

PRIVILEGES OF THE PRESS CARRY RESPONSIBILITY

Harry Overstreet, an American educator, once wrote that “newspapers have developed what might be called a vested interest in catastrophe.” In recent months, I have been engaged in conversations about the responsibility of the press. A few people act so enraged that they would like to drown reporters and columnists in printer’s ink.

There appears to be confusion about what the constitutional guarantees actually mean and where a paper should draw the line between reporting and commentary.

First, the Constitution does not give absolute freedom to the press or individuals. The adage “you cannot yell ‘fire’ in a crowded theater” places certain restraints on free speech and the printed word. The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage, reminds its reporters that “fairness and impartiality should be the hallmark of all news articles and news analyses that appear in The Times.” “Accuracy,” it states, “is the chief element of fairness and impartiality.”

But as the manual suggests, accuracy can be easily subverted. Facts, each accurate, can be presented in an unfair manner. Simple words can be manipulated to give a different meaning to a story. And, of course, headlines can change the entire meaning of a story or influence the reader before he gets to the first line. Any good reporter or copywriter knows this and avoids the temptation.

Journalists, however, should not be expected to be cheerleaders of our society or the conductors of applause. “Our job,” said Walter Cronkite “is to hold up the mirror – to tell and show the public what has happened.”

Second, there is a difference between a reporter and a columnist or editorial writer. If you will notice, columns, editorials, and cartoons appear on the editorial page under the banner of “Opinion.” There is a reason for this.

Reporters write what they see and hear. If it is a good report (story), it will be factual, accurate, fair, unbiased and interesting. Commentators, on the other hand, serve a different purpose. They comment on the news. What they say is strictly the opinion of one entity – columnists, cartoonist, or newspaper.

They have the same responsibility to truth, facts, and accuracy as reporters, but they are allowed the luxury of letting their biases, prejudices, emotions, and instincts influence their words.

With this privilege comes a warning: no reporter or editorial writer or columnist should deliberately distort or sacrifice truth on the altar of “freedom of the press.” To do so is to jeopardize the protection granted by the Constitution.

The one cardinal rule that applies to all newspaper people is: never use words to libel and never write with intentional malice. These two violations are not only unethical and immoral, but they are illegal.

John Gunther reminded us that “journalism, like history, is not an exact science.”

Nothing is perfect and newspaper people are no less vulnerable to human frailties than citizens with less power. The difference is that a slip in type may produce a more far-reaching impact than a slip of the tongue.