

Journalism in the New Age

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One of Rhode Island's most monumental contributions to today's society is its innovations in the journalism field. *The Providence Journal*, Rhode Island's largest continuous newspaper publication and the recipient of four Pulitzer prizes, has been reporting on landmark developments in history for over two hundred years. When reporting on anything from Civil War battles to labor strikes to Jim Crow laws, the *Journal* used its insightful articles and skilled photography to draw attention to political and social issues that found their way to the forefront of the American conscience since the paper's first issue in 1829. Since the 20th century, Rhode Islanders also relied on local publications such as *The Warwick Beacon* for practical information on relevant issues such as public education, taxes, and bus schedules. To this day, these newspapers and many more remain a crucial aspect of life in Rhode Island as reliable sources of both local and national news developments. However, it has become increasingly difficult for many people in America to find news sources that they can depend on for accurate news reports and factual information, especially as most newspaper publications have transitioned to the Internet to spread their stories. Rhode Island, with its well-established proficiency in the journalism field, is more than capable of fighting the recent problem of "fake news" in the technology-centric age we live in today.

A report issued by the Stanford History Education Group in 2015 revealed an alarming number of teenagers cannot easily discern between a legitimate news story and a completely fabricated hoax when presented with the two. Several of the young participants in the research project even had difficulty separating articles from advertisements, often deceptively labelled as "sponsored content." While naively believing false news reports may seem like a typical adolescent oversight, the influence of these fake stories can extend to American citizens of

voting age as well. An online poll conducted by the Brookings Institution in October of 2018 revealed that 57% of adults surveyed believed that they had encountered fake news regarding the recent election, and 19% believed that this fake news had altered their voting decisions. The speed and ease with which fake news is produced, coupled with the American population's increasing dependence on the Internet as a main source of information, makes it an incredibly pervasive and dangerous problem that can sway the decisions of those who are unaware of its impact. Most Americans simply do not have the time to fact-check their sources, many of which are constantly finding ways to doctor their appearance and composition in order to keep up a facade of believability.

As I have worked as an intern and freelance writer for a local newspaper, I have experienced first-hand the importance of ensuring that all details are accurate when publishing a story. It is not only important to include correct dates, times, and places; obtaining personal quotes, evidence, and dissenting perspectives is just as vital, if not more, when covering any story that holds weight in the community - which is to say, all of them. A person's first exposure to a problem or development in his/her community can shape his/her beliefs in a matter of moments in a way that is often difficult to disregard, even when a valid counterpoint is presented. If even an unintentional error can change the slant of a news story, the potential damage caused by malicious false reporting can be devastating to a community.

I believe Rhode Island's newspapers can deliver on the responsibility inherent to the journalism field: to provide accessible and reliable news for the betterment of the public. While *The Providence Journal*, like many newspapers, has expanded to include a website to display online versions of its stories, it has not sacrificed quality or work ethic in order to make its publications more accessible. The paper's standards for publishing news releases, listed on their

official website, includes an extensive list of questions to be answered by the story before it is considered for release. The people and places involved, the story's relevance to the larger community, and the time of the event are just a few examples of requirements, as well as adequate contact information for reporters to follow up on as the story develops. The *Journal* also provides contact information for readers who wish to correct a story that has included incorrect information, with revisions being included in future issues. As previously mentioned, readers of news stories can experience difficulties separating actual news stories from stories written for marketing purposes. This confusion is not present on *The Providence Journal's* website, however, as the website has a clearly labelled section for branded content, specifically separated from other types of news stories. This attention to detail, as well as the consideration of factual information and its impact on the community, displays an attitude that is sorely needed in many newspaper organizations today. If Rhode Island's newspapers are to serve as a model for integrity in the journalism industry, perhaps a much better system of communication could be instituted than the inconsistent one we currently have.

Alexander Hamilton, founder of the *New York Post* in 1801 (then the *New York Evening Post*), understood the importance of the newspaper and its impact on the beliefs and values of those around him. The newspaper originally served as an outlet for Hamilton to express his political views, even at the cost of losing revenue when his opinions polarized its readers. As the paper passed through multiple editors and centuries, its views and stances on ongoing politics changed many times. While Hamilton's vision may have been to further his own beliefs rather than to educate the public, he still viewed his newspaper as an important medium of persuasion and expression first and as a profitable business second. The value of quality over potential financial gain is something that has always been present in Rhode Island journalism, as our

newspapers continue to report stories that arm readers with the knowledge that they need to take action. Rhode Island's newspapers have a strong historical background and a well-established work ethic that is capable of enforcing quality control for the betterment of all readers. I believe that this gives our state the potential to serve as a positive example for all American newspaper institutions, especially during a time where misinformation can spread very quickly. As Hamilton noted during his time as a representative at the Constitutional Convention: "One great error is that we suppose mankind more honest than they really are."

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