Desert Sun.

Social media, enemy of thought? Depends who you ask

Jesse Marx The Desert Sun

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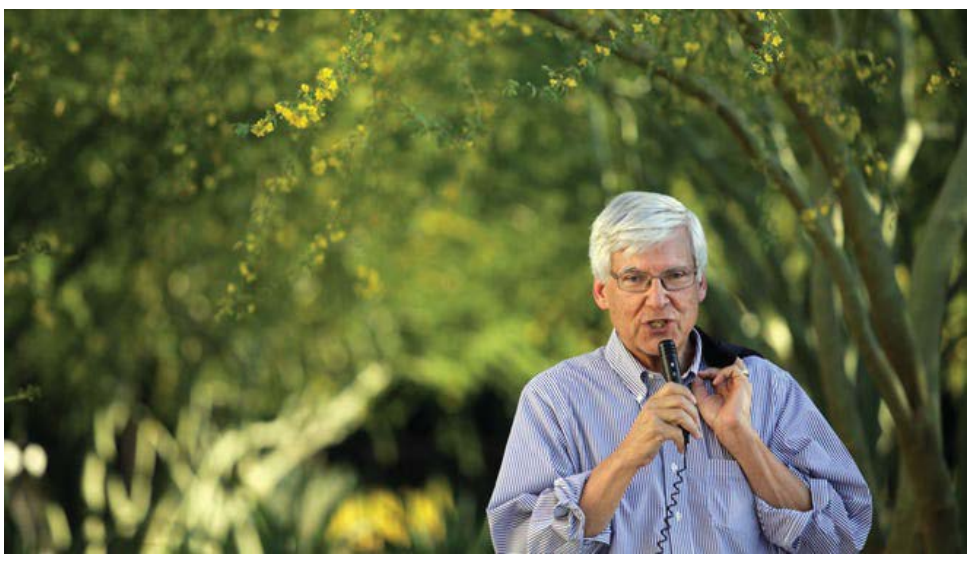
Van Gordon Sauter, a former broadcast reporter, opened one of two political discussions on Friday morning at the Rancho Mirage Writer's Festival with a series of simple questions. How many people, he asked, read a newspaper every day? A couple hundred hands — almost the entire room — went into the air. But when he searched for audience members who use Twitter to find news, he got only a dozen hands.

Rancho Mirage Writers Festival goers pack the Steinbeck Room Friday morning for a discussion about social media and politics. *Jesses Marx/The Desert Sun*



Cowan speaks at a Sunnylands water symposium on March 19, 2014. *Richard Lui/The Desert Sun*

Sauter then asked whether anyone present was under the age of 30, and a couple impish old-timers threw themselves on the mercy of the crowd. Laughter spread, but quickly dissipated.

What followed was a serious, though mostly skeptical, conversation among reputable journalists and authors, including one politician, about the relationship between social media and democracy.

Bret Stephens, a foreign affairs columnist for the Wall Street Journal, offered the most pessimistic view of the Internet. He likened the experience of social media to Narcissus, a character in Greek mythology who could not stop staring at his reflection in a pool. Twitter and the like, he continued, shorten attention spans, desensitize audiences — they are the "enemy of thought," and "the affect has been a coarsening of the American mind."

This point was echoed and even expanded upon by Michael Dobbs, otherwise known as "Lord Dobbs of Wylye," to include politicians. As both a member of that class and an author — he wrote the novel "House of Cards," which became the basis of the Netflix series — he's seen how the 24-hour news cycle forces people in the public sphere chase headlines.

Masha Gessen, a journalist whose work has focused largely on Vladimir Putin's Russia, took up the defense, calling the comments of the other panelists gross misrepresentations of reality. New media sites are producing some of the best long-form journalism, she said, and more people are reading it than ever before.

Writers festival brings literary stars to Rancho Mirage

Social media, she added, has allowed for the delivery of tough questions that reporters, in a place such as Russia, might not wish to ask. Even in the United States, the Internet has given voice to gay and lesbian publications that had previously been considered fringe.

No doubt social media can function as an echo chamber, providing false comfort to serious people in search of change, Gessen said, but it provides a way for those same people to organize.

Earlier in the conversation, Marvin Kalb, a long-time broadcast reporter, spoke of the careful thought and deliberation that is required of great journalism. As an example, he cited Edward R. Murrow's famous radio report on the liberation of Buchenwald concentration camp in 1945. Murrow was so horrified by what he saw that he waited several days in order to find the appropriate words.

Kalb quoted part of Murrow's broadcast off the top of his head, but encouraged the audience to find it for themselves.

Where? On social media.

Let the People Rule

Also on Friday morning, Geoffrey Cowan, the outgoing "innkeeper" at Sunnylands, gave festival goers a glimpse into his latest book, "Let the People Rule," which surveys the 1912 election and the birth of presidential primaries in America. Prior to then, the party bosses handpicked the country's candidates.

If that system hadn't changed, Cowan theorized, Jeb Bush would likely be the Republican nominee today, Bernie Sanders wouldn't be considered viable, "and nobody would be talking seriously about Donald Trump."

It is an intimate subject for Cowan, who — inspired by Teddy Roosevelt's efforts — helped create a commission in 1968 that led Democrats to change the party's rules, so that delegates, with a few exceptions, would actually be picked during primaries.

Yet Roosevelt was a complex man. He was, for instance, opposed to popular democracy until it suited his purpose, and some of the decisions he made in 1912 were blatantly hypocritical: he spoke of the people, but excluded blacks from his new political party.

That incident — which is examined extensively in the book — marks a stain on Roosevelt's reputation, Cowan said, and raises the question, to this day, of whether "there's anything a candidate wouldn't do to win the presidency."

But Roosevelt also helped open up the process — a process that later propelled non-WASP candidates such as John F. Kennedy or Barack Obama into the highest office in the country.