



DOUGLAS COUNTY HUMAN RESOURCES DEPARTMENT

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A Salute to Fair and Objective Journalism

Editorial by Michael Kurtz

Jim Lehrer died last Thursday at age 85, and with his passing another living example of civility and objectivity in the media is gone. Mr. Lehrer was news anchorman for 36 years for Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). In a brief memorial statement on television the other night, longtime political commentator and former adviser to Presidents Nixon, Ford and Reagan, David Gergen paid tribute to his late friend Jim. In describing the lengths that Jim Lehrer went to remain an objective journalist, Gergen stated that Lehrer never voted in any election as he didn't want anyone to think he was taking a political side. Gergen went on to state that it was because of this earned reputation of steadfast objectiveness in his work that Jim Lehrer was asked to moderate 12 U.S. Presidential debates. More than any other person in history.

As quoted in a New York Times article, Lehrer once stated, "I have an old-fashioned view that news is not a commodity. News is information that's required in a democratic society, and Thomas Jefferson said a democracy is dependent on an informed citizenry. That sounds corny, but I don't care whether it sound corny or not. It's the truth."

We now live in a world where if someone doesn't like what they hear in the media their immediate response is "fake news." While the public likes to blame a biased news media who they feel represent different segments of political ideology, the reality is we are all to blame. How often do we share a story on social media without fact checking it first? How quick are we to believe false information that confirms to our preconceived notions and dismiss facts that might challenge our beliefs? While we, the citizenry, are all culpable the media is not above reproach either. Agenda driven "journalism" is becoming more and more common. Whether due to political motivations or simply to drive sales through the titillation of sensationalism and controversy, the outer fringes in the "news media" are contributing to the erosion of public trust in the news.

This all brings me to recent news stories about the County Commissioners. As the County HR Director I'm often asked to hold the moral compass of our county government and provide direction. It can be an uncomfortable position to be in, but it is responsibility I take seriously with my only allegiance being to what is legal, ethical and in the best interest of the efficient operations of the County. Thus, it is hard for me to stand on the sidelines when allegations of misconduct are being wrongly made towards this Board of Commissioners.

For the most part I have been involved in the matter on the periphery. However, I was included in the discussions regarding the Oregonian's request for 650 pages of receipts and records. I saw the email from the Oregonian reporter that came at 3 p.m. on Tuesday with accusatory questions that needed to be responded to by Wednesday at noon. I should have known just by the tone of the questions and the unreasonably short deadline, that the Commissioners wouldn't be portrayed in a favorable light; but my faith in an institution so important to democracy that its protections are described in the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution couldn't allow me to even imagine what would follow.

What followed was a story with a headline stating that Douglas County used federal safety net money on pet travel and first-class airline flights. Both of these allegations have been proven to be false. It doesn't say

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much for the rest of the article when the headline isn't even correct. The Board of Commissioners addressed these and several other false allegations at their last public meeting in a very calm, detailed and measured point by point response. However, despite their rebuttal, the damage has already been done. As Jonathon Swift once wrote, falsehood flies and the truth comes limping after it. But this damage is not just to the individual and collective reputations of the Board, but to the integrity of the news media.

Despite all this I remain optimistic. I refuse to believe that the legacy of Jim Lehrer doesn't still live in the hearts of some of today's journalists. I still believe that there are some journalists who are able to cast aside their personal bias and objectively pursue the facts; and present those facts whether or not it conforms with their own beliefs. I know there are journalists who's only goal is provide the news and not make it. To all of you, I salute the work you do. Don't stop doing what you do. As corny as it sounds, democracy is dependent upon you.

Michael Kurtz is the Human Resources Director for Douglas County and a former Army Journalist who received the Bronze Star for his work during Operation Desert Storm.

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