

NYT editor talks about importance of real news



New York Times Executive Editor Dean Baquet and Caesar Andrews with UNR's journalism department on Feb. 8 in Reno. Photo/David Calvert

By Linda Fine Conaboy

RENO – To some, the latest chapters in U.S. political history read like a catchy novel; to others, current changes are merely pulp fiction.

These are attention-grabbing times no matter how one views the unfolding daily drama floating over the political landscape.

In a conversation on Feb. 8 sponsored by the University of Nevada Don Reynolds School of Journalism at UNR and later that evening at the Nevada Museum of Art, *New York Times* executive editor, Dean Baquet (pronounced like valet), the current and

the first black editor of the *New York Times* and previously, the *Los Angeles Times*, discussed the need to keep his paper nimble, open-minded and forward thinking.

His UNR audience consisted mainly of students, who were all exceedingly interested in the election of the new U.S. president and who peppered Baquet with hard-hitting questions about current issues such as fake news, accountability, integrity and presidential tweets.

Regarding his integrity as executive editor of a major newspaper, Baquet said he always tries to make sure associates don't know where he stands on issues. "It drives some people crazy. Almost all of my friends are journalists, and I don't know their political views either. I at least vote, but some other editors don't," he said, explaining their need for total transparency.

He said he avoids relationships with public officials and he didn't meet President Barack Obama until near the end of his presidency.

He cautioned that in the newspaper business it's imperative to hold people accountable, but to also remain objective. "Don't take for granted what politicians say, be skeptical."

He said President Trump has told many falsehoods, the first coming to his mind is the Obama birther issue. "It's an effective cover to say things that are blatantly false."

Baquet added that the new president's tweets are particularly revealing. "He is the president of the United States. When he tweets, it's an unfiltered view of the most powerful person in the U.S. It's the closest view inside the mind of the president that we'll ever get."

Warming to his subject, he declared, "We must cover Trump. The things he does have huge consequences; what he does affects the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Trump eats away

at the trust in the media.”

Fake news is really nothing new, Baquet said, declaring there has always been fake news and pointing to the blatant and salacious headlines the National Enquirer spouts regularly as a case in point. However, he said, some fake news is designed to lessen the trust the public has in journalism.

“Journalism is not flawless, but what the First Amendment is meant to protect is under attack,” Baquet said. “Now though, fake news is on steroids. It’s insidious and puts more pressure on us to be honest and honorable.”

Facebook and other sites, he said, need to work harder to police it.

Because the fake news issue is on the minds of many, Baquet said his reporters are becoming exceedingly motivated.

“There’s an extraordinary clarity about what needs to be done. I remind [reporters] what our jobs are and the fact that we’re the opposition party necessitates that we ask hard questions. It’s not the job of journalism to be liked,” Baquet said.

He added that when people call the *NY Times* on a mistake, he and his staff will always own up to those mistakes and attempt to make them right.

Unfortunately, according to Baquet, all media now is in financial turmoil, but the *NY Times* less than others. “Now, more than half of our revenue comes not from advertising, but from our readers, and readers make measurable demands.”

Baquet said after the presidential election, he received many angry emails blaming the *Times* because Trump won the election. However, shortly thereafter, his emails took a positive turn resulting in a sizable and unexpected increase in circulation.

“There used to be a powerful world of great newspapers. But now the whole system has broken down,” he said. Nevertheless,

according to Baquet, liberal media elitism is curable starting with getting out into the world and listening to people's views.

"Objectivity is real and it is important. People have a right to unbiased news," Baquet said.

He said his outlook on journalism has changed over the years.

"I am very confident about the future of journalism. There's been a tremendous increase in readership. I'm probably more a believer in asking hard questions of powerful people now," Baquet said. "We're in for years of rapid change, but there have been periods like this before. We need to train journalists as much as possible. Journalism schools have a larger role than they have ever had and now it's important to cross-train them."

He explained that to his way of thinking future journalists must be comfortable not only in the world of words, but also be within the realm of the visual aspects of journalism.

What makes a good reporter? A good reporter listens, is open minded, is a voracious reader, especially of good novels, and is open to learning new ways to tell a story. "Everything in journalism has happened before, except now, we know more about it and we know it instantly."

As he prepared to wind down his conversation, Baquet returned to the newly elected president.

"The myth of the uneducated person who voted for Trump is just that—a myth. He won the Republican vote; he won the vote of those who make a lot of money; he won votes from people who think the system is screwed up," Baquet said. "A Trump voter is probably more sophisticated than we think. The political elite don't understand the upheaval, but Trump seized on it. There are people who voted for Trump who also voted for Obama.

“It is my job to understand all sides of the story and to do this every day. I feel like I’m in a novel; you get a glimpse of the world you’re never going to get anywhere else.”