

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

The erosion of trust

On Tuesday I touched on one of the many marvelous technological advances in the last 50 years, smart televisions.

It would take a whole month of columns to cover other progress such as computers, the internet, smart phones, search engines, Google Earth, music files, wonder drugs and laparoscopic surgery.

But along with all this betterment, a culture of suspicion has grown up that has degraded our sense of community and coarsened public life.

Looking through *Mercury* editions of 50 years ago, it is remarkable to see common-place news items that would never appear today.

Let's start with the hospital: every day *The Mercury* would publish local and area births: "TO MR. AND MRS. PAUL SMITH, 305 Linden St., a daughter in the medical center Wednesday. Mrs. Smith is the former Carol Johnson."

The newspaper also published daily admissions and discharges from the Pottstown Memorial Medical Center, together with each person's home address.

Such practices would be verboten today because of privacy laws. In a more trusting age, these newspaper items kept people informed about their neighbors. You could congratulate new parents or send somebody a get-well card.

The Mercury also published birthday congratulations, usually for children but sometimes for adults, also with their home addresses.

Obituaries frequently included the home addresses of the deceased.

The phone company distributed directories to all their customers with names and addresses of all subscribers except for a relative few who paid to remain unlisted.

Each August, students looked forward to homeroom lists published in the newspaper. Elementary school students could find out who their teacher would be.

Each day's paper carried wedding announcements and photos of brides and grooms in their nuptial finery.

There were accounts of meetings of garden clubs,

ladies' auxiliaries, boy scout troops, even piano recitals.

All this contributed to a sense of community.

Almost everyone watched the three national networks and saw the same shows. All three network news teams, ABC, NBC, and CBS, were respected.

Walter Cronkite of CBS was often called "the most trusted man in America."



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

With cable TV and the rise of the internet, tens of millions of people who once shared the same news broadcasts now see different versions of reality on programs like Fox News and MSNBC.

The internet not only diminished broadcast news, it also crippled local newspapers, which for the most part deal in facts.

Before, wildly unsubstantiated letters to the editor of the newspaper were rejected. Public decorum was considered important. Because a lot of local news was published, nearly all the letters addressed local issues.

Sound Off is now filled with rabid partisans for either Trump or Biden who constantly talk past each other.

Many people live in echo chambers and seldom interact with those whose views are different from their own. The lunatic fringe has blossomed.

The proliferation of social media has allowed people to write anything without any consequences for libel.

At a time when people are statistically safer than ever, they are more suspicious and disrespectful than ever.

Political leaders no longer work across the aisle. Divisiveness reigns, and gridlock results.



WALTER CRONKITE, who anchored the CBS evening news from 1962 to 1981, was often called "the most trusted man in America." Now nobody trusts anybody.