntary group of Christian believers, like the Baptist denomination.

For Baptists, those principles apply not only politically, but also spiritually. We practice pure democracy—every member gets a vote in church decisions; messengers from churches vote on denominational decisions—because of two core doctrines. The priesthood of all believers and the autonomy of the local church lead us to honor each others' consciences by giving all of us a say in our decisions. Consequently, a free flow of information is vital to Baptists. We can't come together and make wise decisions unless we have the facts and accurate context.

Since Bradlee's heyday, newspapers everywhere—from the *Post* to the

Standard—have faced an onslaught of challenges. Technology presents traditional newspaper readers with myriad news options. Newspapers have been political whipping boys for at least two generations. Young adults, raised on multimedia, rarely sit still long enough to read news stories. And every economic downturn knocks props out from the expensive process of newsgathering.

A few years ago, Bradlee reminisced with Woodward and Bernstein. He lamented the “hand-wringing that newspapers would disappear.”

A world without newspapers

“I am really appalled about that,” he said. “I cannot envision a world without newspapers. I cannot envision it. I can envision a world with fewer newspapers. I can envision a world where newspapers are printed differently, distributed differently, but there is going to be a profession of journalism, and their job is going to be to report what they believe the truth to be. And that won’t change.”

So, why am I telling you this?

First, because Bradlee is an American hero, and his passage merits note.

But also because all of us should reflect deeply on the last part of Bradlee’s quote: “... there is going to be a profession of journalism, and their job is going to be to report what they believe the truth to be. And that won’t change.”

Less than a week before Bradlee died, we [posted an article](#) announcing the boards of [Baptist News Global](#) (formerly ABPnews/Herald) and the *Baptist Standard* have approved a process for considering whether the two organizations should merge their operations.

Although the outcome is not predetermined, the goal of those discussions is

“to secure a free press and robust news coverage for Baptists regionally, nationally and globally.”

Every person affiliated with the *Standard*—14 board members and seven staff—take seriously the newspaper’s 126-year legacy mandate to provide a free flow of news about and for Texas Baptists. The intent of the talks is not deciding to merge or not merge with our longtime partners at Baptist News Global. The intent is to determine the best way to secure that legacy mandate for generations to come.

Baptists and a free press

We believe Texas Baptists’ best chance for future strength is to ensure their access to news about their common life together. Changes within the denomination and the communications industry led us to consider accomplishing that goal through a possible merger. Changes in technology make that consideration possible.

But an unchanging principle—free Baptists’ dependence upon free-flowing news—is our guiding star, whatever our specific operational model.

To paraphrase Bradlee: “We cannot envision a world without newspapers. ... And there is going to be a profession of Baptist journalism, and their job is going to be to report what they believe the truth to be. And that won’t change.”