

The Delray Democrat

Woodward and Bernstein at FAU Remind Us of Journalism's Importance¹

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I didn't expect to feel so emotional. Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward were sitting in front of me, crossed-legged, offering juicy anecdotes about Watergate and jeremiads about the 2024 presidential campaign. They summoned the pride I felt when I wrote for a big newspaper and magazine. The Fourth Estate, guardian of our First Amendment.

And frankly, I had some inchoate hope the legendary journalists would reassure us that a free press and our Constitution could save us — like Watergate. That lasted five minutes.

Speaking at Florida Atlantic University February 8, the two confirmed the fears of millions of Americans: The 2024 election may cost us our democracy.

“We have a different country now,” Bernstein warned. “Trump is the first seditious president of the United States willing to encourage a coup. He will do anything to sabotage the legal transfer of [presidential] power.”

For the first time, the U.S. is on [the list of “backsliding” democracies](#), beginning in 2016, fired by “January 6 and a poorly functioning legislature.”

In Watergate, our Constitution and our laws worked. “The question now is, will it work again?” Woodward said. He answered his own question: “Unfortunately, there's a lot of doubt.

“Trump called me at home,” Woodward continued. “He wanted to talk about the coronavirus; 140,000 people had already died. Trump said he had it under control. I asked, ‘What is your plan?’ Trump said he'd have one in 105 days. I asked ‘Why the delay? People are dying.’ ”

Only later did Woodward realize that 105 days would be Election Day.

Also frightening is the number of Americans threatening to surrender their precious right to vote — because of ennui, anger or a fiction that their votes don't count.

Along with getting out the vote, what can we do?

Write to the national media and hold them accountable for their disproportionate coverage of Donald Trump's garbage sandwiches.

[According to a CNBC report](#), “Today, some of the largest newspaper groups in the country ... are owned, controlled by or in debt to hedge funds or private equity groups.” The independence that

¹ [The Delray Democrat](#), February-March 2024, page 8.

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was the marrow of good journalism is largely gone. Profit is the editor-in-chief.

Back in 2016, Les Moonves, then president of CBS, [presciently defended](#) his coverage of Trump's anti-democracy candidacy by saying, "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS." Profit is an agile argument — but for the news media, a false one. The media are unlike any other industry, shaping decisions on the rise and fall of governments, economies and war. The 24/7 coverage of [Trump's lies](#) abets the erosion of the public's faith in their government. Yes, he is a presidential candidate. But he's also our Tokyo Rose.

It's true that all politics is local, yet many Americans live in news deserts. "Local newspapers are vanishing across the country: Nearly 1,800 U.S. newspapers have closed since 2004," then-Berkshire Hathaway Vice Chairman Charlie Munger [told a shareholders' meeting](#) in 2022. For decades, their business model was advertising. Now those ads — and 75% of the profits — go to Google and Facebook (Meta).

"Craigslist really hit hard," said Joel Engelhardt, a former investigative reporter for the Palm Beach Post. At a recent League of Women Voters lunch, he described the bomb that hit his paper. "By 2008, paid advertising dried up overnight, especially the big revenues from real estate agencies and car dealerships. Between 2010 and 2012, the Post went from 1,100 to fewer than 300 employees and could barely make a profit."

With the death of local papers, there's a concomitant reduction in civic engagement and voting. "Our local-news situation is even worse than we think," [warns](#) the Columbia Journalism Review.

"When newspapers shed journalists, some political operatives cheer," [wrote Orlando Sentinel columnist Scott Maxwell](#) in a piece after 115 Los Angeles Times employees were laid off. "But let me tell you who also cheers whenever local journalist positions are cut? Bad guys. Corrupt politicians. Greasy lobbyists. Predators. Evil thrives when there's no spotlight shining."

Floridians are fortunate to have some outstanding local papers such as the *Sun Sentinel*, the *Orlando Sentinel*, *The Miami Herald* and others.

Subscribe to those in and outside of your county. You'll get a comprehensive story of what's going on statewide. Consider the cost a donation to democracy.

As noted in "The Paper: The Life and Death of the New York Herald Tribune" by Richard Kluger: "Every time a newspaper dies, even a bad one, the country moves a little closer to authoritarianism."

June S. Neal, *Sun-Sentinel*, March 5, 2024