



Delivered date: May 11, 2019

Commencement Speech at Quinnipiac University

Remarks by USAGM CEO & Director John F. Lansing

John F. Lansing,
USAGM CEO &
Director

Thank you Dean Dichels, Dean O'Connor, and Acting Dean Bloom. And thank you to all of the faculty. It is one of the highest honors of my life and career to have the opportunity to join you today for this inspiring occasion.

Tomorrow is Mother's Day...to our graduates, reflect with me for a moment, on the impact and importance of your mother (or the person who stood next to you throughout your journey in the same role)...

Graduates – please stand and join me in an ovation of appreciation for our mothers and all they have done to get you to this place and this day!

Parents, Grandparents, Spouses, and loved ones: Congratulations to you today. Knowing my own journey to graduation, which on and off took 29 years by the way, would have been virtually impossible without the support of my wife Jean and family. It gives me the perspective I need to understand that this day is a your day!

And to our graduates – your journey both ends and begins on this one single day. You are now armed with the tools of knowledge you will need to begin mapping out a life of accomplishment, however you will define it. Success in your career is certainly central to the start of your next journey.



You will bring your whole self into your careers – those parts of you that Quinnipiac helped you sharpen and refine.

But you will also bring with you your core values and your guiding ethical principles that you have clarified and sharpened during your time at Quinnipiac. Indeed, your moral compass will be an essential element of how you live your life as both a person and a professional – including:

- Duties of loyalty, but not blind loyalty;
- Commitment to supporting and helping others along the way as you put THEM above yourself; and
- An Allegiance to honor and truthfulness – even when shortcuts taken by others may tempt you.

Today, I want to touch on an issue that, in my view, is the defining one of our time: one that touches every aspect of our lives, from our personal life, our professional life, and even the glue that holds our nation together. It is the state of truthfulness in our country and in our world – and, I call on all of us to be willing to recognize that today there is actually a war on truth – a war that must be won.

It is being fought on many battlefields including the Digital Information Battlefield where information is being weaponized and unwitting citizens here and around the world, are being manipulated.

It is a war that is often conducted in shadowy corners of social media by foreign and domestic posers and even robots that poison the truthful narratives that we, and you, sort through issues.



A set of unimpeachable facts, and the existence of a baseline of truth is the foundation that undergirds our democracy, its institutions, and the health, safety, and security of all American citizens.

Since our country's founding, it has been journalists and journalism that have stood watch over private and public officials in power to hold them accountable to what is factual and what is true.

Journalists who abide by the highest standards of professional journalism are the Enemy of the People! Yet, there are those that would have you think that distort and confuse you.

That is not to say that journalists are perfect, and as a life-long career journalist myself, I can attest to my own failings. But at my core, and at the core of every professional journalist I have ever known, is a sincere desire, and I would dare a burning passion, to find and report the truth.

I began my career as a video journalist. I learned early on that the visual narrative I produced could at times be the most powerful witness to factual events and truthful story telling.

It was a time when there wasn't a camera in everyone's pocket – it was on me to understand the events unfolding before me and to record it in a way that truthfully and meaningfully conveyed the story.



I also quickly realized that the mere presence of a large video camera at a ten- and complicated news event can be potentially harmful, particularly to vulnerable individuals – a lesson I learned the hard way early in my career.

I recall a grieving mother on the scene of a drowning that turned a joyous family holiday outing into a family tragedy. Having learned my lesson, this time I stepped back and did my best to cover what was minimally necessary for the story and avoided any graphic pictures or any attempts to interview her.

I learned the pursuit of truth does not ride roughshod over the feelings and emotions of people who are vulnerable or at risk of future harm. There are many stakeholders in truth telling and all must be considered before decisions are made that cannot be taken back.

Stepping away from journalism for a minute, we know that truth telling is essential in all your professional work. Teachers must be empathetic even as they truthfully assess the work of their students honestly.

Business leaders must be respectful of subordinates even when they truthfully pinpoint deficiencies in a performance review.

The importance of truth is essential even if telling the truth is difficult. And it means we must become smarter at recognizing what the truth is.

As my career progressed, I found myself leading local television newsrooms in Minneapolis and Chicago and grew to understand the larger truths can be difficult to discern. I realized that having a newsroom that lacked many forms



diversity is in itself a recipe for missing the larger truth of what life is like day in and day out.

I recall holding town hall meetings with citizens in both cities. I will never forget one meeting in particular in a majority African American section of South Chicago.

We opened the meeting with a broad question to break the ice: “What does live TV news mean to you?”

I was rattled by the responses we received. One woman rose to say that the African American communities of Chicago are more than crime scenes. She said, “Why do you only rush to our neighborhood when there is an incident of violence? Where are the stories of our successful young people, the contributions of our community leaders? Our doctors and lawyers and academics – where are they? Why do you exploit us like that?”

I realized immediately that we had gotten her story and the stories of her community wrong. That the “truth” about being an African American in Chicago that we were telling every night was nowhere close to reality. We were only giving one slice of factual information – stories of crime – and we were failing to report the broader and deeper dimensions of truth.

Our newsroom did some soul-searching about how African Americans are represented in our daily broadcasts.

We proactively talked about the imbalance of crime coverage over other important topics in our city such as business, education, health, and religion.



We awoke to the fact that we were not truthfully telling the story of Chicago every night. And we were determined to get it right.

My lesson learned was that the pursuit of truth is a responsibility to take my blinders off. To seek out and listen to others, to make sure my institutional biases are not coloring my judgment – and therefore, skewing my decisions and my actions.

I share it with you not just as journalists and communicators – but in education and business where your judgment and adherence to the truth undergirds your reputations and ultimate success.

Over the past four years, my journey has taken me to the United States Agency for Global Media where I oversee the largest news organization in the world: 4000 journalists reporting in 60 languages in over 100 countries and working one of the networks including the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and among others.

Our mission is to provide truthful and professional reporting to parts of the world that do not have the benefit of a free and open press (and there are many).

It is our duty to pursue the truth in telling America's story to the world – and to provide truthful coverage of authoritarian regimes...where their citizens are lied to and manipulated on a daily basis.



In places like Russia, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, North Korea, and Cuba – the “truth” those citizens receive is a collection of lies and deceptions designed to allow illegitimate dictators to gain and retain power. And, alarmingly the Authoritarian Trend is spreading across the globe.

Our Agency faces this onslaught of lies head on every day on what has now become the Information Battlefield.

And our journalists are paying a high price through their courage in the face of strongmen who think nothing of jailing journalists for the crime of reporting truth.

And, in some cases, the danger for journalists extends to the ultimate sacrifice as it has for fifteen of our journalists, three in just the last year.

But the truth is worth fighting for! Now, as we have seen, the erosion of truth come to our shores in the form of Russian hackers attacking our sacred process for electing our leaders.

We are also under attack on a daily basis from other adversaries seeking to disrupt our great American experiment – a Democracy that threatens despots whose only goal is to completely destroy the very idea of true and verifiable facts – facts that would challenge the power they have grabbed with no accountability.



For it is the accountability built into our system of government that is crucial to our long-term survival. Our leaders in politics, business, education and all corners of society must be held to a standard of truthfulness and honesty. It is the critical element that separates America from lapsing into the authoritarian tendencies of our adversaries. And there is nothing they would want more.

It is on us – each and every one of us – to defend the very idea that truth is sacred. As you start your professional lives, know this:

- Truth is based on verifiable facts.
- Truth is not an opinion.
- Truth and Nonsense are not two sides of the same coin.
- There are no alternative facts.

Which brings me to a term heard all too often in recent months and years: FAKE NEWS.

I've thought a lot about the use of this term and have come to believe it is actually two things.

On the one hand, “fake news” is exactly what authoritarian regimes use in closed societies to control the narrative and keep their citizens off-balance and unsure of whom to trust.

For a dictator like Vladimir Putin, this use of Fake News is a method for destroying the very idea that there exists a verifiable set of facts.



Think of it this way: If the idea of truth based on verifiable facts is dead, then the biggest liars will win.

Because when you are an illegitimate leader you fear the truth, so it must be destroyed. That is certainly how Fake News is being deployed by our adversaries. On the other hand, the term Fake News has snowballed in this country mostly through an accusation leveled at journalists and journalistic institutions.

Most often, I believe, the “fake news” complaint comes from those who just dislike the news reporting no matter how factually accurate that reporting is.

Don’t allow yourself to be overwhelmed by a fog of opinions – apply your critical thinking skills you have learned here at Quinnipiac University. Explore. Examine. Verify.

To be sure, the American press is not perfect, and it makes mistakes. My 42 years of experience tells me these are overwhelmingly mostly honest mistakes. Good news organizations correct their mistakes promptly and transparently. Question those that don’t.

But to label any legitimate journalists as the “enemy of the people” and to aggressively seek to undermine the veracity of honest and truthful reporting by labeling it as Fake, is dangerous.

It is dangerous because it aids our adversaries in denouncing the very idea of fact-based truth. It is a road that does not lead to a stronger democracy. It is a road taken by authoritarians around the world to hold on to power.



Truth is worth fighting for. It's worth fighting for in the press and it's worth fighting for in all of our daily lives. It's worth fighting for in your professional lives...

Sometimes the truth hurts. Sometimes the truth presents a longer and more difficult path to successes big and small.

Sometimes the truth must be managed carefully to avoid unnecessarily harm certain stakeholders.

But it is the foundation our nation rests upon. "WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS TO SELF EVIDENT...THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL. It is the foundation for success in business. It is the foundation for success in education. And it certainly is the foundation for success in communications.

Nurture the TRUTH. Protect the TRUTH. Honor the TRUTH.

Thank you.