

CT VIEWPOINTS -- opinions from around Connecticut

When democracy dies in the White House darkness by Christine Palm

A bright young man I know recently moved back to Connecticut to be a reporter at *The Day*. A former *Hartford Advocate* editor of mine now teaches journalism at University of Pennsylvania. A childhood friend moved from *The Atlantic* to *InsideClimate News* to oversee reporting on climate change. Another colleague continues to crank out acerbic columns for the state's paper of record.

These are the people Donald Trump considers "enemies of the state." He fears their power, and fights back by calling them treasonous purveyors of "fake news" (a ludicrous term that is now the argot of the current White House).

But not only are they *not* traitors to the state; they are, in fact, defenders of it. Journalists — on every rung of editorial influence, covering every beat imaginable, and working in whatever medium available to them — are absolutely essential to the very existence of the state. And to those of us in public service, they are instrumental in keeping government transparent, from the local zoning board of appeals to the G-7 Summit in Paris.

So, when the president of the United States cancels the White House's subscriptions to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and threatens to force federal agencies to do the same, it's time to say it flat out: democracy doesn't just "die in darkness," it gets murdered there by venal dolts like Donald Trump.

How can any sitting president possibly govern intelligently and strategically (never mind compassionately) when he literally shuts the page on two of the most important news sources in the world?

His latest apologist, White House Press Secretary Stephanie Grisham, gave this lame excuse: "Not renewing subscriptions across all federal agencies will be a significant cost saving — hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars will be saved."

Talk about pennywise and pound-foolish. If Trump were serious about saving taxpayer money, he could start with his rallies, which have left a trail of unpaid bills and cities across the country on the hook to the tune of \$800,000, [according to Fortune](#).

In comparison, let's run the numbers on subscriptions to these two venerable news sources. Allowing for various specials and depending on which plan you buy, The NYT costs about \$180

per year, and the Post, about \$150. That's \$330 per year for Trump to learn that America was formed 243 years ago, not in Ancient Rome; that climate is different from weather; that you can't put Harriet Tubman on the \$2 because it's out of print; and that Colorado doesn't border Mexico. Seems a good investment to me. And even if he authorized a subscription for, let's say, 100 federal agency officials to stay on top of the things he can't be bothered with, like geography, history and geo-political alliances, that comes to about \$33,000 per year.

In any administration, journalism is the *last* expense that should be cut. While Minister to France in 1787, Thomas Jefferson famously said, "...were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

Never has the practice of journalism been more needed, or precarious. And I thank every reporter and editor working to keep our individual brains from calcifying and our collective consciousness from becoming ignorant of the world around us.

When I taught journalism at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts some years ago, my students gobbled up each daily paper (thanks to *The Hartford Courant's* "Newspapers in Education" program). At the start of each class, I handed out sections randomly, and watched while the kids held the paper in their hands, turning the big broadsheets with a kind of reverence, and poring over news – local, regional, national and international.

They savored every bit, from minutiae about an animal that had escaped a zoo, to Jeter's latest acrobatic catch, to the death toll from a Haitian hurricane. They learned to discern for themselves what is valid, and true. They questioned everything. I believe it has made them better people, more engaged citizens and more informed voters. Mostly, I hope they will always subscribe to some good papers, and in so doing, hold themselves to a higher standard than our president holds himself.

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