

The BuzzFeed Buzzsaw: Who Should Decide What You Get to See?



*By Simon Erskine Locke, Founder & CEO
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BuzzFeed was right. BuzzFeed was wrong. In the debate about the Trump dossier, there seems to be no in-between.

Mainstream media organizations have decried BuzzFeed's decision to publish research conducted by a former British Intelligence officer into what President-elect Donald Trump may or may not have done in a Russian hotel room and allegations that the Russian Government had compromising information on him.

The New York Times and The Washington Post specifically argued that BuzzFeed was wrong to publish the Trump dossier, which had been widely circulated for months in Washington. The reason – journalists had tried but were unable to independently verify the information. As such, it did not meet traditional standards for publication.

Others, including the Columbia Journalism Review's Venessa Gezari have argued that BuzzFeed was right. She noted the "media's full-throated condemnation of BuzzFeed is both self-righteous and self-serving." Gezari states that BuzzFeed's Editor-in-Chief Ben Smith convincingly defended the notion that people should have access to this information and be able

to make their own decisions about it.

The debate around BuzzFeed's decision to publish, highlights rules about what doesn't get published. Did something happen in Russia? Is there kompromat? We may never know unless one of the participants confirmed the event. How likely is that?

An additional dimension is the media's self-confessed (at the time of the Gawker-Hulk Hogan trial) concerns about the financial impact of lawsuits and defamation. Are decisions not to publish simply a matter of ethics? Or should we be concerned that when it comes to the powerful, the risk of litigation, means the bar is higher?



Editors and publishers have a tough job. High standards are meant to protect people from inaccurate or defamatory reporting. But we have to question whether or not the rules are applied equally. Protections for the powerful are clearly a lot stronger than those for the powerless.

The fact that it took the money of a Silicon Valley billionaire to fund the lawsuit of a famous (and presumably wealthy individual) to win a case against a media organization is revealing. An understanding of journalism's rules, allows them to be manipulated. This sounds very House of Cards. It is. The protagonists in our story understand the rules. And make no mistake, smart people use them against the media to obfuscate, distract and block coverage.

The press has a critical role to play in our democracy. We need a fourth estate to hold our political leaders accountable. Exceptional reporters are fulfilling this role.

But, being clear-eyed about journalism and the pressures publications face is important. Why, because trust in the media is in decline and its adversaries are winning.

Technology and the world have moved on. Journalism's efforts to be balanced often results in attention being paid to the sensational, not what is really important. Dead cat distractions on Twitter have been a powerful way to re-focus the media spotlight.

The media has a knife in a gun fight. It has one hand tied behind its back. In a world where the gap between the haves and the have nots is greater than ever, the patrician model of editors using traditional rules to decide what is important clearly isn't working so well.

BuzzFeed and the Columbia Journalism Review are right to say that "We the People" (my words) need access to relevant information. This is especially important when it comes to choosing the person and institutions that work for us: The President of the United States and Congress.

The question of access to information and how much to share with the people is not new. This debate been ongoing since Roman times (and before). As we know, information is power. So those with it, want to control it directly or indirectly – this applies both to leaders in politics and the media.

The freedom of information with all of its potential for messiness is the basis of liberty. In the world in which we live, we need access to more information rather than less, because in my view, journalism's role should be that of a trusted curator, rather than arbiter. As a curator, news organizations role should be to not only to share news, but more importantly to provide access to information and explain it. As arbiters – editors make decisions about what they think is important for the rest of us. The track record is spotty.

Now more than ever, we need a more complete picture of our

leaders, not an edited one, and context to make up our own minds. Journalists have a critical role to play. But their role needs to evolve.

What has always been done in the past, won't necessarily work for the future.

***About the Author:** Simon Erskine Locke is Founder & CEO of CommunicationsMatch™ a global communications-focused matching search engine. With more than 4,600 U.S. and International agencies and professionals listed, it is a go-to resource for businesses seeking communications services providers with expertise in areas including: public relations, internal communications, government affairs, investor relations, content marketing, social media, SEO, website development, photography and video. Prior to founding CommunicationsMatch, Locke held senior Corporate Communications roles at Prudential Financial, Morgan Stanley and Deutsche Bank and founded communications consultancies.*