

Media should not be stoking anger



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CNN journalist Wolf Blitzer. Guest columnist Patricia W. Elliott says CNN and some other media outlets have encouraged division and anger in the way they cover news. *ANGELA WEISS / AFP/GETTY IMAGES*

The media is a powerful platform. At its best, it informs citizens and holds our governments to

account. At its worst, it sows division, suspicion and hatred.

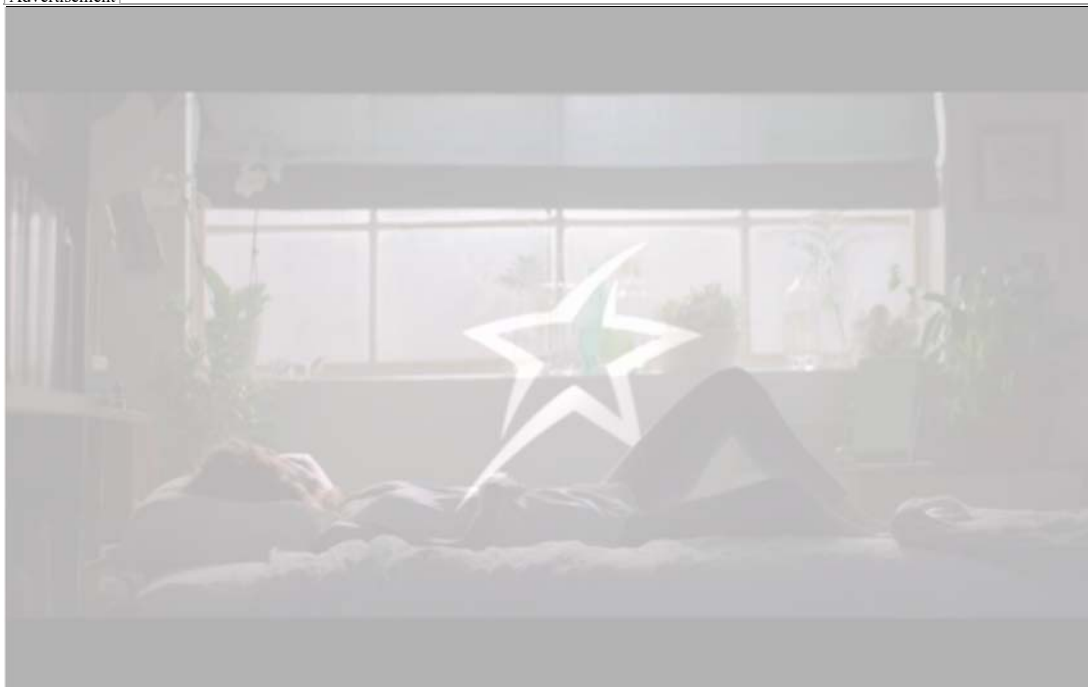
During the U.S. election, I frequently checked CNN for updates. What did I see? People yelling at each other. From noon to midnight it never ceased, each journalist flanked by a panel of paid shouters. And this is the “moderate” U.S. news channel.

Imagine a group hurling abuse at each other in a restaurant, voices rising, fingers stabbing the air. Someone would quickly intervene – other diners, staff, maybe even you. On the air, there’s no such intervention. Social norms that make society safe and functional are turfed. Arguments are goaded into fury. Onlookers can do nothing.

Media brass must love drawing audiences like rubberneckers to a bad car accident. They seem careless of consequences. The first casualty of nonstop anger is truth. The second, human decency. No need to describe what’s next — the historical examples are known to all.

Alas, Canada has no immunity. In my very city, I can turn on the radio and hear a host mocking 13-year-old kids who questioned the wisdom of a pipeline crossing a Missouri River reservoir. “Oh, the ignorance,” he says after playing an interview clip, and before stating such views harm Saskatchewan families.

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These youngsters, approached for interviews by a journalist, doubtless assumed their words would be objectively presented in a news report. Who wouldn't? Could they have even imagined their clips would be used for an on-air public caning? I think of my own son at this age and it breaks my heart.

Their youthful sense of purpose becomes mere fodder to rail on about the gosh-darn things they teach kids in school these days. The bluster flows past their teachers and straight at the person in the least secure position, an intern. Call the school board office, the broadcaster says, and don't be kind.

It pains me to think of my own interning students, brimming with ideals and desire to change the world. This is the province of youth. As it should be. They're testing the world, experiencing its boundaries for the first time. Kindness is the one thing the old can give them.

Instead, they gain a lesson in how to separate an individual from the herd and set the pack on her. I think of a colleague who experienced a broadcaster whipping his audience into the foaming belief that she alone was responsible for a group protest he found disagreeable. Her boss was called to the flogging, too; it seems Friday evenings are no longer off the clock. As she was falsely, repeatedly accused of being a foreigner, I heard a future where birth certificates and work unit stamps must be produced before joining a cause.

Finally, the host read out her phone number. Don't be kind, he advised, but don't be a jerk. Well, good golly, after several days of referring to "that woman" as "disgusting" and "a piece of work," what kind of calls would you expect?

It's one thing to direct calls to a business or a government office, quite another to an individual. More importantly, it's one thing to critique, another to incite.

Incitement is a line mainstream media outlets with mass audiences shouldn't cross, for reasons that should be obvious to all. The platform is too powerful, the consequences too unpredictable and potentially dire. Just stop and think about it.

I could be next to have my social media feeds plumbed and phone number aired. I don't care. I just want human decency to prevail. Don't ask me to be unkind. Saskatchewanians are supposed to be famous for their kindness. Why set a normally friendly people at each others' throats?

In this spirit, I ask local media to declare themselves anger-free zones, at least for the holiday season. Sure, report on anger, but don't become it, condone it or stoke it. There's enough already.

For most, it's an easy call to answer, for a few, a little harder. But try. If you can manage the next few weeks anger-free, make it your New Year's resolution, too.

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