

I'm a journalist, so when I talk about issues like transparency and freedom of expression, I like to tell stories.

I'm going to tell you a few personal stories today that have guided my thinking about free expression, democracy, and the importance of our great First Amendment.

In the news business, we believe that the Watergate scandal, and the investigative reporting that helped uncover it, was the greatest recruitment tool ever for our profession.

I'd like to say that Watergate helped inspire my career choice. But in fact I got into journalism even before Watergate.

And you know, when I was in college, maybe I gave some thought to journalism's crucial role in a democracy. But the truth is, I became a journalist NOT out of some grand commitment to saving the world or speaking truth to power.

I became a journalist because.....it's just a lot of fun.

You get to meet and talk with all kinds of people, in all kinds of places. You have a license to be nosy, even impertinent.

Things are a little different now. But when I started reporting in the 1970s it seemed like EVERYONE loved talking to journalists.

That was CERTAINLY true when I covered Congress in the years right after Watergate.

Sure, there was partisanship.

But there were also negotiations, and compromises and wheeling and dealing for votes, all the time, across the Republican-Democrat divide.

And people loved to talk about what was happening behind the scenes.

I used to cover the Kentucky delegation in Congress. And one year, I found out that the House members from Kentucky had collaborated to get a bill passed continuing federal price supports for tobacco farmers.

Now, this was the 1970s, and the federal government was telling people that smoking tobacco products could kill you. So, you can probably imagine that to get a bill passed extending federal aid for tobacco farmers, it took some stealthy parliamentary maneuvering by the House Kentuckians.

I went to visit some of them after their sneak attack. They were remarkably transparent about how they did it.

Yeah, one of them told me. “We mumbled that one through, when no one was on the floor.”

The headline on my article was: Mumbling it Through.

A few years later, though it was a lot harder to “mumble through” a controversial bill like tobacco price supports.

That’s because TV cameras were allowed into the House chamber, and the CSPAN channel was born. Score one for transparency.

In the 1970s, transparency was turning on the lights in other parts of government, too.

Freedom of Information laws were strengthened.

And FOIA became a household word – at least in the wonky world of Washington.

The Federal Election Commission was created. And so was the FEC office where reporters like me could go, for the first time, to check out reels of microfilm, thread them into a reader, and find out exactly who was funding whom in Kentucky's congressional races – and how much they were giving.

Whether they liked it or not, our national politicians were now operating in a more transparent system.

That didn't guarantee better government.

But it certainly guaranteed a better informed electorate, because we journalists used all those tools of transparency in our reporting.

In fact, it was a golden era for transparency.

A few years later, in the second half of the 1980s, I found myself an eyewitness to yet another golden era of transparency.

This one was unfolding on the other side of the world.

I was NPR's Moscow correspondent when, after 70 years of nearly total control of all media, the Soviet Communist Party apparatus began to loosen its grip on information.

Some Soviet journalists grabbed the new freedom they were being offered – and ran with it.

They ran FAR beyond anything envisioned by Mikhail Gorbachev, the reformer who set the wheels in motion.

Soviet journalists began to write honestly, for the first time, about environmental disasters and economic stagnation.

Soviet history – which was so carefully airbrushed for years by the Communist Party – began to get reexamined.

Even KGB archives, which hid some of the country's most devastating secrets, were opened for examination.

That openness went on for a few years. And then, in August 1991 – 25 years ago -- a band of Communist hardliners cried “enough.”

Well, they did a lot more than cry. They put Gorbachev under house arrest.

And they banned all but the most reliably loyal newspapers.

They deployed tanks to crucial sites in Moscow, like the huge radio-tv broadcasting facility known as Gosteleradio.

Inside those broadcast offices, in the earliest hours of the coup, workers were putting film of Swan Lake on TV.

Then, stacks of turgid, overwrought decrees arrived. They were handed to the Soviet TV anchors, who obediently began reading them into the camera.

The first statement began like this:

Compatriots,

Citizens of the Soviet Union,

We are addressing you at a grave, critical hour for our Fatherland and our peoples. A mortal danger looms large over our great Motherland.

Apparently the hardliners thought they could frighten the country into submission, as the Communist Party had done for seven decades.

It didn't work, though. Editors from some of the banned newspapers got together and published clandestine information sheets. People passed them out on the streets in Moscow, and a few other cities.

Inside that vast state broadcasting facility, a little band of journalists snuck a report onto TV the first night.

It showed Boris Yeltsin standing on a tank, surrounded by supporters, defying the coup.

And then there was the live broadcast of the coup leaders' press conference.

Millions of people watched all across the country. And about half an hour into the questioning, here's what happened:

A 20-something Russian journalist, stood up, looked squarely at the hardline coup leaders and said:

"Could you please say whether or not you understand that last night you carried out a coup d'etat?"

By naming the action – calling the coup “a coup” before a huge, national audience -- journalists helped spell the end for the hardliners.

I was an eyewitness to all of that. And being there, watching the courage of those journalists, is one reason why I later decided to change careers.

I went from reporter to press freedom advocate. In my new job, I defended journalists like the ones I’d seen taking risks and pushing for more openness in the Soviet Union.

When I made that switch, and joined the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York, it was the late 1990s. CPJ worked all over the world. But it almost never took up press freedom cases here in the U.S.

Here’s the rationale: The kind of help that U.S. journalists needed usually involved legal issues, decided by courts. And the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, based in Washington, had terrific legal expertise – still does today -- and it had a ready roster of lawyers – who could help with FOIA battles and First Amendment challenges.

The issues WE were dealing with at CPJ were very different. Journalists were getting beaten up, or imprisoned, or even killed for their work. There usually wasn’t much a lawyer could do to help, in those circumstances.

Our main advocacy tool at CPJ was moral suasion. We named and shamed leaders who did not respect the ideals of press freedom. In some parts of the world, naming and shaming can work – not perfectly, and far from all the time. But it can make a difference.

After awhile, though, we began to see that we couldn't be silent about the U.S., for two reasons:

First, how could we argue that leaders in Angola, or Bangladesh, or Venezuela should be more respectful of their media, if we were silent about press freedom issues in our own country.

Also: we could see that there WERE more press freedom issues in the U.S.

Our annual book, *Attacks on the Press*, was thick with cases from all over the globe. In 2000, it got a little thicker, when we added the United States, a country where:

Legal protections for journalists were eroding.

Journalists covering certain stories increasingly were subject to harassment.

And access to elected officials was shrinking.

That's what we reported, 16 years ago.

I wish I could say, "things have improved."

But you all know better. A year after that, 9/11 happened, and things only got worse.

That golden era of transparency became a distant memory, as the U.S. built a new national security apparatus to fight terrorism.

A hallmark of that fight was the increased use of government secrecy:

Widespread secret monitoring of telephone traffic

The increasing use of secret classifications – to hide not only dark secrets like the abuses at Abu Ghraib.....but also utterly innocuous newspaper articles – articles that were totally public, and yet, someone decided to stamp them “secret” and stuff them in a government file.

When President Obama took office in 2009, he criticized what he called the “excessive secrecy” of the Bush administration.

“Transparency promotes accountability,” Obama said, “and provides information for citizens about what their government is doing.”

On his first full day in office, Obama directed government agencies to make more data public. He told them to speed up their responses to FOIA requests.

It seemed like maybe he wanted history to remember him as The Transparency President.

Well, maybe. But that’s not going to happen.

A couple of years ago CPJ published a lengthy report on The Obama Administration and the Press

It was filled with actions that belie the early Obama rhetoric:

Like leak investigations and electronic surveillance programs aimed at deterring government sources from speaking with reporters.

The CPJ report noted that in Obama's Washington, accountability reporting had grown more difficult, because of increasing restrictions on access to government records and government officials.

CPJ also noted the increasing use by the Obama White House of digital media, to report its own version of meetings and events – some of which are not on the White House calendar, and thus were totally unknown to White House reporters.

One longtime White House correspondent told CPJ that Obama is “the least transparent of the seven presidents I've covered in terms of how he does his daily business.”

A national security reporter said: “This is the most closed, control freak administration I've ever covered.”

The New York Times public editor said the Obama administration engages in “unprecedented secrecy and unprecedented attacks on a free press.”

Even Obama's signing of a FOIA reform act this summer did little to erase the judgment of one ProPublica investigative reporter earlier this year:

“The federal government no longer cares about disclosing public information.”

But now we're in the last months of the Obama administration. So, time to consider: What happens next?

Now, I don't have any more information than you do about who's going to win this election.

But I do feel confident in predicting that, whichever candidate is elected, government transparency – at least at the federal level -- will not be a winner in 2016.

Why do I say that? Because as so many journalists will tell you: Regardless of political party, every president ends up being more secretive than his predecessors.

Here's how longtime CBS newsman Bob Schieffer put it in that CPJ report:

“Every administration learns from the previous administration. They become more secretive and put tighter clamps on information.”

And so, said Schieffer, “When I'm asked what is the most manipulative and secretive administration I've covered, I always say it's the one in office now.”

There's little in the current campaign that suggests Schieffer's view will change when our next president takes office.

Look at what we've seen from the campaign trail so far:

Hillary Clinton went the better part of a year without holding a press conference. She didn't tell the public she had pneumonia until she was caught on video staggering from her illness.

Donald Trump is the first presidential candidate in decades who's refused to release details of his taxes. His campaign has blacklisted journalists, and the candidate himself has publicly mocked a New York Times reporter's disability. That latter example may not directly reflect his views on transparency. But it was certainly an alarming insight into his view of the media.

For anyone who cares about transparency, open government, and freedom of expression here in the U.S. there is plenty to be concerned about in this election.

Let me suggest another reason we should all be concerned.

I described that period of transparency in the last years of the Soviet Union, and the role that journalists played when hardliners tried to close the door on greater openness.

The victory for openness in 1991 didn't last very long, though.

Today, the KGB's archives are locked shut again. Mass media are beholden – and loyal – to the Kremlin.

And the presidential press conference is a once-a-year affair in Russia, much closer to reality TV than accountability journalism.

I can't argue that we here in the U.S. feel a direct impact when there's little or no transparency in Russia, Turkey, China, Zimbabwe, and other countries we could name.

But I will argue this: what happens HERE matters very much over THERE.

If OUR government becomes more secretive.....if it puts more information out of public reach.....if it treats with disdain the watchdog role of journalists.....believe me, Vladimir Putin, Robert Mugabe, and others are watching.

They are watching, and learning. And when the U.S. government, or a western advocacy group like CPJ criticizes them for a lack of openness, don't be surprised when they say:

“leave us alone. Go look after the problems in your own country.”

We live in the Age of the Internet, which promises more openness, and greater access to information than the world has ever known.

That access can level the playing field between the powerful and the powerless.

It can provide an outlet for whistleblowers to expose tax evaders on a global scale.

The Internet can be a platform for victims of war in Syria to tell their story.....or for each of you, and millions of others, to voice your views, about any issue, without constraint.

But whether you consider him a traitor or a national hero, Edward Snowden has revealed to us that the same Internet, with so much promise to liberate, has also been used secretly by the US as an international system of surveillance.

And it's not just government monitoring that's at issue, of course, but also corporate monitoring, via Facebook,

Google, and others, whose wildest marketing dreams have come true.

Glenn Greenwald, who told Snowden's story to the world, describes two pathways before us:

The digital age could usher in the individual liberation and political freedoms that the internet is uniquely capable of unleashing, he's said.

Or, it could bring about a system of omnipresent monitoring and control, beyond the wildest dreams of even the greatest tyrants of the past."

Right now, either path is possible. Transparency, access to government records, freedom of information – even our personal privacy – all of these things depend not just on persistent journalists asking tough questions and demanding access.

They also depend on you. Because all of us – politicians, journalists, business people, ordinary citizens – we are all the ultimate arbiters in our American democracy.