

Video address transcript for The Society of Publishers in Asia (SOPA) 2017 Awards for Editorial Excellence on June 15th, 2017

Transcript of remarks by Christiane Amanpour

Good evening to all of you in Hong Kong from me here in London and it's a pleasure to address the Society of Publishers in Asia Awards dinner tonight. You have done so much to promote excellence in journalism, best practices, and of course, stand up and defend the freedom of the press.

There's so much to talk about—where to begin?!

Ok the U-S election and my personal bugaboo---it appeared much of the media got itself all into knots trying to differentiate between balance, objectivity, neutrality ---and crucially truth---

We cannot continue the old paradigm...let's say like over global warming—where 99.9% of the empirical scientific evidence is given equal play with the tiny minority of deniers.

I learned long ago, covering the ethnic cleansing and genocide in Bosnia, never to equate victim with aggressor---never to create a false moral or factual equivalence, because then you are an accomplice to the most unspeakable crimes and consequences.

I believe in being truthful not neutral.

And we must stop banalizing the truth.

And we have to be prepared to fight especially hard for the truth in a world where the Oxford English dictionary's word of 2016 is —post truth.

We have to accept that we've had our lunch handed to us by the very same social media that we've so slavishly been devoted to.

The winning candidate did a savvy end run around us and used it to go straight to the people. Combined with the most incredible development ever—the tsunami of fake news sites that somehow people could not, would not recognize —fact check—or disregard: one of the main fake news writers says people are getting dumber, just passing it around without fact checking.

We need to ask whether technology has finally outpaced our human ability to keep up? Whether the big online media giants—Facebook etc. are up to the job of keeping us honest and safe?

I feel that journalism faces an existential crisis ---a threat to the very relevance and usefulness of our profession.

Now more than ever we need to commit to real reporting across ----a real world— in which journalism and democracy are in mortal peril— including by foreign powers like Russia paying to churn out false news and hacking into the democratic systems.

Recently as I prepared to address graduating seniors at a New England university---a couple of things happened to focus my thoughts: in his Easter sermon, the archbishop of Canterbury entered this debate—warning that the public has become used to facts being reduced to the level of opinion.

And that same weekend I read an interview with a rising young actress--- asked what the greatest challenge of our time is?

She said: who to believe.

That was a punch in the gut. To me as someone who has devoted my entire career—and sacrificed, to seek only the truth...

And amidst all this I also saw a film --it has been out for a while, but I caught it on a flight over here from London.

It's called "Denial" and it's about a British so-called historian, a holocaust denier, David Irving who sued an American academic Deborah E. Lipstadt, because she called him out for lying about the holocaust. She won.

But last month, spray-painted on a Seattle synagogue were the words: 'Holocaust is fake history'.

If people can lie, and twist horrifying conspiracy theories about even the holocaust ---the biggest most despicable crime, the most documented and evidence-rich crime in modern humanity--- then I guess they can do it about anything.

So, let's quickly break down fake news—aka lies—

There's the real fake news made up of whole cloth, then there's the "I don't like what you are saying about me," kind of fake news.

Fake news has been a political weapon throughout history —sometimes it's called propaganda, but it is a war to dominate, distort and influence the public square— especially in our information age.

The Russians are masters of this art ---waging war by other means.

Our democracies depend on recognizing the difference between truth and lies...because that is also the difference between democracy and dictatorship.

It absolutely matters where people get your news from.

And the internet is not always the right place...I recently read about a book that was published a decade ago, called the Cult of the Amateur. It says the internet promised “more truth to more people, more unbiased opinion from dispassionate observers.”

In fact, though, the author said what it’s “really delivering is superficial observations of the world around us rather than deep analysis, shrill opinion rather than considered judgment.”

Now let’s talk about fake news—as code for “I don’t like what you are writing about me.” This too is a political weapon.

And when the American president speaks the world listens.

Right now, journalists from China to Cambodia, Russia to Egypt and Turkey, are being bashed over the head with the fake news weapon.

A Turkish MP says "detentions of journalists will continue because those in power consider journalism a crime.”

And my personal favorite from your region--

When a Filipino journalist was killed recently, the strongman Philippine president, Rodrigo Duterte responded:

"Just because you are a journalist--- you are not exempted from assassination”.

This is the environment we work in every single day out there...to be people’s eyes and ears in this complex world.

Think about it—I do every day and every night---and each time I resolve to keep fighting –keep on going with the fight to be truthful—never neutral...

Thanks so much for listening to me on this screen—good night—good luck ---and enjoy your evening.

*Adapted from recent addresses to the Committee to Protect Journalists and Northeastern University.