

Our freedom may be a casualty

Getting information that should be public will get more difficult

Sometimes it seems like the horror that Sept. 11 brought us was actually months ago, instead of just days ago. It is hard to take in all the chaos and horror of the last few weeks without being overwhelmed.

Reporters out in the field have been inundated with stories to be done, photos to be taken, information that needed to be covered. Families, friends and even those with no close connection except that of humanity, have anxiously awaited word, whether on the television or radio or in print.

Newspapers printed extra editions on that Black Tuesday and most sold out quickly.

Still, we are beginning to be far enough removed from the shock to consider what the long-term effects of this event will be for all of us, and today I am talking especially to each of you in the business of news gathering.

Certainly, there are changes in our world as a result of these events. Security at airports, as well as many other public places, has tightened. The public is justifiably concerned about its welfare.

As talk turns to war and retaliation, citizens turn to their government, particularly the federal government, but indeed, law enforcement in general, and demand that whatever steps are needed be taken to ensure the security of our citizens.

These are dangerous emotions. They raise conflicting feelings in me, and I want to share those with you briefly.

All of us understand the need for some semblance of security that has arisen. None of us are comfortable thinking that the calm, routine world in which we exist could be so devastatingly changed as it did that Tuesday morning for thousands of families.

I have found myself unnervingly aware of the sound of a plane flying overhead and the shadow of large jets crossing the skyline outside the window of my sixth-

floor office. A month ago, I watched outside my window in awe as the Blue Angels soared over the Kansas City skyline, barely clearing the roofs of buildings they passed.

Today, when a plane lowers its course to begin the approach into the downtown airport, I notice, with trepidation, even for just an instant. Clearly, in little ways, all of us have been forever changed.

As a result, we hear the calls for the government to take any steps it deems necessary in this time. Arguments are made that these are war times, and there is no doubt in my mind that they may well

be. Immediately, federal law enforcement authorities asked for increased ability to read our correspondence over the Internet, to tap our phone lines, to listen into our electronic conversations.

These are war times, we are told again. I suspect there will be little argument made against such actions.

And yet, in my heart of heart, I am troubled. I fear that the First Amendment is the one sister of Liberty that gets trampled in such times. While the stately dame that overlooks the New York harbor weeps over the loss of her children, her

sister no doubt is wondering what basic tenants of her existence will still sustain her as we continue down the path that seems to lie ahead.

The principle of access to public information is a hard sell even in the best of times. I suspect if we thought it was tough then, we haven't seen the tip of the iceberg. And that troubles me greatly.

These are my thoughts, not necessarily those of anyone involved with Missouri Press Association. I don't ask that all of you agree with me, but I hope that each of you who depends day-by-day on the need to access this public information will be a voice of reason and tolerance as the voices of others are raised urging these freedoms be cast aside.

A tenuous balancing is needed. The government has its job to do. The bloodshed of this past month is fresher in the minds of all than the bloodshed that was shed to gain these precious freedoms more than two hundred years ago. But that doesn't make the fight that gave us these freedoms any less important.

Indeed, we live in perilous times. For our lives, for our liberties. As Herb Strentz, a journalism professor at Drake University, said a few days ago, "You really should not defend freedom by forfeiting it."

My point, exactly. □



Jean Maneke
MPA
Legal Hotline
Counselor

(816) 753-9000
Fax (816) 753-9009

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Myles Communications

Robyn, Jim & Pat Myles

312 Wightman St., Moberly, MO 65270

(660) 269-9201