

Journalists sound alarm at WSU

Democracy needs independent press, Murrow award recipient Bob Schieffer says

By Joel Mills of the Tribune

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Bob Schieffer speaks as Helen Thomas looks on during a news conference at Washington State University. The journalists were given the Edward R. Murrow Lifetime Achievement Award at the Pullman campus on Tuesday.

PULLMAN - Veteran journalists Bob Schieffer and Helen Thomas received the Edward R. Murrow Lifetime Achievement Award on Tuesday, and they used the opportunity to sound an alarm.

"I fear that it has reached its Waterloo," Thomas, 88, said of the profession that has put her face-to-face with 10 presidents. "I think it's a tragedy that so many newspapers are going down."

Schieffer echoed those concerns, adding a healthy, free press is what separates dictatorship from democracy.

"In a totalitarian society, you have one source of news, and that's the government," said Schieffer, 72. "In a democracy, you have an independent press that gathers the facts and presents another version."

Thomas and Schieffer are the latest recipients of the award Washington State University's Edward R. Murrow College of Communication has been giving out for a dozen years. Their day consisted of a news conference for local media, workshops with journalism students, and acceptance speeches Tuesday night at WSU's Beasley Coliseum.

Schieffer started his career with the Fort Worth Star-Telegram in Texas, and has been with CBS News since 1969. Thomas was the White House correspondent for United Press International for 57 years, and now works as a syndicated columnist for Hearst Newspapers.

Both said the Internet is a technical marvel, but one that is killing their industry. They decried the lack of standards for electronic Web sites and blogs that pass themselves off as "news."

"It is the only vehicle that we have ever had to deliver news that has no editor," Schieffer said. "The worst newspaper, the smallest newspaper, has someone on that newspaper that knows where the stuff comes from."

He said there are credible news Web sites and blogs out there, "but we're left to figure that out for ourselves."

Thomas said the Internet has marred journalists' search for the truth, "and truth is supposed to be our stock and trade."

Schieffer added that the sheer volume of good and bad information on the Internet makes many people tune out, rather than sift through the din.

"It's like elevator music," he said. "There's so much out there that you don't even hear it. Everyone has a right to their opinion, but that doesn't mean it's news, and it certainly doesn't mean it's right."

Thomas and Schieffer said newspapers have played a central role in American history, and are not just journalistic exercises. "It's hard to imagine what this country would be like without newspapers," Schieffer said, noting their shrinking numbers. "We need more journalists, not fewer journalists. We need more people out there covering the news. That's why it's so important for schools like the Murrow school here to instill the standards of journalism."

Thomas said a good newspaper engulfs its reader.

"You read so much more than you intended to, you learn so much more."

She said John F. Kennedy was her favorite president because he inspired young people to public service and set lofty goals for the country. She recalled an evening when Kennedy invited the first astronauts and their wives to dine at the White House.

"In the mix and mingle, he asked the astronauts, 'do you think we could land men on the moon?' They said 'sure, absolutely,' because you never say no to a president," Thomas said. "When they left, they said 'is this guy nuts?'"

Thomas said Lyndon Johnson made the greatest contributions to domestic policy. She recited an encyclopedic list of his accomplishments, from Medicare and the Civil Rights Act to voting rights for blacks in the South and federal aid to all levels of public education.

"He moved the mountain," Thomas said.

But even though journalism is in peril, Thomas said she wants students to know it is an honorable, rewarding profession.

"I still tell them to go for it," she said. "Not that I want them to starve to death. But I do think there's hope out there that they'll find a solution. But I haven't heard it yet."

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