“Step right up!” carnival barkers used to invite, and once the sucker’s foot left the ground, the con was in the bag, the fools and their money parted company, and within hours if not minutes both parties knew the score: hoodwinkers 10 and nice guys and gals zero. Fast forward a century or more, and in place of the open-air booth, slick flim-flam phonies rely on apps (like Twitter, Facebook or Instagram) to engage modern chumps with a rainbow of memes, clickbait, and copycat posts. Unfortunately, today every one of us falls prey to personal pitches and fake news that take something far more precious than our money—these crafters of lies destroy our capacity to think critically and, therein, to know the truth.

Many of us depend on journalists to provide credible news. However, periodically, politicians disparage reporters, and people regard news professionals as scapegoats for problems that demand massive social and cultural changes. Pop culture records the tension between the journalists and the power brokers in lots of narratives that interpret, predict, and reinforce the cherished assumptions of the majority with an occasional nod to the invisible poor.

The image of the journalist formed as the printing press expanded with immigration, industrialization, and innovation, particularly in the late nineteenth century. The roots of the word “journalist” stretch back to the ancient Roman “diurnal” or daily, which referred to the Acta Diurna, the world’s first newspaper that consisted of a handwritten page of information posted on the Forum in the public square. The term “journalism” evolved from a Latin root in the French language. In 1680, “journalize” meant recording notes in a book, according to the Online
*Etymology Dictionary.* Narratives about reporters and their role in democracy appeared in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, perhaps mirroring flesh-and-blood muckrakers who fought against corruption and deception. Just as critics from rich and powerful circles rejected muckrakers, authors portrayed some fictional journalists as drunkards and frauds.

**I. Journalists: Watchdogs or Rabid Mutts?**

In *Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture*, Matthew C. Ehrlich and Joe Saltzman point out that pop culture featured both the best- and the worst-behaved newspaper reporters, photographers, and editors. The journalist’s access to juicy information about celebrities, their courage in playing the watchdog, and their unfortunate status as humans capable of making mistakes have prompted dime novelists, literary authors and radio writers as well as motion picture and TV script writers to center dramas on journalists. This smorgasbord of narratives taught us the best journalists protected the institutions of democracy, served the people, and revealed the truth—often at great personal sacrifice. Of course, the worst journalists used the public trust for personal gain, embodying debauchery while roving the streets as viciously as rabid mutts.

Therein, as the early decades of the 21st century passed, we created cultural myths (sacred stories we believe so intently we change our actions to make them reality). Naturally, some of these plots featured noble news professionals or focused on the consequences of betraying public trust and eroding essential institutions, like the news outlets and the post office. We might have continued this tradition of emphasizing the best through bleak accounts of the worst if technology had not erased our shared consciousness of the world.
II. Technology: An Eraser

In past centuries, journalists exposed notorious swindlers and warned the public about scams. But even as the typewriter replaced a former marvel, the lead pencil, all people saw was time-saving devices improving communication. Everybody assumed each new bolt of innovative lightning united humanity and offered prospects for universal peace. People expected the telegraph, telephone, and radio as well as TV, movies, and now the internet to connect them into a global web of kindness and mutual prosperity. Instead, each new wonder erased memories of life where people spoke face to face, wrote and sent letters, or read to each other to pass a long winter’s eve.

Erasing the old ways of doing things resulted in generations moving away from plodding language toward quick ciphers. In a 240-character tweet or a short paragraph on Facebook where thinking involves a few strokes of a keyboard or selecting the vital emoji, the need for a private signature vanishes. Moreover, much of commerce also transpires electronically. Schools stop teaching cursive. People stop caring about grammar. Couples text rather than converse on dinner dates, where nothing but a menu tent separates them. They do not gaze into each other’s eyes or hang on one another’s words.

III. Language: A Barrier to Speedy Messages?

Why does this erosion of language matter to journalists?

The first obvious answer relates to the technology eraser’s cleaning the slate so thoroughly that many newspapers no longer exist. Moreover, that same wipe-clean process also removed most of the former readership. Just as TV news had to compete with cable channels that ran Green Acres, Mr. Ed, and other (no doubt edifying) reruns at the same hour as the evening news, today professional journalists not only must adapt their ways of reporting to online venues,
but also must vie for viewers. Today, writing full words hampers swift messaging via Twitter, and language forms a barrier to speedy texting.

Sadly, words as well as images provide the clay for clever scoundrels to shape our views. Devious providers thrive on confirmation bias—packaging information to affirm their subscribers’ goofy, irrational, and divisive fears. Of course, news often shatters these messages, and so subscribers to things like Parler dismiss accurate accounts as nefarious attempts to assist baby-eaters and promote SOCIALISM. When corporations accept tax perks or the rich benefit from reduced rates on an array of stuff (just because they could afford to pay a hundred times the usual cost), this government handout masquerades as “priming the pump” or “trickle-down” economics. Narratives matter.

The image of the journalist in the 21st century will slide between the negative caricatures and positive depictions of reporters. In the dark morality tales, news goons will skulk in the government swamps, gleefully acting as the evil tools of those undermining freedom in the name of all that is unholy. The promoters of a modern civil war to quash equal rights, restore patriarchy, ignore climate science and other devastating realities (like the pandemic) will produce these scary lessons of what happens when people are too educated.

On the other hand, their tree-hugging, latte-sipping opponents will seek reform to address any wrong that makes rural folks look dimwitted. They also will applaud taxing the rich and everything else that breathes and smoke pot or any other available weed as well as promote education for all creatures great and small. These liberal fiends will celebrate stories about journalists doing their best to inform a skeptical public, hold the power brokers accountable, and offer a bit of joy in gloomy times.
IV. Journalism: Will Power Brokers Allow a Watchdog?

Such polarized views of the press and of each other will not help our nation or people heal. Neither description of the adversaries in the prior paragraphs is fair or balanced. In the past decade, the loss of civility has resulted in our technology, which could provide us doors to harmony if we chose to use it toward those ends, instead usually being sidetracked to ignoble goals of discrediting others to glorify oneself or group. The threat to the image of the journalist reflects the crisis in public trust in our national institutions. We shout at each other and view one another as enemies, instead of peers seeking to improve our society. Name calling and repeating lies to make them accepted as truth has replaced respect and mutual support for facts, science, and dissent.

Journalists will regain their image as the credible compass pointing to the truth only if we, the people, rise above the sweet comfort of always being right and never having to learn anything new or let go of a cherished but flawed view. If we continue to turn to technology to reinforce our beliefs rather than thinking for ourselves, taking risks, and accepting bad news we wish were not true, then we will listen to the biggest mouth espousing the most outrageous but pleasing falsehoods. We will surrender our ability to make hard choices to those who define a world where our nemeses, not stupid political decisions or irresponsible stewardship, keep our country from greatness. The image of the journalist will either vanish or provide the villain in the new order where cruelty replaces kindness and anyone different must either conform or suffer because the state will matter more than the individual.

As other nations generate their own interpretations of journalists in the 21st century, the images in the United States of America will arise from political, cultural, and social realities that the citizenry understands mostly via technology. The question today remains just as focused on
the meaning of truth and the possibility of powerbrokers allowing a watchdog as it did in 1776, 1864, 1945, 1971, 2001, and yesterday.