



THOUGHT LEADERS

FIRST AMENDMENT

Media professionals explore the culture of free speech and trust building



BOTH PHOTOS: JIM COURTNEY

Matt Davison, left, makes a point at last week's Thought Leaders discussion on media and the First Amendment while Michael Petro listens. Below, Jeff Woodward shares his perspective on social media and how it influences the public's perception of news outlets.

BY JAMES FINK
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Facing fire from various sources, the mainstream media continues to surge forward, despite a litany of obstacles.

Criticism runs loud and deep, coming from the White House and trickling down to Main Street-level boards, agencies and authorities.

Add to that the confusion with social media, including bloggers, vs. traditional media outlets such as newspapers, radio and TV stations, and it's easy to understand what has become a new world for journalists.

"The attacks on the press are dis-

turbing," said Lisa Polster, WIVB-TV news director.

She was part of a Business First panel discussion on the media and First Amendment rights. The discussion was sponsored by Hodgson Russ LLP.

Other participants were Matt Davison, managing partner of Martin Davison Public Relations; Elizabeth McPhail, partner, Hodgson Russ; Michael Petro, editor, Hamburg Sun; Aaron Saykin, associate at Hodgson Russ and former WGRZ-TV reporter; and Jeff Woodward, SUNY Fredonia director of marketing and communications and former WGRZ-



with MATT DAVISON, MICHAEL PETRO, LISA POLSTER and JEFF WOODWARD



“Social media gives everyone a voice and that’s a good thing, but it also gives everyone a voice and that may not be such a good thing.”

JEFF WOODWARD,
director of marketing and communications, SUNY Fredonia



“People understand the concept of free speech.”

ELIZABETH McPHAIL,
partner,
Hodgson Russ LLP



“Trust is No. 1. We always want to make sure our reporters are right and thorough.”

LISA POLSTER,
news director, WIVB



“The press is under the largest microscope that it has ever been under.”

AARON SAYKIN,
associate,
Hodgson Russ LLP



“Trust is so important for what we do.”

MICHAEL PETRO,
editor, Hamburg Sun



“The move to digital has resulted in a loss of fact checking. Maybe reporters are moving too fast and, because of that, sometimes there are errors.”

MATT DAVISON,
managing partner, Martin Davison Public Relations

TV news director.

“It is becoming a lot more difficult today doing the (reporting) job, for a lot of reasons,” Woodward said. “There are some things out there that are very worrisome.”

While the press is used to criticism, the level of it has ratcheted up in recent years.

The rise of social media – Twitter, Instagram and Facebook – has generated confusion and concern. Some may confuse a blogger, for example, with a mainstream news outlet.

“Personally, I’m worried about the public perception,” Petro said. “Readers don’t know if something is true or not.”

Businesses, political leaders, sports stars, celebrities and others use social media platforms to deliver their message.

Many public figures choose to bypass the mainstream media, preferring social media where they can control content and delivery of their message.

Davison has clients who turn to Facebook to announce news rather than hold a press conference or schedule a one-on-one interview.

“Unfortunately, the legitimate media gets lumped in with all the other sources,” Woodward said. “For legitimate news outlets, that’s not fair.”

That has put the First Amendment, which guarantees freedom of speech and serves as the media’s foundation, under a microscope.

The panelists agreed that the con-



JIM COURTNEY

Jeff Woodward and Lisa Polster agreed that trust is a key component in the public’s relationship with the media.

stitutionally protected First Amendment must not be altered in any way.

“Freedom of the press will never go away, I hope,” Woodward said.

There are numerous challenges, however.

Due in large part to social media, the need for speed in reporting stories ramped up considerably in recent years.

“I would imagine that a lot of news directors are losing sleep about the need to get information out so quickly,” Saykin said. “Twitter is the new reality. There is such competitive pressure, at least in this new reality.”

Polster of WIVB-TV said she makes sure that staff is well-versed in the legal ramifications connected to news reporting, especially given the increased pressure of social media.

It still all comes down to one word, however: trust.

“Trust in the media is going down,” Davison said. “Trust in business leaders is going up.”

Trust is established through one-on-one relationships between reporters and the subjects of their stories. Trust is something that is earned; it’s not automatic, according to the panelists.

► CLOSER LOOK AT THE THOUGHT LEADERS

The Thought Leaders is a yearlong series of discussions with Western New York business leaders and attorneys at Hodgson Russ LLP.

Leaders in diverse industries meet for a roundtable discussion moderated by Business First journalists. Excerpts from the conversation are published after the roundtable.

The next panel will feature decision makers involved in the region’s development community.

Discussions are held in the law firm’s Pearl Street offices in Buffalo.

Trust is accumulated over time but can be destroyed with one bad report.

“With the media, it is your job to push for the truth,” McPhail said. “And that makes the role of the press even more important.”

Even in the world of social media, the public knows that the media’s role is that of a watchdog.

And as a watchdog, that means sometimes ruffling more than a few feathers.

“We have to be consistent and thorough,” Polster said. “And, yes, we do have to take a step back sometimes.”

Saykin agreed.

“As a reporter, you have to embrace the nuisance and not run from it,” he said. “Remember: You are reporting on real people and real organizations.”