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The Nixon-era press held great power and responsibility.

Now, we are all editors.

By Ed Smith, New Statesman, 2-8 February 2018

(N.B. The words and sentences that are highlighted appear in the questions below.)

Steven Spielberg's *The Post* is a timely film, but not in the way we're meant to assume. Richard Nixon (boos) hated the press, Donald Trump (louder boos) also hates the press. The press – bravely and sometimes brilliantly, as *The Post* explores – helped to bring down Nixon. **And so, with the right encouragement and courage...**

I found *The Post* enjoyable and powerful, so this column is not so much critical as **quizzical**. For there are two problems with the analogy that is being implied, the first concerning personalities and the second to do with technological change.

For starters, apart from the fact that they're both paranoid and unpleasant, there aren't that many similarities between Nixon and Trump. Nixon belonged to a different kind of politics: worldly but shadowy power-brokers whose careers played out, as the classic American political phrase holds, in "smoke-filled rooms". Nixon owed his ascent to the accumulation of political knowledge and influence, the exact opposite of a direct **pitch** to the masses.

Of the alternative careers that Nixon might have pursued, "TV personality" (Trump's route to the top) was among the least likely. It was a poor TV debate with John F Kennedy that helped Nixon lose the 1960 election. Indeed, if Nixon had been better known as a "personality", he surely wouldn't have been elected. With Trump, it's the opposite. He was only elected because he was so well known. (Pause for a moment here, and consider which electorate has more to feel guilty about.)

There is a wider problem with *The Post* as a rallying cry for our age: times have changed, overwhelmingly so. Yes, Trump and the phenomenon of fake news reaffirms the value of paying for real journalism. But flawed, self-published news isn't going away any time soon.

"We have to be a check on their power" – that is the central sentence and message of the film. Consider, though, how power was much more tightly held in the 1970s than now, not only by the political elite but also by the press. If newspapers didn't run something, effectively the story was dead. If citizens sought to bring injustice to light, newspapers were almost their only chance (short of legal action).

That's why the film reminded me of the awesome responsibility that fell on editors as they weighed their judgements about what to print. The film's authorial voice is: "Let's support brave and great editors." And how could your columnist, for whom journalism has always been a strand of working life, do anything other than agree with a film that champions the value and freedom of the press?

Here, my argument takes an uncomfortable turn. For instead of wishing for more great newspaper editors, ask yourself instead how you are doing as an editor. For we are all editors and publishers now. We turn our lives into newspapers on a daily basis. People act as editors (curating retweets), journalists (writing posts) and paparazzi (taking Instagram photos). People broadcast, use Photoshop, **opine** and gossip, and make it public on social networks. **The media is no longer a professional "estate" but a mode of living, and a very democratic one.**

The quantification of that democratic activity is a central addiction of modern life. Just as a professional editor is forced to balance **high-mindedness** with **reach** – “How the paper is declining,” we **scoff** – have you, as an amateur publisher, courted the gallery to gain a few cheap likes or followers?

The American journalist Michael Lewis argued that before the financial crisis economics exposed how countries – and people – behaved in a world of almost free credit. What would they buy, if they could buy anything? And how would they convince themselves of their own probity? In the same way, the age of social media has revealed how people behave when they can appoint themselves as editors.

Yes, there is some genuine exchange of insight and information. But also amply in evidence: petty vindictiveness, bullying, indifference about due process, herding behind vogueish opinion, self-righteousness, the restless desire to find feet of clay in everyone and a **yearning** for instant justice. Want information and opinion to be better edited? It starts at home.

This is pretty new. My generation – I am 40 – grew up believing that a small number of people held a great deal of responsibility and, correspondingly, that they had to be held vigilantly to account – still the world, effectively, described in *The Post*.

Now, given the influence of social media and the **ripples** it causes, anyone trying to exercise power through old-fashioned channels (ie holding down a job with responsibilities) faces a daily opinion poll. A large number of people, in other words, hold a small amount of power. Real democracy, you could argue.

Maybe part of the angst eating away at social and political discourse is a crisis of responsibility. “**They**” have been significantly disempowered. But there’s a flip side: it’s on us now. For there is no effective establishment, the media is all of us, and power is held more diversely and confusingly than at any stage in history.

In that context, what can responsible, professional journalism protect against – which excesses ought it to **curb**? If the previous target was the behind-closed-doors stitch-up, now, increasingly, it is the unchecked **bandwagon**.

In these restless times, it can feel as though a revolution is just around the corner. Maybe it is. Alternatively, the revolution has happened already and the uncertainty stems from problems of adjustment. Change began in Silicon Valley, then crept into the banalities and casual judgements of everyday life. So far, as revolutionaries, we haven’t done much to temper mob instincts.

I – VOCABULARY (4 points)

For each of the following words (highlighted in the article), choose the best synonym or definition for the word as it used in the context of the article:

1. **QUIZZICAL**

- a. puzzled
- b. ironic
- c. questioning
- d. supportive

2. **PITCH**

- a. appeal
- b. playing field
- c. vote
- d. line

3. **OPINE**

- a. express an opinion
- b. criticise
- c. sound out opinions
- d. speak openly

4. **SCOFF**

- a. mock
- b. observe
- c. point out
- d. lament

5. **YEARNING**

- a. longing
- b. claim
- c. demand
- d. expectation

6. **RIPPLES**

- a. damage
- b. scandals
- c. repercussions
- d. divisions

7. **CURB**

- a. restrict
- b. highlight
- c. condemn
- d. condone

8. **BANDWAGON**

- a. fake news
- b. power of the internet
- c. musical chairs
- d. fashionable cause

II – COMPREHENSION (6 points)

For each question choose the best response (one only) in the context of the article:

1.

**What does Ed Smith probably infer when he says:
“And so with the right encouragement and courage...”**

- a) ...perhaps Nixon would not have been brought down by the press.
- b) ...perhaps the press will contribute to Trump's demise also.
- c) ...the press will surely continue to act bravely and (sometimes) brilliantly.
- d) ...I will now explain why I think The Post is such a good film.

2.

Which of the following can be inferred from the article:

- a) Donald Trump hates the press more than Richard Nixon did.
- b) Technological change has been a main factor in Donald Trump's election success.
- c) The journalist considers that the electorate should feel more guilty about electing Trump than electing Nixon.
- d) Nixon, unlike Trump, was a heavy smoker.

3.

“Here my argument takes an uncomfortable turn” means

- a) What I say next could make you feel uncomfortable.
- b) Self-appointed editors must remember they bear a certain responsibility.
- c) I am not absolutely sure about what I am going to say next.
- d) Self-appointed editors should feel uncomfortable about what they are doing.

4.

“high-mindedness” and “reach” are another way of saying

- a) pride (in their profession) and widespread impact
- b) strong opinions and great influence
- c) strong moral principles and wide effect
- d) self-esteem and popularity

5.

Ed Smith refers to the American journalist Michael Lewis

- a) in order to draw a comparison between people's behaviour during the financial crisis and in the age of social media
- b) in order to draw a comparison between people's behaviour when they enjoy free credit and when they are free to act as news editors
- c) in order to underline the possible abuses of social media
- d) in order to compare the situation in the USA with the situation in Europe

6.

Which of these statements is most clearly confirmed by a close reading of the text ?

- a) The transformation described by Ed Smith in this article is seen as overwhelmingly negative.
- b) Self-appointed journalists are compared to revolutionaries who are ruled only by their baser instincts.
- c) In the past, the press wielded as much power as the politicians.
- d) A small amount of power in the hands of a large number of people is considered unequivocally as a good thing.

III WRITTEN EXPRESSION (10 points)

“The media is no longer a professional “estate” but a mode of living, and a very democratic one.”

Discuss.

(300 words)