

# NIEMAN REPORTS

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

DOUBLE ISSUE

Vol. 53 No. 4 WINTER 1999

Vol. 54 No. 1 SPRING 2000

Ten Dollars

*'...to promote  
and elevate  
the standards  
of journalism'*

—Agnes Wahl Nieman

A selection of outstanding writing  
published in Nieman Reports during the  
last half of the 20th Century

## Editor's Note:

Journalism calls upon those who practice it to also be the guardians of its core principles. As the 20th Century progressed, challenges arose as journalists wrestled with technological changes brought by radio, then television, and now the Internet, and also with significant economic shifts in how news operations are owned and managed. These articles compiled from 53 years of Nieman Reports attest to journalists' enduring search for better understanding of what the guiding principles of our profession ought to be and how practitioners can be their protectors.

To publish this retrospective issue required the assistance of people who gave generously of their time and wisely in their counsel. Former Nieman Fellows Robert Manning ('46), Boston writer and former Editor in Chief of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and Lindsay Miller ('88), Senior Editor of Morning Edition (WBUR-FM) in Boston, went into the Nieman Reports archives and read hundreds of pages from past issues. Curator Bill Kovach, Nieman Reports Assistant Editor Lois Fiore, and I also delved into back issues to perform the difficult task of selecting articles to include in this issue.

The final decision about which articles to republish was left to the editor, as was the decision about which articles to run in their entirety and which to excerpt. Each of the writers is identified at the end of the article with biographical information current with when the original story appeared. One thing that was changed, however, is that in some stories visuals—cartoons or photographs—have been added.

Finally, let me express my gratitude to the editors who preceded me, for finding the writers they worked with, for the stories they published, and for the adherence they demonstrated to the founding principle of the Nieman Foundation—"...to promote and elevate the standards of journalism." The editors were Louis M. Lyons, Dwight Sargent, James C. Thomson, Jr., Tenney K. Lehman, Fay Leviero and Robert H. Phelps.

Melissa Ludtke  
Editor

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Nieman Reports (USPS #430-650) is published in March, June, September and December by the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University, One Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138-2098.

Telephone: (617) 495-2237  
Internet Address (Business): [nreports@harvard.edu](mailto:nreports@harvard.edu)  
Internet Address (Editorial): [neditor@harvard.edu](mailto:neditor@harvard.edu)  
WWW address: <http://www.Nieman.Harvard.edu>

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Subscription \$20 a year, \$35 for two years;  
add \$10 per year for foreign airmail. Single copies \$5.  
Back copies are available from the Nieman Office.

Please address all subscription correspondence to One Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138-2098 and change of address information to P.O. Box 4951, Manchester, NH 03108.

ISSN Number 0028-9817

Second-class postage paid at Boston, Massachusetts, and additional entries.

POSTMASTER:  
Send address changes to  
Nieman Reports,  
P.O. Box 4951,  
Manchester, NH 03108.

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# The Roots of Our Responsibility

BY BILL KOVACH

The American press was halfway through the century just ended before journalists began to talk seriously about press responsibility.

A letter Henry Luce wrote to Robert Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago, prompted this conversation. "I know what my freedoms are under the First Amendment, but what are my responsibilities?" Luce wondered.

"I don't know," Hutchins scribbled back. "Why don't we form a commission to find the answer?"

This exchange took place about the time—1937—that Harvard advertised for its first class of Nieman Fellows. The inquiry was interrupted by World War II, but 10 years later the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press completed its work. The report it issued, "A Free and Responsible Press," spawned the creation of Nieman Reports.

Archibald MacLeish, the first Curator of the Nieman Foundation, was a member of the Hutchins Commission. He alerted his successor as Curator, Louis Lyons, that the report would be released early in 1947. He also told him of one lament of the Commission: there was no forum for regular and serious criticism of the press.

By the time the report was released, Lyons and his 1947 class of Nieman Fellows had created Nieman Reports to fill that need. It was a publication which promised "no pattern, formula or policy except to seek to serve the purpose of the Nieman Foundation '...to promote the standards of journalism in America.'"

What you hold here is a collection which reflects the substance of the first 53 years of the conversation journalists have engaged in about their rights and responsibilities in the pages of Nieman Reports. At times you will find an article that opened a new argument or ended an old one. Throughout you will hear the voices of journalists committed to their work challenging colleagues to raise the standards of discovering, reporting, writing and editing the news in a context meaningful for navigation within a free society.

Culling the content of Nieman Reports since its founding was a work of devotion on the part of five readers: Assistant Editor Lois Fiore, Editor Melissa Ludtke (NF'92), Robert Manning (NF'46), Lindsay Miller (NF'88), and me.

Obviously, reducing more than half a century of Nieman Reports to 224 pages means many memorable articles never made the final cut and must remain in the archives.

Those that survived were guided by Melissa Ludtke's vision for the issue. Here's how she spelled that out:

"Each reader will take responsibility for reading Nieman Reports for a 10-year period.

"In reading these journals, judgments will need to be made constantly about whether a particular article should be recommended for inclusion... Does the article do an excel-

lent job of defining or exploring an issue in journalism?... Does an article stand out because of its provocative nature?... Does it simply stand out because of its fine writing... [or] are there themes...exemplified by the particular article?"

The collection opens with a brief excerpt of Louis Lyons's review of the conclusion of the Hutchins Commission: "[T]hey came out with the warning that only a responsible press can remain free.... This is an urgent warning to the interests in control of the press. It is going to be a hard one to brush off or forget as so many criticisms of less weight have been brushed off and ignored."

Some in the press didn't find the warning hard to ignore. George Sokolsky, for example, wrote in the Tampa Daily Times: "It just shows how dumb these professors are to put radio in front of the newspaper in a study of the press."

But many in the press in general, and the Nieman Foundation in particular, took the notion of journalistic responsibility to heart. Discussion about what this responsibility entails weaves a common thread through writings that span more than five decades, a remarkable stretch of time during which extraordinary changes occurred in how news is and can be delivered and how it is even defined. Though technological change has at times seemed to bring with it erosion in some of the core values that have guided journalists, at least in these pages discussion continues about what core values ought to be vigilantly preserved. It is interesting to observe how each time technologic or economic events threaten to usher in changes in journalistic practices—whether it be the arrival of television, the consolidation of newspaper ownership, or emergence of the Internet—the conversation among journalists returns to an exploration of fundamentals, of the core principles which define journalism.

The articles are organized chronologically by topic. You will see how the discussion of a subject area—developing and using sources, for example—has changed (and at the same time been constant) over the years. Naturally enough the broad category of journalism, which opens this issue, is itself the largest subject area. In here you will discover what may be the most eloquent and best description of journalism that ever has been published, "The Pursuit of Journalism" by Thomas Griffith, a senior editor at Time (NF'43). His words evoke the spirit as well as the reality of journalism, explain its great promise, and provide fair warning of its limitations.

"Journalism is in fact history on the run," Griffith wrote. "It is history written in time to be acted upon: thereby not only recording events but at times influencing them.... Journalism is also the recording of history while the facts are not all in."

You will also find a description of newspaper journalism that owners in today's market-driven world might want to

clip and save. The article is, "For That Hole in the Forms." It is by Edwin A. Lahey, a member of the first Nieman class.

"Newspapering is a mass production, assembly-line manufacturing process, first and foremost," Lahey wrote. "And like any other manufacturing process, the assembly line shuts down if the customers don't buy the merchandise. But there is a slight difference.... [T]he First Amendment, a simple and well-worn phrase packed both with opportunity and responsibility."

In a way every journalist will recognize the evolution of journalism between 1947 and 1999 recorded herein is a story of sameness and change, of a world undergoing fundamental shifts in economic organization and technological possibilities but held together by (but at times barely clinging to) some core principles.

"I've never seen the press corps quite so frustrated," a Washington reporter told me..." writes one of this issue's authors. Of course, this sentiment might be the boilerplate lead on any story chronicling complaints of journalists during any of these decades. But this particular quote is the opening line in a story called "The Captive Press," written by Douglass Cater. His is a cry against the "frozen patterns" of reporting in the early 1950's that turned press coverage into a convenient conduit for the destructive character assassinations put forth by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Arguments about how news ought to be reported continue to this day.

By the end of the century, in a discussion about investigative reporting ("Reporters' Relationships With Sources"), a group including Pulitzer Prize-winning reporters remind us of how newsbreaking stories don't require the use of anonymous sources. These journalists tell how they broke stories examining criminal conduct in some of the most sensitive areas of life and did so without relying on unnamed sources or becoming the tool of any interest save the truth.

The magazine chronicles the performance and shortcomings of the press as it monitored the 1960's and 1970's, decades when profound societal changes reshaped the nation and the world. Editorials written by Southern Nieman such as Harry Ashmore (NF'42), in Arkansas, and Hodding Carter (NF'40), in Mississippi, remind us of the discomfiting tightrope newspaper editors walked in fighting for tolerance in the face of murderous white hate, a murderous hate profiled by Simeon Booker (NF'51) in his coverage of the Mississippi trial for the murder of a black man, Emmett Till.

The emergence of the new feminist movement, Peggy Simpson (NF'79) points out, was first met with "disbelief and ridicule" by much of the press. As Simpson noted, women, who had begun entering journalism in increasing numbers found themselves performing a balancing act, too. As they tried to shape their careers by covering prominent stories, they were also trying to bring awareness into the newsroom of stories and perspectives not previously covered.

The American journalists' declaration of independence of military and political control is captured in "Reflections on Vietnam, the Press and America," an article by Peter Arnett. "God knows we are not perfect as professionals..." he

wrote. "But if I am to be judged, better in the broad context of the American press tradition than in the narrow interests of venal politicians or partisan colleagues."

Against this backdrop of conflict, challenge and change, Anthony Lewis (NF'57) wove the encouragement of the courts as they steadily expanded press freedom. "Over the last two decades," he wrote in "The New Reality," "judges... have interpreted the First Amendment generously, even imaginatively, to protect freedom of speech and press. They have given editors what I think is beyond doubt the widest measure of legally, enforceable independence that exists, perhaps that ever has existed, in any country."

There was in this period, too, the excitement of discovery as new and important advances in the craft of journalism found their way into the pages of Nieman Reports. Philip E. Meyer (NF'67) introduced a new precision into journalism by using tools of social science, mathematics and analysis. Anthony DeCurtis, Senior Features Editor of Rolling Stone, explained how "political and social realities" can be learned through the often overlooked reporting contained in serious criticism of popular music.

The rest of the century seems almost a blur as social, political, economic and technological change continued to challenge traditional behavior in all aspects of our personal and professional lives. Throughout this anthology, however, you will hear clearly the voices of journalists who argue persuasively for holding on to the enduring principles of journalism so as to act in the public interest. In articles (and excerpts from articles) such as those that follow, this message emerges as a clarion call:

"Backdoor Editorializing," by John L. Hulteng (NF'50).

"Has Money Corrupted Washington Journalism?" by James S. Doyle (NF'65).

"Does Press Freedom Include Photography?" by Joseph Costa.

"Media Power and the Dangers of Mass Information," by Michael J. O'Neill.

"Feasting on the Seed Corn," by Alex S. Jones (NF'82).

"Endangered Species," by David S. Lamb (NF'81).

Most of all, you will find in this sampling of the first half-century of Nieman Reports the urge of journalists to perfect their craft. These journalists represent the contributions made to this magazine by so many others whose words have been inspiring to those of us who had the privilege to work on this issue. Reading these back issues helped me to realize how critical it is to maintain a serious dialogue among ourselves about our craft. As writer after writer reminds us, it is not the job of those outside of journalism to define what we will become or how we will do our work. But if we don't do the hard work of examining and reexamining decisions we make in the light of our enduring principles then we will fail in our obligation to maintain a responsible press. And without a responsible press, the fabric of our social community and our democratic process begins to fray.

It is this obligation for which this issue of Nieman Reports is only a reminder. ■

Midway through the last century, the **Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press** issued its report, concluding that only a responsible press—responsible for meeting the needs of a democratic people and responsible for adhering to its core principles—could remain free.

Nieman Reports highlighted the Commission's report in its inaugural year and now its findings open this first retrospective issue. This is fitting since the conclusions reached then seem remarkably relevant today. During the 1940's, Commission members examined what was happening in the separate segments of media—radio, newspapers, magazines, movies and books—and worried about the consequences of some consolidation within and among these various avenues of communication.

“Besides economics and technology, other forces work toward monopoly,” the report observed. “Personal forces—exaggerated drives for power and profit—have tended to promote monopoly.” And it asked whether “the press by becoming big business [has] lost its representative character and developed a common bias—of the large investor and employer?”

Commission members also noted that they were “disturbed” by learning that “many able reporters and editorial writers displayed frustration—the feeling that they were not allowed to do the kind of work which their professional ideals demanded.”

Now, at the start of a new century, a small number of huge companies own and operate combinations of these (and other new) media entities under one corporate roof. In the waning years of the 20th Century, consolidation within the media increased markedly. And journalists gather often to discuss not only what their core standards ought to be, but how they can adhere to them in the constantly changing, highly competitive environment of round-the-clock newsgathering and dissemination.

These topics, addressed in a range of forums and responded to from various perspectives, have been at the heart of Nieman Reports content during its 53 years of existence.

Forty years ago **Thomas Griffith** (NF'43) wrote that “the essence of journalism is its timeliness; it must be served hot.” Never has the plate upon which news is served been hotter than it is today. Yet speed of delivery brings with it new questions and concerns that are certain to be discussed on the pages of Nieman Reports during its next 53 years. ■



*April 1947*

# A Free and Responsible Press

## A Review of Free Press Report

BY LOUIS M. LYONS

In December 1942, Henry R. Luce of Time, Inc. suggested to President Robert M. Hutchins of the University of Chicago an inquiry into the freedom of the press: both its present state and future prospects. President Hutchins selected a dozen scholars to serve with himself on a Commission on Freedom of the Press. Their conclusions now published mark an event in the history of American journalism.

For the first time an examination of the performance of the press has been undertaken by a highly competent, independent body with adequate resources. They spent three years and \$200,000 of Mr. Luce's money, then \$15,000 more that President Hutchins

dug out of the Encyclopedia Britannica....

They considered freedom of the press in terms of a responsible press, and they came out with the warning that only a responsible press can remain free. Failure of the press to meet the needs of a society dependent on it for information and ideas is the greatest danger to its freedom, the Commission finds.

In answer to the question "Is the freedom of the press in danger?" is a flat "Yes." But the reasons do not echo the familiar assumption of the publishers that freedom of the press is their proprietary right to act as irresponsibly as they please.

The Commission's reasons are:

1. As the importance of communication has increased its control has come into fewer hands.
2. The few in control have failed to meet the needs of the people.
3. Press practices at times have been so irresponsible that if continued society is bound to take control for its own protection.

The citizen also has a right... (to truthful information on public affairs), the Commission asserts. "No democracy will indefinitely tolerate concentration of private power, irresponsible and strong enough to thwart the democratic aspirations of the people. If these giant agencies of communication are irresponsible, not even the First Amendment will protect their freedom from government control. The Amendment will be amended."

This is an urgent warning to the interests in control of the press. It is going to be a hard one to brush off or forget as so many criticisms of less weight have been brushed off and ignored. ■

*Louis M. Lyons is Chairman of the Society of Nieman Fellows Editorial Board.*

*April 1947*

# Freedom for What?

## Only a Responsible Press Can Stay Free, Hutchins Commission Finds

(AN ABSTRACT OF THE REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON FREEDOM OF THE PRESS)

### The Problem

The Commission set out to answer the question: Is the freedom of the press in danger? Its answer to the question is: Yes. It concludes that the freedom of the press is in danger for three reasons:

First, the importance of the press to the people has greatly increased with the development of the press as an instrument of mass communication. At

the same time the development of the press as an instrument of mass communication has greatly decreased the proportion of the people who can express their opinions and ideas through the press.

Second, the few who are able to use the machinery of the press as an instrument of mass communication have not provided a service adequate to the needs of society.

Third, those who direct the machinery of the press have engaged from time to time in practices which the society condemns and which, if continued, it will inevitably undertake to regulate or control.

When an instrument of prime importance to all the people is available to a small minority of the people only, and when it is employed by that small minority in such a way as not to supply the people with the service they require, the freedom of the minority in the employment of that instrument is in danger.

This danger, in the case of the freedom of the press, is in part the consequence of the economic structure of the press, in part the consequence of the industrial organization of modern society, and in part the result of the

failure of the directors of the press to recognize the press needs of a modern nation and to estimate and accept the responsibilities which those needs impose upon them.

### The Remedy

We do not believe the problem is one to which a simple solution can be found. Government action might cure the ills of freedom of the press but only at the risk of killing the freedom in the process.

The real remedies lie in a greater assumption of responsibility by the press itself and in the action of an informed people to induce the press to see its responsibilities and to accept them.

The problem is of peculiar importance to this generation. The relation of the modern press to modern society is a new and unfamiliar relation.

The modern press is a new phenomenon. It can facilitate thought or thwart progress. It can debase and vulgarize mankind. It can endanger peace. It can do it accidentally, in a fit of absence of mind. Its scope and power are increasing.

These great new agencies of mass communication can spread lies faster and farther than our forefathers dreamed when they enshrined freedom of the press in the First Amendment to the Constitution.

With the means of self-destruction now at their disposal, men must live, if they are to live at all, by self-restraint and mutual understanding. They get their picture of one another through the press. If the press is inflammatory, sensational and irresponsible, it and its freedom will go down in the universal catastrophe. On the other hand, it can help create a new world community by giving men everywhere knowledge of the world and one another, by prompting comprehension and appreciation of the goals of a free society.

### Freedom for What?

Modern society requires great agencies of mass communication. Breaking them up is a different thing from breaking up an oil monopoly. Breaking them up may destroy a service the people require.

But these agencies must control themselves or be controlled.

Freedom of the press is essential to political liberty. Freedom of discussion is a necessary condition to a free society.

The press is not free if those who operate it act as though they had the privilege to be deaf to ideas which freedom of speech has brought to public attention.

Freedom of expression does not include the right to lie.

The principle of freedom of the press is not intended to render society su-

has become big business. There is a marked reduction in the number of units relative to the population.

The right of free public expression has therefore lost its earlier reality. The owners of the press determine which persons, which facts, which versions of the facts, and which ideas shall reach the public.

The press has become a vital necessity in the transaction of the public business of a continental area. A new era of public responsibility for the press has arrived. The variety of sources of news and opinion is limited. The insistence of the citizen's need has increased.

It becomes an imperative question whether the performance of the press can any longer be left to the unregulated initiative of those who manage it.

Their right to utter their opinions must remain intact. But the service of news acquires a new importance. The citizen also has a right...to adequate and uncontaminated mental food, and he is under a duty to get it.

The freedom of the press can remain the right of those who publish it only if it incorporates into itself the right of the citizen and the public interest.

Freedom of the press means freedom of and freedom for. The press must, if it is to be wholly free, know and overcome any biases incident to its own economic composition, its concentration, and its pyramided organization.

The press must also be accountable. It must know that its faults and errors have ceased to be private vagaries and have become public dangers. The voice of the press, so far as by a drift toward monopoly it tends to become exclusive in its wisdom and observation, deprives other voices of a hearing and the public of their contribution.

Freedom of the press for the coming period can only continue as an accountable freedom.

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## Is the freedom of the press in danger? [The Commission's] answer to the question is: Yes.

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pine before possible new developments of misuse of the immense powers of the contemporary press.

The aim of those who sponsored the First Amendment was to prevent the government from interfering with expression. The authors of our political system saw that a free society could not exist without free communication.

They were justified in thinking that freedom of the press would be effectively exercised. In their day anybody with anything to say had little difficulty getting it published. Presses were cheap.

It was not supposed that any one newspaper could represent all the conflicting views regarding public issues.

### A Press Revolution

This country has gone through a communications revolution. The press

## What the Public Needs of the Press

The requirements of a free society:

A truthful, meaningful account of the day's events;

A forum for exchange of comment;

A means of protecting group opinion and attitudes to one another;

In many places the small press has been completely extinguished. The great cities have three or four papers but most places have only one. The opportunities for initiating new ventures are strictly limited.

Only one out of 12 of the cities with daily papers have competing dailies. In 10 states there are no competing dai-

Personal forces—exaggerated drives for power and profit—have tended to promote monopoly. The means used vary from economic pressure to violence.

The Hearst-McCormick newsstand war was a factor in the gang warfare that has distressed Chicago ever since.

Monopolistic practices and high costs have made it hard for new ventures to enter the press field.

Has the press by becoming big business lost its representative character and developed a common bias—of the large investor and employer?

Economics calls for an omnibus product for a mass audience, something for everybody.

The newspaper is as much a medium of entertainment and advertising as of news.

News of public affairs is even lower in radio—0 in some; 2-10 percent on some network stations.

Public affairs are often a minor part of mass media—shaped to a mass audience.

## The Newspaper 'Game'

So "news" has a special meaning. Its criteria are recency or freshness, proximity, combat, human interest, novelty.

Such criteria limit accuracy and significance.

The game played in press rooms often seems childish and sometimes cruel.

Unauthorized "scoops" at the end of the war produced much distrust of these news sources. They led to doubts about the value and legitimacy of a game that could be played with such irresponsibility and heartlessness.

The press emphasizes the exceptional rather than the representative; the sensational rather than the significant. The press is preoccupied with these incidents to such an extent that the citizen is not supplied the information and discussion he needs to discharge his responsibilities to the community.

Illustration—the San Francisco Conference.

So completely was the task of manu-

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## Has the press by becoming big business lost its representative character and developed a common bias—of the large investor and employer?

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A method of presenting and clarifying the goods and values of the society;

A way of reaching every member of the society.

Especially in international events the press has a responsibility to report them in such a way that they can be understood. It is necessary to report the truth about the fact.

In domestic news, too, the account of an isolated fact, however accurate in itself, may be misleading and in effect untrue.

A flow of information and interpretation is needed.

The great agencies of mass communication should regard themselves as common carriers of public discussion.

The giant units can and should assume the duty of publishing significant ideas contrary to their own, as a matter of objective reporting. Their control over the various ways of reaching the ear of America is such that if they do not publish ideas which differ from their own, those ideas will never reach the ear of America. If that happens one of the chief reasons for the freedom which these giants claim disappears.

Identification of source of facts and opinions is necessary to a free society.

## Concentration of Control

The outstanding fact about the communication industry is that the number of its units has declined.

lies. Forty percent of daily circulation is non-competitive.

A few big houses own the largest magazines. Drastic concentration obtains in women's magazines: six have nine-tenths of the circulation.

Books show a broader competitive area.

In radio the networks lie outside regulation. Four networks grossed nearly half radio's \$400,000,000 in 1945. Eight hundred of 1000 stations are in chains.

Five movie companies own the best movie theaters.

Newspaper chains: 375 dailies—25 percent are in chains; small chains increased as Hearst and Scripps Howard shrank. One hundred seventy-five places have combination. Ninety-two percent of places have only one paper.

In 100 places the only newspaper owner owns also the only radio station. This creates a local monopoly of local news.

Great newspaper-radio ownership is increasing. One-third of radio stations are owned by the press.

"The Boiler Plate King," John H. Perry, provides insides of 3,000 out of 10,000 weeklies (survivors of 26,000 in 1900).

Three press services serve 99 4/5 percent of all daily circulation.

Syndicates are related to press associations and chains.

Besides economics and technology, other forces work toward monopoly.

facturing suspense performed that when an acceptable charter was signed the effect on newspaper readers was one of incredulous surprise.

### The Press Is Big Business

The press owner is a big business man. "He has the country club complex. He and his editors get the unconscious arrogance of conscious wealth."—W.A. White.

Evidence of advertising domination is not impressive in strong papers.

Incident: The American Press Association, advertising representative of 4,000 weeklies and small dailies, placed a U.S. Steel policy ad on the steel strike of 1945 in 1,400 papers.

Its letters to the papers in which it place the ad urged: "This is your chance to show the steel people what the rural press can do for them."

### Who Runs Radio?

Radio advertising is concentrated. Five companies accounted for nearly one-quarter network income in 1945. A dozen and a half agencies place contracts and prepare programs. The great consumer industries which in 1945 gave the networks three-quarters of their income determine what the American people shall hear on the air.

The result is such a mixture of advertising with the rest of the program that one cannot be listened to without the other.

Sales talk should be separated from material which is not advertising. Public discussion should not be manufactured by a central authority and "sold" to the public.

### The Failure of the Press

Criticism of the press in the press is banned by a kind of unwritten law. If the press is to overcome its own shortcomings this practice of refraining from criticism of the press should be abandoned.

Our society needs an accurate, truthful account of the day's events. We need a marketplace for the exchange of

comment and criticism. We need to clarify the aims and ideals of our country and every other.

These needs are not being met. The news is twisted by emphasis on freshness, on the novel and sensational, by the personal interests of the owners, and by pressure groups.

Too much of the regular output of the press consists of a miscellaneous succession of stories and images which have no relation to the typical lives of real people anywhere. The result is meaninglessness, flatness, distortion and the perpetuation of misunderstanding.

When we look at the press as a whole we must conclude that it is not meeting the needs of our society.

This failure of the press is the greatest danger to its freedom.

### Self-Regulation is Absent

The motion picture code is enforced. It sets standards of acceptability, not responsibility.

Movies go farthest in accommodation to pressure groups. This may thwart development of documentary films.

Radio stations are licensed. They must operate in the public interest. But the FCC cannot censure programs. The NAB [National Association of Broadcasters] code is not enforced.

The FCC now says unless broadcasters deal with overcommercialization, government may be forced to act. So far it has produced little from the broadcasters except outraged cries about freedom of speech.

In newspapers there is no enforcement of codes.

The Guild does not seek professional standards but recognizes the right of publishers to print anything.

Professional standards are ineffective in the press because the professional works for an owner. His is the responsibility.

Schools of journalism have not accepted the obligation to set standards of the profession, as have law and medical schools. Most devote themselves to vocational training. That is not what a

journalist most needs. He needs the broadest, most liberal education.

### What Can Be Done?

By Government—

The problem will not be solved by laws or government action.

But no democracy will infinitely allow concentration of private power irresponsible and strong enough to thwart the democratic aspirations of the people.

If the giant media are irresponsible, not even the First Amendment will protect their freedom from government control. The Amendment will be amended.

If the press does not become accountable by its own motion, the power of government will be used, as a last resort, to force it to be so.

There is nothing to prevent government participating in mass communication. It is not dangerous to freedom of press for it to do so.

Government should facilitate new ventures.

It should keep channels open—stop monopoly—invoke antitrust laws to keep competition.

It should see that the public gets benefits of concentration.

Radio service should be supplied to the whole country either by the radio industry or by government. We prefer the former.

Redress of libels should be expedited.

State anti-syndicalism laws should be repealed.

Government has a duty to inform the public. If the press cannot or will not carry reporting about government policies and purposes, the government should publish itself.

### What the Press Can Do

The press is a private business but affected by a public interest.

The press has an obligation to elevate rather than degrade public interests.

The press itself should assume responsibility of service the public needs.

We suggest the press look upon itself as performing a public service of a professional kind.

We recommend that mass communication accept the responsibility of a common carrier of information and discussion.

The press should finance attempts to provide service of more diversity and quality for tastes above the level of its mass appeal.

The press should engage in vigorous mutual criticism.

### Nieman Fellowships

The press should increase the competence of its staff.

The quality of the press depends in large part upon the capacity and independence of the working members in the lower ranks.

Adequate compensation, adequate recognition, and adequate contracts seem to us the indispensable prerequisite for the development of professional personnel.

We should suppose three-year contracts would be sufficient to guarantee the independence which the worker in the press must have if he is to play his part as a responsible member of the profession.

The type of educational experience provided for working journalists by the Nieman Fellowships at Harvard seems to us to deserve extension, if not through private philanthropy, then with the financial aid of the press itself.

### Radio Should Control Advertisers

We recommend that the radio industry take control of its programs and that it treat advertising as it is treated by the best newspapers. Radio cannot become a respectable agency of communication as long as it is controlled by the advertisers.

No newspaper would call itself respectable which was dominated by its advertisers and which published advertising information and discussion so mixed together that the reader could not tell them apart. The public should not be forced to continue to take its

radio fare from the manufacturers of soap, cosmetics, cigarettes, soft drinks and packaged goods.

### What Can Be Done By the Public?

We are not in favor of a revolt and hope less drastic means of improving the press may be employed.

We have the impression that the American people do not realize what has happened to them. They are not aware that the communications revolution has taken place. They do not appreciate the tremendous power which the new instruments and new organization of the press place in the hands of a few men. They have not yet understood how far the performance of the press falls short of the requirements of a free society in the world today. The principal object of our report is to make these points clear.

Nonprofit institutions should help supply the variety, quantity and quality of press service required by the American people.

In radio and documentary films, chains of libraries, colleges and churches should put before the public the best thought of America and make the present radio programs look as silly as many of them are.

Schools of journalism should not deprive their students of a liberal education.

### For Press Appraisal

We recommend the establishment of a new and independent agency to appraise and report annually upon the performance of the press.

It should be created by gifts, given a 10-year trial to:

- 1) Help define standards of press performance.
- 2) Point out inadequacy of press service in some areas and concentration in others.
- 3) Make inquiries in areas where minority groups are excluded from reasonable access to channels of communication.
- 4) Make inquiry abroad regarding the

picture of American life given by the American press.

- 5) Investigation of press lying, especially on public issues.
- 6) Make appraisal of tendencies of press.
- 7) Make appraisal of government action on communication.
- 8) Encourage centers of advanced study in field of communication.
- 9) Encourage projects to meet needs of special audiences.

These are methods by which the press may become accountable and hence remain free.

### Make Journalism a Profession

The Commission was disturbed by finding that many able reporters and editorial writers displayed frustration—the feeling that they were not allowed to do the kind of work which their professional ideals demanded. A continuation of this disturbing situation will prevent the press from assuming effective responsibility toward society. As remedies, we have urged the press to use every means that can be devised to increase the competence and independence of the staff. In many different ways the rank and file of the press should be made to constitute a genuine profession. ■

*The Commission on the Freedom of the Press:*

*Robert M. Hutchins*

*Zechariah Chafee, Jr.*

*John M. Clark*

*John Dickinson*

*William E. Hocking*

*Harold D. Lasswell*

*Archibald MacLeish*

*Charles E. Merriam*

*Reinhold Niebuhr*

*Robert Redfield*

*Beardsley Ruml*

*Arthur M. Schlesinger*

*George N. Shuster*

July 1947

# Press Reaction to Hutchins Report

## How Is Press To Be Criticized?

Walter Lippmann, *Column*  
March 27

...The problem is a specially important form of the question: Who polices the policeman? The commissioners are not, I think, so clear on this point as they might have been. "We recommend," they say, that the members of "the press engage in vigorous mutual criticism." There they needed, but missed, the advice of the working members of the press.

Mutual criticism, like marital criticism, if it is publicly made, is too hard for mortal man to take. The good critic should be an outsider, like Mr. Hutchins, as regards the press. For personal detachment is necessary to good criticism.

While vigorous criticism of the press is most necessary to the welfare of the press, it will have to come from those who are outside the press. Those who wish to work at the criticism of the press will find this report an admirable introduction to the subject....

## Sensible but Inconclusive

Barry Bingham, *Louisville Courier-Journal Book Review*  
March 28

...It seemed a sound idea to use non-professionals to survey the press, since the purpose was not a technical study of newspaper methods but a broad consideration of how our papers are serving the American public. At best, the choice of personnel produced serious and challenging views of a basic American problem. At worst, lack of familiarity with the mores of newspaper offices resulted in a certain naiveté and awkwardness in exploring unfamiliar ground....

The prime failure of the report...is

its curious inconclusiveness. It makes a case against the press with dignity and seriousness. When it comes to describing the remedies...it ladles out great masses of confusion....

## Dumb Professors

George Sokolsky, *Tampa, Florida, Daily Times*  
April 9

...The professors include under the word "press" the following items in the order given, which shows what they know about it: the radio, newspapers, motion pictures, magazines and books.

The "press" is the newspaper. Radio is not a newspaper any more than vaudeville. Radio is a show. A newscaster, like a female singer, is hired for his voice. He reads stuff dished up by one of the newspaper wire services. True, the networks often hire newspapermen to report from here and abroad, but this is secondary to the show business.

It just shows how dumb these professors are to put radio in front of the newspaper in a study of the press. It would be as correct for my jury of saloonkeepers to put football ahead of anthropology and astronomy as educational features of the American university. And maybe saloonkeepers would be more accurate....

## Now You See What the Report Was About

*Chicago Sun Editorial (unsigned)*  
March 29

Last Thursday a distinguished Commission on the Freedom of the Press, headed by Chancellor Robert Hutchins of the University of Chicago, published its report. The principle conclusion was that the American press is often

biased and irresponsible and that only a responsible press can remain free.

The Chicago Tribune published the news account of the report on page 40 under the headline: "'A Free Press,' (Hitler Style) Sought for U.S." The "news" story contained such gems of objectivity as these:

"The book apparently is a major effort in the campaign of a determined group of totalitarian thinkers led by such housetop shouters as Harold L. Ickes, Morris Ernst, George Seldes and Archibald MacLeish, who want to discredit the free press of America or put it under a measure of government control...." (Of those mentioned only Mr. MacLeish was a member of the Commission.)

"The Commission is clothed with the same degree of public authority which covers any 13 patrons in a Madison St. saloon."

This "news" account is in itself a pretty conclusive documentation of the Commission's charge of bias and irresponsibility in the press. But for an equally striking example, consider the handling of another story in the same edition of the Tribune.

On page one it streamer-headlined the charge of Senator Brooks that the federal government was responsible for the Centralia mine disaster. This fitted into Colonel McCormick's strategy of trying to elect a Republican mayor by attacking a Democratic national administration. The diligent reader had to turn back to page eight to discover, under a cleverly obscure headline, the news that the Tribune's own Governor Green had received warnings of unsafe conditions at the Centralia mine before the disaster and had brushed them off.

Now do you see what Dr. Hutchins' Commission was talking about when it said that "the few who are able to use the machinery of the press...have not provided a service adequate to the needs of the society, but have engaged in practices which the society condemns and which, if continued, it will inevitably undertake to regulate or control?"

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July 1950

# The Captive Press

## How a Senator Can Monopolize the Loudspeaker

BY DOUGLASS CATER

“I’ve never seen the press corps quite so frustrated,” a Washington reporter told me the day of the second Lattimore hearing. “It’s as if we lacked words to describe what’s going on. But it’s not the words; it’s the frozen patterns of journalism that inhibit us.”

Perhaps “frozen patterns” is as good a phrase as any to describe what prevents the press from giving an accurate picture of the McCarthy affair. It is not simply that some newspapers make a practice of exploiting this sort of thing—that the Scripps Howard chain, for example, acted as if it had been ordered by Roy Howard to play the McCarthy story for all it was worth, or that the Chicago Tribune Washington man, Willard Edwards, supplied McCarthy’s

speechwriter with the material for the Lincoln Day address at Wheeling, West Virginia, that precipitated the whole investigation. All that was part of the everyday fortune of a certain section of the American press.

What can the responsible press do in handling the McCarthy story? The reporter, the wire service man, the managing editor give various answers. When it deals with politics, the press network of the United States is a system of loudspeakers that transmits and amplifies the words uttered in the public arena. The trouble is that an increasingly large number of people know how to capture that instrument and scream all they want into it. In Washington, its chief originating point, Senator McCarthy, who has an acute sense of copy deadlines, talks to newspapermen. Forty-five minutes later his words are being read in Des Moines, Iowa.

Technically, the system is very efficient, but, like most modern contrivances, it is not yet immune from abuses.

The problem begins with what the press puts on its amplifier—basically, with what news is. Recently, a Washington managing editor undertook to define it for me: “What happens in the world and what people say, do and think about it.” This definition is so broad that it doesn’t help much in the day-to-day making up of a newspaper. Which statement, actions and thoughts should be run; which left out? Most important of all, which are worth putting on the front page?

To this last question, newspapermen have no pat answer. The layman suspects that often the amplifier is monopolized by the men with the loudest voices and the least scruples.

Students of the press attribute this to the competitive drive for circulation, which is, after all, the daily bread of the newspaper. But the motivations are not always so easily explainable. Take the case of the Montgomery (Alabama) Advertiser, a morning paper in a one-publisher city. When McCarthy commenced his rampage, that paper played the story down, giving the Senator’s charges a brief story near the center fold. All through February, the story stayed at the center of page one with a single-column head, but in March it moved inexorably upward. For 16 days of that month, it rated a top-of-page one, three-column head, holding the upper right-hand position for 11 days. The Advertiser was not fooled by McCarthy: it took an editorial stand supporting Acheson. Nor was it engaged in a circulation drive. It clearly had succumbed to the contagious excitement of the radio stations, the wire services, and the out-of-town press. By its treatment, and that of similar papers all over the country, the circle was completed, bringing the excitement back to the Congressman on Capitol Hill.

Headlines, of course, represent the maximum output of the amplifier system. McCarthy hasn’t been the first to discover that the hurled charge—no matter how outlandish—is heat for the



Sen. Joseph McCarthy with reporters. Photo courtesy of UPI/Corbis-Bettmann.

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**The problem begins with what the press puts on its amplifier—basically, with what news is.**

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headline writer, whose job is made easier by the vocabulary of accusation—“puts the finger on,” “spy,” “pinko,” “bared secrets,” and the rest. “McCarthy Names Lattimore Top Russian Agent” is controversial and unexpected (a headline rating of two). “Lattimore Asserts McCarthy Liar” is controversial and expected (a headline rating of one). If Lattimore had said McCarthy was telling the truth that would have had a bigger headline rating and, consequently, a bigger headline.

Senator Tydings decided that it was the time factor which put the defendant at a disadvantage in the battle of the headlines and tried to do something about it. By hearing the accuser and the accused on alternate days, he hoped that the reply would catch up with the charge before irrevocable damage was done. But the Senator’s attempt to keep pace with the rhythms of the press backfired. A denial never has the newsworthiness of an accusation. Besides, relieved of the necessity of stating his entire case before the rebuttal began, McCarthy has manufactured new charges each time the old ones begin to wear thin. For more than three months now, the victory of the headlines has been incontestably that of the Senator from Wisconsin.

One of the frozen patterns that have hampered press coverage of the McCarthy charges is the distinction between the “straight” reporting of the ordinary reporters and wire service men, and the “interpretive” or “evaluative” reporting of the privileged few. A wire service editor defined “straight” reporting for me. “The job of the straight reporter,” he said, “is to take the place of the spectator who is unable to be present. Like the spectator, he does not delve into motives or other side issues except as they become a part of the public record.” Unfortunately, the

spectator is a casual witness, usually excited and bewildered by any unexpected event. A professional callousness can free the “straight” reporter from excitement, but not from bewilderment if he is only a spectator and not, as in the old days of reporting, an investigator.

Faced with a phenomenon as complex as McCarthyism, the “straight” reporter has become a sort of straitjacketed reporter. His initiative is hog-tied so that he cannot fulfill his first duty, which is to bring clearer understanding to his reader. It results in a distortion of reality. Some examples:

The “straight” reporters did not see fit to point out that Willard Edwards of the Chicago Tribune furnished the material for McCarthy’s original speech—a fact probably known to nine-tenths of them.

The “straight” reporters could not say one word about the Nationalist China Lobby, which was feeding McCarthy with material, until Lattimore mentioned it in open hearing. Even then “straight” reporters were limited to quoting Lattimore, giving the reader no basis for judging the credibility of his accusation.

“Straight” reporters did not investigate the sources of the abundant financial aid which McCarthy is receiving, or the expert assistance provided by men like Kent Hunter of the Hearst newspapers. On the other hand, it could and did publicize the fact that Tyding’s committee got \$25,000 for operating ex-

penses. It thus gave the impression, deliberately created by McCarthy, that he is a lonely crusader fighting against powerful odds.

“Straight” reporting does not attempt to “play” the witnesses according to their credibility. For example, it recorded the happenings of May 1 in this order: Headline and lead went to Freda Utley, an ex-Communist who described Lattimore as a “Judas cow.” The middle of the story brought out the fact that Demaree Bess, an associate editor of the Saturday Evening Post, had testified that he knew Lattimore in Moscow in 1936, and he never saw the “slightest evidence that he was becoming even the mildest form of fellow traveler.” In the breakover (inside page) was the fact that Representative Frank Karsten (Democrat, Missouri) had announced that McCarthy’s 81 cases were among the 108 investigated more than two years ago by Republican-controlled committees. “Straight” reporting gave leading emphasis to the witness with the most spectacular and sensational, not necessarily the most reliable, testimony.

Eighty percent of the nation’s dailies depend exclusively on the “straight” reporting of the wire services out of Washington. Unless they depend upon the syndicated columnists, their editors presumably have no means of making a balanced assessment of McCarthyism.

A wire service reporter parries with this argument: “We have respect for the American people,” he says. “We believe they are capable of making up their own minds without our help.” The problem is that when the reader is given facts selected only for their headline value, how can he have anything but a crooked vision of the case?

The American Society of Newspaper Editors has in its Ethical Rules a section

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**Faced with a phenomenon as complex as McCarthyism, the ‘straight’ reporter has become a sort of straitjacketed reporter.**

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entitled “Fair Play”: “A newspaper should not publish unofficial charges affecting reputation or moral character without opportunity given to the accused to be heard; right practice demands the giving of such opportunity in all cases of serious accusations outside judicial proceedings.”

Responsible newspapers try hard to live up to this creed, failing only when the accused, like Lattimore, turns out to be in the wilds of Afghanistan. In practice, it works as follows: Late one afternoon Senator McCarthy may name a person—Dorothy Kenyon, Haldore Hansen, or Donald Duck. All through the evening the victim’s telephone rings. He is told briefly the nature of the charge made against him and asked for a brief reply. Next morning, the papers describe in detail the McCarthy charges. Usually in the subhead and somewhere in the tail of the story, note is made of the fact that the accused person disagrees.

Some excellent interpretive reporting on McCarthyism has been filed from Washington. On February 23, three days after McCarthy first brought his case to the floor of the Senate, the Providence Bulletin carried a story by its Washington correspondent, Harold Graves, Jr., disclosing Willard Edwards’s position behind McCarthy. Graves also pointed out that the 81 cases mentioned by McCarthy were those the State Department discussed with the House Appropriations Subcommittee in February 1948—a fact which Senator Tydings used over two months later to persuade Truman to release the loyalty files. On March 31, Graves filed a story describing the influence of the National China Lobby upon McCarthy—one week before Lattimore testified to the same thing. On April 6, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch carried a story by Ed Harris giving more details of the silken hand of the China Lobby. The Post-Dispatch was able to point to an exposé of Chiang Kai-shek’s insidious operations in Washington, which

it had carried early last fall.

Early in March, Richard L. Strout of The Christian Science Monitor and Carroll Kilpatrick of the San Francisco Chronicle, by taking the trouble to check a transcription made by a radio station in Wheeling, West Virginia, pointed out McCarthy’s lie in denying to Senator Lucas that he had said in his Lincoln Day speech: “I have here in my hand a list of 205 that were known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping the policy in the State Department.” A group of Democratic senators used

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this same transcription two months later to corner McCarthy in a battle on the Senate floor.

But these and a few other instances of good “interpretive” reporting (which, after all, only followed the tradition of plain reporting, without adjectives) had little effect. Washington correspondents, who don’t hesitate to quote each other’s conversation in the press club bar as “usually well-informed sources,” fail to read each other’s dispatches. Besides, “interpretive reporting” has an “exclusive” quality. Once it is used, other “interpretive” reporters regard it as the writer’s private property and shy away from it even though it may be valuable in throwing light on a situation.

Busy as he is catching the news of the day, the newspaperman rarely can refresh his mind on what happened yesterday. This type of reporting has

little chance of getting across to many unless it is done by columnists, who have little time for digging. As a result, the columnist frequently dishes up as “news” the stale trash of a previous period. Not even The New York Times adequately tied in McCarthyism with the past campaign of vilification the China Lobby waged against the Institute of Pacific Relations. Not one newspaper or magazine seemed willing—or courageous—enough to do a research job of its own comparable to that done by Lattimore’s assistants in preparing his rebuttal. Yet most publications have morgues and staffs quite sufficient to cover such a contingency.

The McCarthy affair has elicited some unexplainably bad reporting from the two deans of the Washington corps. Arthur Krock of The New York Times was not present when Louis Budenz appeared before the Senate Subcommittee. His column the following Sunday justifiably contained no mention of Budenz’s evidence or the lack of it. Quite unjustifiably, however, it was based on a quotation from Senator Ralph Flanders who, though also absent from the hearing, handed down “the general verdict of the political community.” Said Senator Flanders: “I find it disturbing.” Krock continued: “Many fair-minded persons have been hostile to the manner in which McCarthy has presented his charges and up to now have been persuaded—by his inaccurate arraignment of the State Department which he repeatedly was obliged to revise downward—that the Senator had little basis for it. Yet there is evidence that these persons are beginning to lose confidence in their appraisal.”

Mr. Krock, failing to weigh Budenz’s charges and appealing vaguely to a non-existent “general verdict of the political community,” might just as well have written his column from an editorial armchair in New York. There, he might have realized that the words of Arthur Krock have a far more disturb-

ing effect on public opinion than anything Louis Budenz might say.

Even more surprising has been the attitude of Bert Andrews, chief correspondent of the New York Herald Tribune in Washington. In 1947, Andrews wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning series of columns for the Herald Tribune on the witch-hunting aspects of the State Department's loyalty program. The blame fell largely on a man named Dean Acheson who, as Under Secretary of State at the time, bore administrative responsibility. Later, Andrews revamped the articles into a book entitled "Washington Witch Hunt."

In 1950, the voice of Bert Andrews had strangely changed its key. The uninitiated might even think he had joined the ranks of the hunters. On April 4, the Herald Tribune carried a story under his byline reporting that during a secret session of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee, J. Edgar Hoover had refused to absolve one man. Since Andrews didn't say which man, suspicion fell on all whom McCarthy had accused. On April 9, Andrews came up with a story that was headed: "Hickenlooper May Quit Part in Red Inquiry." In newspaper parlance, this type of story is known as a "plant." Hickenlooper, a Senator hard-pressed for reelection, wished to let other Subcommittee members know that if he didn't get his way, he would pick up his marbles and go home. The story failed to mention whether or not the other members, including Republican Senator Lodge, were satisfied with the Subcommittee's progress.

On May 4, Andrews came up with a story headed: "State Dept. To Let Service See 'Secret' Papers Senate Couldn't." The lead announced: "The State Department is declassifying certain restricted and confidential documents to make them available to counsel preparing the defense of John Stewart Service, who will soon appear

before a department loyalty board." On May 7, the Herald Tribune carried a letter from Conrad Snow, Chairman of the loyalty board: "Mr. Service has not been given and will not be given access to the loyalty or personnel files which were gathered by the F.B.I. and other investigatory bodies and which

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**Amid the shortcomings of the press, the fist of McCarthy continued to wave defiantly from the headlines. The brave efforts of many newspapers to retaliate by shaking the mild, well-mannered finger of the editorial seem puny in comparison. Something more than the inside editorial is needed to counteract the front-page headline.**

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were refused by the President to the Senate Committee. Mr. Service is entitled, however, as a matter of elementary fairness, to see and put in evidence any reports or other papers in the files of the State Department which were prepared by him or in connection with the missions on which he served, which may be material to his defense."

Amid the shortcomings of the press, the fist of McCarthy continued to wave defiantly from the headlines. The brave efforts of many newspapers to retaliate by shaking the mild, well-mannered finger of the editorial seem puny in comparison. Something more than the inside editorial is needed to counteract the front-page headline.

Herbert Elliston, Editor of The Washington Post, is aware of the newspapers' shortcomings. He suggests that the objective presentation of the "straight" reporter must be supplemented by more and better interpretation. "Honest interpretation," he says, "looms much bigger than spot news as a newspaper function in these respon-

sible days of the American democracy." To handle the complexities of McCarthyism, Elliston believes that the newspapers should assign "second" reporters as soon as the situation is fairly well seen. The second man's function would be to fill that narrow but deep crevasse between the "straight" reporter and the editorial writer. He should do the background work, the sleuthing for motives, the "atmosphere" creation. By reading this reporter's accounts run side by side with the "straight" story, the reader would have a much better opportunity to reach an honest conclusion. For the small daily wholly at the mercy of the wire service, the problem would remain unsolved. There is no reason, however, why the larger paper's "interpretative" reporting should not be syndicated to smaller papers, just as many feature stories are now syndicated.

The press of America has long constituted itself a merry Fourth Estate, largely immune from criticism. Today, the advent of McCarthyism has thrown real fear into the hearts of some—fear of what a demagogue can do to America while the press helplessly gives its sometimes unwilling cooperation. Perhaps Joseph McCarthy, Senator from Wisconsin, is not a demagogue. But who knows? One greater than McCarthy may come. ■

*Douglass Cater joined the Washington press corps just as McCarthyism seemed to be taking over the whole organism of public opinion making in America. The qualities that made him the strongest man in his Harvard class four years ago stood him in good stead as he refused to be terrified by the Terror and insisted on understanding the failure of the press to cope with it. This is his first piece as Washington correspondent of The Reporter.*

October 1951

# How Best Prepare for Newspaper Work?

Nieman Fellows answer the question.

BY EDWARD A. WALSH

*...The writer [Walsh], a former newspaperman, has often been troubled by the question of what is the best education for journalism. He took up teaching to give students the benefit of his 20-odd years of experience and found many students who would not take journalism because editors or other teachers told them the straight liberal arts course was the best preparation. He found many newspapermen in his own experience who felt the same....*

## Roy M. Fisher

*Chicago Daily News*

...I think much of the present journalism curriculum is a waste of time. At least, it does not represent the maximum use of time. Men who intend to work on newspapers the rest of their lives should make full use of their short college years to acquire a knowledge of history, government, economics, science and the other subjects upon which they later will be expected to hold a working knowledge. Not that I believe the courses in journalism subjects should be completely forsaken. I think they should be telescoped into less space. It is enough if they give the student a general idea of what working on a newspaper means in terms of the hour-to-hour routine. He can refine the skills later.

## Angus MacLean Thuermer

*AP Chicago*

...I cannot see what good the technical courses in writing news stories, learning how to count heads, and page makeup, are when stacked up against

other courses that could be taken in the time spent on these subjects. When you come into a newspaper office, you have to learn how to count heads, etc., etc., and if you don't pick that up in a couple of weeks under a good city editor, you better go back and sell bonds.

...More and more good men are coming from schools of journalism, it is true, but I weep to think of all the broad courses that could be taken in place of copyreading. Though far from a scholastic shark, I passed five hours of journalism proficiency tests without cracking a textbook just by working on the old college daily and listening as hard as I could in the composing room.

## Sylvan H. Meyer

*Gainesville (Georgia) Daily Times*

...My two pet theories are: (1) journalism schools overlook training in newspaper finances and management; (2) journalism schools overlook the fact that 80 percent of the newspapers in this country are under 25,000 circulation and that these papers require all-around people who have curiosity, which can make local stories from apparently insignificant information, who are versatile and can handle, in one day, an editorial, a book review, a political story, a legal story, the press wire, headlines, layout and, in the meantime, peddle a couple of ads.

## Simeon S. Booker, Jr.

*Cleveland Call-Post*

...I think journalism schools, as yet, have made no great impact on the American newspaper game. Their big-

gest duty will come in improvement of typography, editorial writing and such, but their work has yet to be done on a sizeable basis.... Journalism schools will never change the American journalism field at the top brass level, but by producing young men who have vision and character and ideals they will infect the field with new fresh blood and vim. And we may grow stronger and healthier in journalism morally.... I make two points: (a) future journalists should have strong, all-around college backgrounds, and (b) journalism courses should include a certain apprenticeship program with work on live newspapers.

## Hoke M. Norris

*Winston-Salem Journal*

Certainly one should be taught the mechanics of journalism if he's going to be a newspaperman. He should know the framework of a news story, an editorial, and a feature story, as well as something about staff organization, type and composition, covering a beat, rewrite and, perhaps, the business management and financing of a newspaper. However, I believe these subjects can be covered in a very short time—perhaps in a single course of half a year. The major emphasis should not be, I think, on how to write, but on what to write, lest the prospective reporter become like an empty flask, all form no content.... I do think the liberal arts education is the best preparation for journalism. Journalism electives in junior and senior years might be just what I have in mind, except they should be brief courses, as brief as possible.... I certainly wouldn't devote an entire four-year college course to journalism. When an editor hires a reporter, it is assumed that he can write. Writing aptitude can be sharpened by schooling, but if the basic talent is lacking, nothing in the world can make a newspaperman of one. A man who has the talent doesn't need to learn how—he needs to learn what.... The best school of journalism in my opinion is the city room. Why not let the student go to work in one?

**Louis M. Lyons**

*Curator of the Nieman Foundation*

.... In general, I am for providing the maximum chance for studies of a general nature, history, literature, economics, sociology, etc., and a minimum time on techniques of journalism. But just what that minimum should be I would not attempt to prescribe for varying conditions. If you ask, a minimum for what: I should say a minimum for getting a job; for I am sure that techniques are best learned, and most rapidly, on the job under most conditions. If a student has a good general education...already having completed a liberal arts program, then I see no objection and some advantage in concentrating on techniques as in a graduate year like Columbia's.

My impression is that journalism programs are tending toward a greater

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**...he makes them read and write so as to report on what they are learning, and turn it all into good journalism.**

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concern for educational background and a lesser time for techniques, and that this is, in most instances, good. But I can imagine situations in which an able team of technicians might put up a better educational experience for the student than the general education curriculum, and I have a friend teaching journalism who insists that his journalism course is the strong thread that ties together all the content courses of his students because he makes them read and write so as to report on what they are learning, and turn it all into good journalism. That is splendid, but, I suspect, exceptional.... ■

*Edward A. Walsh is an instructor in journalism at Fordham University.*

July 1954

## Handouts to the Country Editor

BY EVAN HILL

**F**iction writers have used a broad and inaccurate pen in painting the modern country editor as a grey-haired, old man wearing a green eyeshade, black muslin elastic-banded arm cuffs, and sitting at a battered, cluttered roll-top calmly smoking a curved pipe as he writes brilliant homey editorials.

Today's country weekly editor may be all of these, although it is doubtful; he may be some of these, which is more probable; but almost surely he will have the cluttered desk. That is, unless he has a long arm and a large convenient wastebasket. For the handout, the unsolicited, generally useless press release, is with him always.

Through no fault of its own, the Post Office Department takes more time and space from the country editor than any other single organization. And it does it as systematically as it delivers the mail. Through rain and hail and sleet and snow, by ship and train and bus and sometimes plane, postmen deliver to the cluttered desk of the country editor piles of printed, mimeographed, duplicated and typewritten "news" that is utterly useless and unwanted. These are the handouts.

The handout is the written result of the paid publicist who has something to sell, an idea to peddle, a reminder to give, or sometimes (and this is a most wearisome and unfortunate circumstance) a good job to keep.

Thousands of reams of good paper are quickly swept into wastebaskets each month throughout this country. These are handouts. Most of them are useless; many of them are insults to the intelligence of the average man; their waste is criminal.

As an example of what these well-paid purveyors of information are doing to the editors of the approximately 1,800 dailies and 10,000 weeklies in the United States, let us look into the cluttered office of a weekly paper in a

town of 6,000 in New Hampshire. This paper has a circulation of less than 2,500 and serves a community that is industrial, not agricultural. It has a full-time news staff of two, and it publishes approximately 10 pages each issue.

In order to get a fairly accurate picture of the handout situation, this writer requested the editor to save the content of his wastebasket for two weeks. At the end of 10 days the editor gave up. He complained that he was running out of storage space. Academic interest and all that sort of thing, he said, were all right and certainly commendable. But you could carry a good thing too far. The editor said the baskets on his desk were full, his wastebasket was overflowing, a cardboard carton of saved press releases was constantly in his way, and could he stop this damned nonsense and send the rest out to the waste paper baler.

So the handouts were gathered from his desk baskets, from the cardboard carton and from the wastebasket and sorted. All these releases were rejects, now; they did not include those which had been put aside for future perusal or which had been used in the two issues published during this 10-day period. Under normal circumstances they would have been taken to the back shop for the waste paper dealer.

After sorting and classifying, here is what was found. In a 10-day period the rejected press releases were equivalent to four printed books of 165 pages each. There were 149 releases from 68 different sources. There was the equivalent of 950 double-spaced typewritten pages or 245,000 words. This was an average of 95 pages of typewritten double-spaced copy each day. And all went into the wastebasket. ■

*Evan Hill teaches journalism at Boston University and has written before on the weekly editor's problems for Nieman Reports.*

January 1959

# The Pursuit of Journalism

BY THOMAS GRIFFITH

For literature, said Max Beerbohm, he felt reverence, but for journalism merely a kind regard. A natural remark to come from a man with his feet in both camps and his heart in one. Journalism has always had a hard time of it among the literary, particularly among those who had to grub in it in order to afford writing what they wanted to write, which society treated as a luxury when for them it was necessity. Literature, said Ezra Pound, is news that stays news. And dictionaries have, at least until lately, defined journalistic as a style “characterized by evidences of haste, superficiality of thought, inaccuracies of detail, colloquialisms, and sensationalisms.” Matthew Arnold thought journalism “literature in a hurry.” The difficulty lies, I think, in

regarding journalism as a kind of failed literature, whereas it aspires to be literature only insofar as it would like to be well written, and aspires to be history only insofar as it seeks to be accurate. André Gide was severer, but closer, when he wrote, “I call journalism everything that will be less interesting tomorrow than today.” For the essence of journalism is its timeliness; it must be served hot.

Journalism is in fact history on the run. It is history written in time to be acted upon: thereby not only recording events but at times influencing them. This explains its temptation to passion and its besetting sin of partisanship. Journalism is also the recording of history while the facts are not all in. Yet any planner of battles knows the

eternal conflict between needing to know enough to act, and needing to act in time: a problem in journalism as in diplomacy and warfare. Adolescents and second-rate poets who specialize in large misstatements often tell us that life is chaos, but if life were only that there would be no such thing as monotony; life includes both the world we know (which, if we do not fully understand or appreciate, we are at least not surprised by) and the unwinding of the unpredictable. It is the function of journalism—daily, in the case of a newspaper, weekly in a magazine—to add up the latest unpredictable events and relate them to the familiar. Not a judgment for history, for too many facts emerge later, but an estimate for now, from the known, and it is a function essential in a democracy. If journalism is sometimes inaccurate and often inadequate, ignorance would not be preferable. Journalism’s desire to reconstruct the world anew each day, to find a serviceable coherence and continuity in chaos, may be a losing game and is always an artificial one: It is circumscribed by the amount of information available, limited at times by the journalist’s lack of imagination and weakened at other times by his excess of it. Yet it has its own uses, even when set against history.

The historian is often thought to be less scandal-minded than the journalist, but with an intimate diary in hand that has later come to light, and with a freedom from libel that a journalist never has, he may often be blunter. A historian is also thought to be more impartial, but must guard against imposing upon the past a pattern of interpretations he is fond of, while a journalist must write to people in the knowing present, suspicious of his flights of interpretation which do not match their own awareness of the times. At the very least the historian must be conscious of the occupational vice of retroactive superiority: He is like a privileged spectator at a horse race in the past who alone knows which horse went on to win, and looking about him wonders why men of seeming intelligence are making such bad bets, or



President Truman holding a press conference on the lawn of the “Little White House,” his vacation residence at Key West, Florida, surrounded by reporters, photographers and staff members, 1950. *Photo courtesy of the Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri.*

getting so worked up over what will not turn out as they expect. A reader of history must make the effort of imagination to realize that though he knows the outcome, the participants did not; what has become a finality (and may even have been, as a later era sees, inevitable) was not so regarded then, or if anticipated, may have been considered as still in doubt, and as something to be resisted, delayed or forestalled. Viewed forward, as decisions that had to be confronted, history can be as exciting as the best journalism; viewed backward, as mechanically determined, history becomes dull, and its actors mere marionettes who did not

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**...the essence of journalism is its timeliness; it must be served hot.**

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have the wisdom (really only the information) of the historian who sits in later judgment. These are some of the difficulties of history, to be set against its advantages of greater information, knowledge of “how it turned out,” and leisure to reflect. I do not intend to demean history to exalt journalism, or to make each of equal worth where they are not, but only to elbow a proper place for journalism as a trade not alone in its disabilities or in its values.

As long ago as my first course in journalism at college, my professor set as a theme for us to write whether we thought journalism to be a game, a racket or a profession. With that instinctive cunning which settles quickly on students at examination time, I could see that to defend journalism as a profession (which one part of me wanted to believe, and still does) was to invite mockery; of course it was not exclusively a racket, so I wrote of it as a game. But I would have been happy then, and content now, to describe it as a craft. A newspaper editor friend of mine once told me that he thought most people fell into their occupations by chance, but that men choose to join the circus, work on a railroad or enter

newspapering. Fresh out of journalism school and full of exalted notions that I could see had to be unlearned, I liked his comparison for being down to earth.

Journalism may be as much in need of principles as medicine or law (I believe this to be true); but without anything comparable to bar associations or medical societies with effective power to censure or expel, its principles are not enforceable. The individual journalist may have the duty, but often does not have the opportunity, to tell the truth as he sees it. He is a hired man, and because he is, his is not a profession. Nor are publishers under any professional restraint. News-

papers enjoy postal subsidies on the assumption that the existence of newspapers is in the public interest,

but publishers as a class do not consider themselves to be operating public utilities—and it is perhaps as well that they do not, for in this direction lie evils greater than the present haphazard irresponsibility. We are left then, if we would have trustworthy newspapers, with the conscience of the individual publisher, which can be a very wee, pea-sized thing; his fear that rival organs of communication will achieve greater credibility by their being seen to be fairer (an increasingly effective brake on him); or he may have to take into account the standards insisted upon by the journalists who work for him.

As a group, newspapermen are much better than their papers. They too are faced with temptations: the hope of advantage if they give the boss what he wants to hear, and the quite opposite temptation of wishing to indulge their

own prejudices. There are hacks among them, as well as cynics and panderers, quite often in high places, but there is a community of undeceived newspapermen who know who among them is cheating on the facts, and they do not always award their good marks—as those who are scorned by them imply—only to those who hold similar political views.

A good journalist is a rewarding sight. He enters a trade where the pay is low—low at least for the qualities of intelligence, energy, experience, judgment and talent he must bring to it. He must have a zest for events, as accountants must love figures and carpenters, wood. He must have a dedication to facts and a scent for humbug. He is probably by temperament an observer not a doer, standing outside of events, often in distaste, and must beware becoming, like a baseball fan, a heckler of plays that he himself could not have equaled. He must cultivate skepticism while avoiding cynicism. He must learn to cover people, meetings and causes for which he can have sympathy but must not display loyalty: He must learn to feel but not engage. He must be incorruptible; the temptation to be otherwise comes not from bribery, which is rare, but from a reluctance to pursue that kind of news which will go against the grain of his paper's views or his own convictions (it takes courage to give unpopular causes their due). He must be swift while also considered. He must go where he is not wanted and be resistant to those who are too welcoming. And for all of this, his hours will be long, his pay inadequate, and his standing in the community not particularly high. Newspapermen must warm themselves by their own fires.

Those newspapermen who have

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**If journalism is sometimes inaccurate and often inadequate, ignorance would not be preferable.**

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“crossed over” into publicity and advertising, where the pay is better, would like it understood that they are still in the “same game.” It is true that newspapermen often have to do menial and even venal jobs, such as furthering their paper’s promotional stunts, and it is true that public relations men are often newspapermen who can write stories that appear to be news and are run as such, but the end is different: The publicity man’s intent must always be to serve a master that is not the newspaperman’s. The appearance may be similar, but the difference is every-

the others lack: a delight in craft, a stimulus in variety, an occasional compensation in wrongs righted, a somewhat adolescent urge to be where things are going on and “in the know.” That man is lucky who is content in his work, finds it stretches his powers and rewards his time: So many Americans seem to be working at jobs that do not gratify them, living only for their hours away from work. A good newspaperman may be displeased by his circumstances, but need not be ashamed of the calling he has chosen.

It is not all cakes and ale. Journalism

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**A good journalist  
...must have a  
dedication to facts  
and a scent for  
humbug.**

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tions of interest, and then move on to something else. A newspaper can risk boring its public at its own peril. And so (newspapermen hate to admit this) journalism is in some respects not a serious business. Its role is at times similar to education, requiring simplicity of instruction without falsifying the subject matter, requiring diversions, distractions and recesses, though sometimes demanding concentration; adapting its material to the absorptive capacity of the audience, and even, alas, having to compete for attention with less worthy amusements. But it cannot compel compulsory attendance.

Newspapermen might not also like to acknowledge that for many readers the daily newspaper is simply an entertainment. Such readers may take a half-interested look at the headlines but they then hurry to the comics or the sport pages; they look to their newspaper for instruction, but in cooking more than in public affairs; they may seek information, but it is about television programs and not foreign events; they may want guidance, but about house-furnishings and fashions more than what is offered them on the editorial page. In this knowledge, the publishers are apt to be shrewder than their employees, paying fat prices for a syndicated comic strip or a canned gossip column, knowing that they can exploit their monopoly of either one, while slighting the news budget—for after all, they reason, everybody has access to the same news, and what reader really appreciates a consistent edge in news coverage? In this I think publishers wrong, but not as wrong as I wish they were: A newspaper’s coverage will be good only if its editor and publisher



Reporters scrambling around (and, in one case, sprawling across) a table at the White House, evidently picking up press releases announcing the Japanese surrender, August 14, 1945. *Photo courtesy of the Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri.*

thing. Sometimes when we who remain journalists come across an advertising copy writer or a publicity man in a bar—confident and leisurely on a fat expense account—we have a hard time deciding whether the resentment we feel comes from scorn or envy. In the end we are what we are because there are satisfactions in our business that

is a fitful trade. Newspapermen like variety in their assignments, which is another way of saying that they may be deficient in concentration. They pursue a subject only about as far as, and rarely much further than, the passing public interest. They are servants to a fickle public; they must seize its attention by novelty, hold it by new injec-

have a passion for making it so and find excellence its own reward. Increasingly as newspapers pass from the hands of those who founded them into the possession of their uninterested sons, their lawyers or their business managers, they become only vehicles for making money, and perhaps not as efficiently profitable as a garage or a hardware store. These merchants fill their paper with merchandise and ask only of their editors that they stay out of trouble, out of libel suits, and play it safe. The proportion of mediocrity in the American press thus far outweighs the good. A good newspaperman, though he need not be ashamed of his calling, can rightly be outraged at its practice.

Peter Finley Dunne thought it the duty of a newspaper “to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.” It is a rare newspaper today that feels any mission to afflict the comfortable. If reporters seem jaundiced, it is because they have to cover so many windy luncheons and solemnly record the pompous hypocrisy of the respectable. Sometimes they are included in the counsels of small groups where the others, feeling safe because they know the newspaper’s publisher is one of them, talk the cant of the well-to-do, forgetting that the reporter himself does not share the same economic stake in their prejudices. Newspapermen are apt to be against the successful and the affluent. In politics, they are usually Democrats—except when the Democrats, after too long in power, became too affluent themselves. No role satisfies the newspaperman more than that of redressor; the chance to be angry, to rout out the rotten; but newspapers being what they are, angers are grooved—confined principally to what can be found out, or if not found out, suspected to be wrong with government. Many, though not all, reporters willingly accepted this role against the Democrats, only to be disillusioned when publishers proved not such ardent pursuers of error in a Republican

administration. But a captious, searching attitude toward any administration (Republican or Democratic) must be the demeanor of all journalists, for by an accident of historical growth the role as watchdog of government falls to the press in American society, replaces the question period which British ministers must undergo in the House of Commons.

Jack the Giant Killer is a pleasing assignment to a newspaperman—but less so when only some giants are marked for the kill. What if big businessmen were subject to the same careful inquiry as government: had to an-

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**They are servants to a fickle public; they must seize its attention by novelty, hold it by new injections of interest, and then move on to something else. A newspaper can risk boring its public at its own peril.**

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swer why this relative was in unmerited high position; why that expensive entertainment was allowed; whose head fell for that bad investment; had to say who consented to this scheming in black markets or that shoddy legalism to thwart a competitor; had to explain why they tolerated an inferiority in the product; had to justify this connivance with an unsavory politician or union racketeer, or that use of company funds to promote selfish ends? In theory, companies have their own machinery for checking such practices, but in reality so long as profits are high very little else is asked of a boss. A publisher, asked why he did not concern himself with this kind of investigation, would say that these things are the domain of private business. But are they not touched with public interest?

Unjustified waste in business, as much as a government’s taxation, grabs at the public’s pocketbook—but it is not generally considered fair game for newspapermen.

Business is a privileged sanctuary, even when its institutional ads are picturing it as just a collection of open-faced “folks” like you and me, interested in nothing but the American way, the improvement of product and the remembrance of millions of fond little shareholders. Public relations men who in government perform a useful enough service for lazy newspapermen by gathering up facts for them—while discouraging independent inquiry—are even more sleekly successful in business at putting out what they would like known about a company, and diverting newspapermen from what they do not want to know. It remains for an occasional outburst of grudge by a disappointed contender, a stockholder’s fight, or—long after the event—a congressional committee investigation, for anything adverse to be heard.

Executives, those unexamined pillars of the community, have such press immunity, and such scorn for the fumbler in public office (any fumbling of their own passing unrecorded), that when one of them is persuaded to go to Washington as a public duty, is subjected to brash reportorial questions, and is no longer safe behind an imposing walnut desk and the stillness of wall-to-wall carpeting, he often seems somewhat less spectacular. It then becomes harder and harder to recruit them for public service, these businessmen who at Board of Directors’ meetings like to say how uplifted they are by challenges.

A journalist too energetic in seeking out the malpractices of business risks condemnation as being against business itself, yet the same logic should apply that applies to government, that it operates best in the public interest when made to operate in a spotlight. But this is a radical thought, and lest any man think the press timid, there are angry writers to point to, whose splenetic outbursts are read by millions. Note, however, what they are mostly mad at: There is a good living to



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**Increasingly as newspapers pass from the hands of those who founded them into the possession of their uninterested sons, their lawyers or their business managers, they become only vehicles for making money, and perhaps not as efficiently profitable as a garage or a hardware store.**

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be made in a shrewd grooving of acceptable grievances.

"Truth always prevails in the end," wrote Lord Acton, "but only when it has ceased to be in someone's interest to prevent it from doing so."

If a newspaperman finds his itch to investigate is encouraged only in some directions, if he finds himself asked to work within the known political prejudices of his publisher, purity of motive is not all to be found on one side. The development of reporters' craft unions (particularly at the outset, when Communists played too big a role) suggested that they, if they had their way, would be as biased, as ready to favor their own, as publishers. The contest of wills between newspapermen and publisher, such as it is, is apt to be muted; in many places the publisher has such clear ascendancy that no

character I loathed.... O, well, I persuaded myself that I could do more good by addressing those who had the greatest need of me—the millions of readers for whom Mr. Hearst was a midleading light."

Some of the sting went out of the struggle when reporters, in themselves reflecting the feelings of the country, passed from militant enthusiasm for the New Deal to at most a sentimental predisposition towards the later Democrats. This change of mood was matched by the rise of practical-minded publishers who had decided to make a necessity out of virtue. This new breed of publisher made it a policy to give no unnecessary offense to any powerful group within the community, even unions. They found themselves up against radio and television, whose dependence on government regula-

treatment is accorded anybody whose views coincide with the publisher's.... Tedium is a dangerous feeling to develop in readers. Sometimes one is tempted to sigh for the old days of honest wrong-headedness boldly proclaiming itself.

There are some who suggest that the way to make newspapers more responsible is to put their ownership into public trusts. But trusts can only preserve; they cannot create, and either the papers become the responsibility of dynamic managers (at which point all the old problems return) or they risk lapsing into staid sterility. Given our prejudice for an independent press, the only answer, if not a completely satisfactory one, is self-responsibility. There are some American newspapers—all too few, but to be honored all the more—whose publishers ignore the prejudices of their fellow businessmen and even defy the passions and whims of their public. A similar kind of dedication is felt by many newspapermen, even though this is to ask a great deal of low-paid men in a society which puts premium on other values; it requires an austerity of mind to accompany a vividness of imagination. But what is so heartening about journalism is how widely this notion of responsibility is felt. And it is ready to have more asked of it. ■

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**There are some American newspapers—all too few...whose publishers ignore the prejudices of their fellow businessmen and even defy the passions and whims of their public.**

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struggle goes on. Many reporters are without pronounced political opinions; others get it established early that they wish to stay clear of the "dirty" stories; still others find no disharmony between their politics and the paper's. For the rest, there are those who say "I only work here;" there are others who are inwardly restive, and those who find some rationalization, such as Ambrose Bierce's: "If asked to justify my long service to journals with whose policies I was not in agreement and whose

tion made them early in the game decide to play the news fairly straight (for all the pseudo-philosophizing about the impossibility of being objective, I have never met a newspaperman who did not know how to follow the injunction to "play it straight"). So there has been a trend toward less flagrant outbursts of violent feeling on the editorial page, and less apparent partisanship in the news columns: On many papers the good deeds of the other side simply get small space, and lengthy

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*His commentary on a trade that he took to naturally, this is from Thomas Griffith's forthcoming book, "The Waist-High Culture," to be published by Harper's this winter. A Nieman Fellow in 1943, Mr. Griffith is a senior editor of Time.*

October 1959

# Birthday Address To the National Press Club

BY WALTER LIPPMANN

I do not think that I need to tell you that standing on this famous platform I feel awkward and shy. I have never done anything like this before, and I cannot altogether believe that it is happening to me.

What is more, I know that I cannot put into words how much this party means to me. On a day like this a man wants to have his heart warmed, and nothing does it so well as to be surrounded by his friends. And if he is a newspaper man, nothing is so sweet as the good opinion of his fellows. So, when I say thank you, please put yourselves in my place and you will know how I feel and what I would like to say.

When Pete Edson and Bill Lawrence invited me, they said that I should talk about the newspaper business. I shall do that. But I hasten to say that I do not feel old enough to inflict upon you my reminiscences, and that I do not feel inspired enough to prophesy what is going to be the shape of the newspaper business in the years to come. I would rather talk about the job of being a Washington correspondent today, about what it is that we are trying to do, and why it is necessary and important as well as interesting to make a life work of it.

The job has changed and developed and grown in my own lifetime, and if I had to sum up in one sentence what has happened, it would be that the

Washington correspondent has had to teach himself to be not only a recorder of facts and a chronicler of events, but also—if I may put it that way—to be a writer of notes and essays in contemporary history. Nobody invented or consciously proposed this development of the newspaper business. It has been brought about gradually by trial and error in the course of a generation.

I think it is reasonably accurate to say that the turning point was the great depression of 1929 and the revolutions and the wars which followed it. Long before 1929 there were, of course, signed articles, essays, criticisms, columns of comment in prose and in verse, and all manner of expressions of personal opinion. But I think it is correct to say that the modern Washington correspondent, which of course includes news analysts and columnists, is a product of the worldwide depression and of the social upheaval which followed it, and of the imminence of war during the 1930's.

The unending series of emergencies and crises which followed the economic collapse of 1929 and the wars of our generation have given to what goes on in Washington and in foreign lands an urgent importance. After 1929, the federal government assumed a role in the life of every American and in the destiny of the world, which was radically new. The American people were not

prepared for this role. The kind of journalism we practice today was born out of the needs of our age—out of the need of our people to make momentous decisions about war and peace, decisions about the worldwide revolutions among the backward peoples, decisions about the consequences of the technological transformation of our own way of life right here in this country. The generation to which I belong has had to find its way through an uncharted wilderness. There was no book written before 1930, nor as a matter of fact has any been written since then, which is a full guide to the world we write about. We have all had to be explorers of a world that was unknown to us and of mighty events which were unforeseen.

The first presidential press conferences I attended were during the administration of Woodrow Wilson before this country became involved in the First World War. These press conferences were small, as a few of you may remember, so small that they were held in the President's own office with the correspondents standing about three or four deep around his desk. When the conference ended, the President would not leave the room but would sit back in his chair, and those who wanted to do so would stay on a bit, asking him to clear up or amplify this or that piece of news.

The little group who stayed on consisted of those who were not concerned primarily with the raw news of announcements and statements in the formal press conference. The wire services would take care of them anyway. They were concerned with explaining and interpreting the news. They were the forerunners of the Washington correspondent today.

For these correspondents and their editors in the home offices were coming to realize from practical experience that the raw news as such, except when it has some direct and concrete personal or local significance, is to the newspaper readers for the most part inedible and indigestible. The raw news has, therefore, to be processed in or-

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der to make it intelligible. For if it is not intelligible, it will not be interesting. And if it is not interesting, it will not be read.

It goes without saying that in a democracy like ours it is an awful responsibility to undertake the processing of the raw news so as to make it intelligible and to reveal its significance. It is such a great responsibility, it lends itself so easily to all manner of shenanigans, that when I can bear to think about it, I console myself with the thought that we are only the first generation of newspapermen who have been assigned the job of informing a mass audience about a world that is in a period of such great, of such deep, of such rapid, and of such unprecedented change.

The newspaper correspondents of this generation have learned from practical experience that the old rule of thumb about reporters and editorial writers, about news and comment, does not fit—or rather, I should say, it oversimplifies—the nature of the newspaperman's work in the modern world.

The old rule is that reporters collect the news, which consists of facts, and that the editorial page then utters opinions approving or disapproving of these facts.

Before I criticize this rule, I must pay tribute to its enduring importance. It contains what we may call the Bill of Rights of the working newspaperman. It encourages not only the energetic reporting of facts. It encourages the honest search for the truth to which these facts belong. It imposes restraints upon owners and editors. It authorizes resistance, indeed in honor it calls for resistance, to the contamination of the news by special prejudices and by special interests.

It proclaims the corporate opposition of our whole profession to the prostitution of the press by political parties and by political, economic and ideological pressure groups, and by social climbers and by adventurers on the make.

But while the rule is an indispens-

able rallying point for maintaining the integrity of the press, the practical application of the rule cannot be carried out in a wooden and literal way. The distinction between reporting and interpreting has to be redefined if it is to fit the conditions of the modern age.

It is all very well to say that a reporter collects the news and that the news consists of facts. The truth is that in our world the facts are infinitely many, and that no reporter can collect them all, and that no newspaper could print them all—even if they were fit to print—and nobody could read them all.

We have to select some facts rather than others, and in doing that we are using not only our legs but our selective judgment of what is interesting or



Walter Lippmann. *Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

important or both.

What is more, the relevant facts often exist far away and out of sight of any newspaperman, as for example the condition of the military balance of power in the world today. You cannot go and look at the balance of power, you have to deduce it and to calculate and appraise it. The relevant facts may occur in places that the reporter cannot visit—as for example Red China—and then the facts have to be inferred and imagined from secondhand reports. The facts may lie in the past. Then they have to be recovered and reconstructed, as for example the story

of how we got into our predicament in Berlin. The facts may lie inside the head of a public man which, like Mr. Khrushchev's head, is not open to private inspection. The facts may lie in the moving tides of mass opinion, for example about the coming elections, which are not easy to identify and to measure.

Under these conditions reporting is no longer what we thought of it in much simpler days. If we tried to print only the facts of what had happened—who did what and who said what—the news items would be like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle thrown in a heap upon the table. The unarranged pieces of raw news would not make a picture at all, and fitting them together so that they do make a picture is the inescapable job of a Washington correspondent.

However, very quickly, I hasten to say, the analogy of the jigsaw puzzle breaks down. Indeed, like most analogies, it is rather dangerous. Our job is harder than it implies. In real life there is not, as there is in every jigsaw puzzle, one picture and one picture only into which all the pieces will eventually fit.

It is the totalitarian mind which thinks that there is one and only one picture. All the various brands of totalitarianism, violently as they differ among themselves, have this in common. Each holds that it has the key and pattern of history, that it knows the scheme of things, and that all that happens is foreseen and explained in its doctrine.

But to the liberal mind this claim—like any other human claim to omniscience—is presumptuous and it is false. Nobody knows that much. The future is not predetermined in any book that any man has written. The future is what men will make it, and about the present, in which the future is being prepared, we know something but not everything, and not nearly enough.

Being newspapermen in the American liberal tradition, the way we interpret the news is not by fitting the facts to a dogma. It is by proposing theories or hypotheses which are then tested by

trial and error. We put forward the most plausible interpretation we can think of, the most plausible picture into which the raw news fits, and then we wait to see whether the later news fits into the interpretation. We do well if with only a little amendment, with only a minor change of the interpretation, the later news fits into it. If the later events do not fit, if the later news knocks down the earlier story, there are two things to be done. One is to scrap the theory and the interpretation, which is what liberal, honest men do. The other is to distort or suppress the unmanageable piece of news.

I have been talking shop. I have been talking about the inwardness of the know-how of our job, and not about the practical problems which all of us wrestle with in our daily work.

Last summer while walking in the woods and on the mountains where I live I found myself daydreaming about how I would answer, about how I would explain and justify, the business of being opinionated and of airing opinions regularly several times a week.

Is it not absurd, I hear the critic saying, that anyone should think he knows enough to write so much about so many things? You write about foreign policy. Do you see the cables which pour into the State Department every day from all parts of the world? Do you attend the staff meetings of the Secretary of State and his advisers? Are you a member of the National Security Council? And what about all those other countries which you write about? Do you have the run of 10 Downing Street, and how do you listen in on the deliberations of the Presidium in the Kremlin?

Why don't you admit that you are an outsider and that you are, therefore, by definition an ignoramus?

How, then, do you presume to interpret, much less to criticize and to disagree with, the policy of your own government, and for that matter of any other government?

And in internal affairs—are you really much better qualified to pontifi-

cate? No doubt there are fewer secrets here, and almost all politicians can be talked to. They can be asked the most embarrassing questions. And they will answer with varying degrees of candor and of guile. But if there are not so many secrets, you must admit that there are many mysteries. The greatest of all the mysteries is what the voters think, feel and want today, what they will think and feel and want on election day, and what they can be induced to think and feel and want by argument, by exhortation, by threats and promises, and by the arts of manipulation and leadership.

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### **The distinction between reporting and interpreting has to be redefined if it is to fit the conditions of the modern age.**

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Yet formidable as it is, in my daydream I have no trouble getting the better of this criticism and you, my dear fellow, I tell the critic, you be careful. If you go on, you will be showing how ridiculous it is that we are a republic and that we live under a democratic system and anyone should be allowed to vote. You will be denouncing the principle of democracy itself, which asserts that the outsiders shall be sovereign over the insiders. For you will be showing that the people themselves, since they are ignoramuses because they are outsiders, are therefore incapable of governing themselves.

What is more, you will be proving that not even the insiders are qualified to govern them intelligently. For there are very few men—perhaps 40 at a maximum—who read, or at least are eligible to read, all the cables that pour into the State Department. And then, when you think about it, how many senators, representatives, governors and mayors—all of whom have very strong opinions about who should conduct our affairs—ever read these cables

which you are talking about?

Do you not realize that about most of the affairs of the world we are all of us outsiders and ignoramuses, even the insiders who are at the seat of government? The Secretary of State is allowed to read every American document he is interested in. But how many of them does he read? Even if he reads the American documents, he cannot read the British and the Canadian, the French and the German, the Chinese and the Russian. Yet he has to make decisions in which the stakes may well be peace or war. And about these decisions the Congress, which reads very few documents, has to make decisions, too.

Thus, in my daydream I reduce the needler to a condition of sufficient humility about the universal ignorance of mankind. Then I turn upon him, and with suitable eloquence declaim an apology for the existence of the Washington correspondent.

If the country is to be governed with the consent of the governed, then the governed must arrive at opinions about what their governors want them to consent to. How do they do this?

They do it by hearing on the radio and reading in the newspapers what the corps of correspondents tell them is going on in Washington and in the country at large and in the world. Here we perform an essential service. In some field of interest we make it our business to find out what is going on under the surface and beyond the horizon, to infer, to deduce, to imagine and to guess, what is going on inside, and what this meant yesterday, and what it could mean tomorrow.

In this we do what every sovereign citizen is supposed to do, but has not the time or the interest to do for himself. This is our job. It is no mean calling, and we have a right to be proud of it, and to be glad that it is our work. ■

*Walter Lippmann is a syndicated columnist.*

July 1960

# Newspapermen and Lawyers

BY ANTHONY LEWIS

I propose to speak tonight on a moderately pretentious topic, the public responsibilities of newspapermen and lawyers....

As my concern is public responsibility in our professions, I want to focus especially on Washington. In that city, I think, lawyers and newspapermen do share a basic motivation and joy in life. Charles A. Horsky, in his book, "The Washington Lawyer," called it "an intimate sense of participation in significant affairs." Douglass Cater, in a book which referred to the press in Washington as "The Fourth Branch of Government," spoke of correspondents having a "heady sensation of power and participation."

Turning first to the press, I have no doubt that a feeling of participation in great events is the life force of many Washington correspondents. Perhaps a heady sense of power, Mr. Cater's phrase, is more accurate. I really hate to see the press taking itself so seriously that it begins writing books about itself as a fourth branch of government. But that the press in Washington has an influence on public affairs, that it is to some degree a participant, is surely true.

A former president of the Harvard Law Review said to me last night that reporters are different from lawyers because they are not, or need not be, men of judgment. They are accountable to no one, he suggested, and so they are without responsibility. I agree that the reporter ordinarily does not bear the lawyer's responsibility for decision; he writes for an anonymous and remote audience, while the lawyer determines the course of action to be taken by human beings immediately

present. I agree also that I would trust the judgment of the best lawyer over that of the best newspaperman to decide the fate of the nation, or my own fate. But the suggestion last night was that reporters really make no judgments at all, that they just write and the editors make the decisions.

If that is anyone's impression, it is incorrect. I start with the proposition that news stories are much more significant in shaping public opinion than editorials. Even editors will admit this, perhaps because readership surveys show that only a small portion of the subscribers ever reads the editorial page. And in my experience the reporter has very much more to do with the shape of the news story than any editor does. For the Washington correspondent, editors are a group of anonymous people at the other end of a

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**Many, perhaps most, Washington events are not simple facts about which only one objective account can be written.... [T]he 'truth' depends on one's point of view.**

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telegraph wire. Of course they retain their power to cut the point out of a story. But usually this is done by inadvertence, because of the demands of space, rather than by design. The real decisions—what facts to report and in what light to report them—are made by reporters, in my opinion....

Many, perhaps most, Washington events are not simple facts about which only one objective account can be written. The facts can be given more than one interpretation, and the "truth" depends on one's point of view. I do not suggest that newspapermen live like characters in a Pirandello play, chasing elusive and changing truths. I

say only that judgments are involved in writing even what purport to be straight newspaper stories.

There are many examples that could be given, but the most telling is probably the whole McCarthy situation. During much of Senator McCarthy's career the Associated Press as a matter of high-level policy kept all interpretation out of its stories about the Senator. The stories were supposedly objective, factual, deadpan presentations of the Senator's activities. But after a while some of the more sophisticated members of the AP began realizing that objectivity may be a little more complicated. Was it objective to report a speech by Senator McCarthy without pointing out his own internal contradictions? Was it objective to report his account of the spies uncovered at a closed session of his investigating committee without checking others who had been in the committee hearing and had seen no spies unveiled? The McCarthy issue deeply troubled American newspapers because, I think, it drove home to them the necessity of interpretive reporting. The idea of reporters exercising judgment

worries many editors, just as some judges prefer to find absolute commands in the texts of statutes and constitutions because, they say, it is inappropriate for judges to weigh these things in the balance. I am not going to get into

the judges' disagreement, but it seems to me that there is no way for newspapermen to escape making judgments....

I have been talking about the process of deciding what goes into a story—setting the facts in the necessary framework of interpretation. There is also the simple question of what is news....

The other day Senator Kennedy accused the press of creating the religious issue in the presidential nominating campaign. He argued that hordes of reporters combing through Wisconsin and West Virginia, asking the citizenry whether it would support a Catholic for President and then reporting the existence of religious bloc-vot-

ing, had in effect made the citizens think of religion for the first time as a factor in politics. I believe there is some accuracy in the picture; the press has at least sharpened the religious issue. But given history and the political realities in this country, could the press really have failed to wonder whether primary voters would cast ballots along religious lines? Was it not appropriate to remind the readers of Senator Kennedy's speech, as my Bureau Chief, James Reston, did, that the Senator had argued to the professionals in 1956 that he should be nominated for Vice President because his religion would win more votes than it would lose? [See accompanying box for additional comments on Reston's reporting on the Catholic issue.]

My examples should suggest that these newspaper judgments may involve moral considerations. Nothing raises more acute problems here than the leak. The leak is the great weapon of the Washington politician. Most of the stories that are called scoops prob-

ably result from a calculation by some official that publication of the material at this time will be advantageous to him and the interests he supports. The idea may be, for example, to start building public support for a program which has not yet won approval within the

and unconfirmed changes against many persons, should the paper print it? Suppose the Secretary of the Treasury returns from a European trip, calls in a reporter, and tells him of deep concern in European financial circles about possible weakening of the dollar as a

currency if a Democrat devoted to easy money is elected President. The reporter is not allowed to identify the Secretary by name as the source of the story; he *can* use a disguise such as "high financial

circles in the Administration...." Should he write the story?....

It is evident that there are dangers in the power of the Washington press to create public images of men and events. There is a strong temptation on some correspondents to play God. After all, it is so much easier to determine foreign policy without going through all the trouble of becoming Secretary of State and without being subject to the limitations that the political system puts on him. Newspapermen are not responsible to a constituency, or even to a client. They are used to haste and

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### It is this power to make meaningful which journalism must now learn if self-government is to survive.

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Administration. Or it may be a leak designed to frighten Congress out of heavy spending by, say, painting a horrifying picture of the gold outflow from this country. Sometimes the reporter's initiative is vital; many good stories are obtained by asking the right question at the right time. But other stories are presented on a silver platter. In both cases there may be ethical concerns. When a law professor frustrated with the limitations on his role as a congressional committee investigator of the regulatory agencies offers a newspaper his memorandum making sweeping

BIG JOHN  
AND  
LITTLE JOHN



"BE SURE TO DO  
WHAT YOUR POPPA TELLS YOU."

Cartoon courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Library.

## The Catholic Issue

...only the man who has learned historical depth can give what we call the news a scope and air in which it can have meaning. The New York Times published several weeks ago a sentence that proves that true, better than I can state it. At the risk of burning Scotty Reston's ears, I should like to recall it to your minds.

Scotty was talking in that Sunday column of his about the Catholic issue in the coming election.

Other people had been talking about the same thing in the papers and out of them. But what Scotty had to say went home because it put the whole debate in the proper landscape and so reduced it to its proper terms.

"A religious war between unbelievers," said Scotty, "would be too much."

It would be hard to cite a statement with more meaning in it or a truer one. What opposes Catholicism in American politics, is not Protestantism as the old Bay Colony understood that term. It's a political attitude. And what Protestantism opposes is not Catholicism, the religion. It is the Catholic powerhouse in New York City and the politics of every other American city.

To call this a religious issue is to misrepresent it. And we all know it, or rather we all know it now that Scotty has put it into words.

It is this power to make meaningful which journalism must now learn if self-government is to survive. ■

Archibald MacLeish  
September 1960

superficiality, not to reflection; depth is a quality not normally found among them. For all these reasons irresponsible journalism is a serious concern.

I am as critical of newspapers as anyone, but I do not think the Washington press corps is predominantly irresponsible. Individually, and collectively with his editors, the reporter does tend to impose on himself the restraint, the responsibility of concern for the public interest.

Mr. Cater, in his book, quotes a well-known Washington correspondent on the difference between reporters and officials. The reporter, he says, decides whether to print something he learns on the basis of only two considerations:

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**The reporter interested only in tomorrow's headline is not likely to keep the respect of those in government—a respect he needs to do his job properly.**

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Is it news? Is it fit to print? The official, weighing disclosure, must also consider the effects of publication on policy—on the interest of the country.

I think that distinction is overdrawn. Certainly officials and newspapermen approach differently the question of whether something should be published. But no responsible reporter ignores the possible effects of publication. One of my colleagues has said to me that he thinks a newspaperman's ability to achieve rapport with an official depends on the official's confidence that the reporter is interested as he is in the good of the country. The reporter interested only in tomorrow's headline is not likely to keep the respect of those in government—a respect he needs to do his job properly.

Finally, let me raise the most difficult question of all for Washington newspapermen, the extent to which they can properly become participants in events—doers instead of observers. Reporters, like lawyers, have opinions. They are naturally interested in public

affairs. They are not eunuchs. Almost inevitably they find themselves rooting for one side or another. Along with this comes the frustrating feeling that they could do things so much better than those who are the participants. Every

reporter who covers congressional committee hearings finds himself full of questions that the congressmen don't have the sense to ask.

But there are limitations on newspapermen. I do not know precisely what they are, and so I shall simply raise some questions. One of my newspaper colleagues in Washington, a lady, was much concerned two years ago about the effects of what I can refer to here in shorthand as the McNabb-Mallory doctrine—the Supreme Court's rule that unnecessary delay in arraignment of a federal prisoner voids any confession made during the delay. This lady thought the doctrine was filling the streets of Washington with criminals, and she wrote a great many tales of horror designed to encourage Congress to overrule the McNabb and Mallory cases. I sat next to her in the Senate the day a bill to accomplish that purpose was defeated by two votes. Her eyes filled with tears, and she rushed downstairs to talk to some senators and see if she could rally her forces.

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**Newspapermen are not responsible to a constituency, or even to a client. They are used to haste and superficiality, not to reflection; depth is a quality not normally found among them. For all these reasons irresponsible journalism is a serious concern.**

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I have been a little sarcastic in describing the episode, but is that justified? If *she* was wrong, what are the proprieties of a newspaperman calling to the attention of some senators a little-noticed bill that would have restricted an important area of federal court jurisdiction?

What about a reporter who was praised by the Senate Rackets Committee for bringing in adverse information on Jimmy Hoffa? How does his position compare with that of the reporters who fed tidbits to Senator McCarthy? If they were wrong, what about the reporters who opposed Senator McCarthy, discussed strategy with his enemies and, I think, had a good deal to do with bringing him down?

There is no sure guide for all situations, but I think it is clear that the reporter must not become entirely committed—an obvious special pleader. His instinct should be all the other way. If he has a concern for the public good, as I think most Washington reporters do, he must reconcile himself to satisfying that urge by uncommitted reporting. Justice Frankfurter has put it that the reporter is an educator, not a reformer. I accept that definition, with the proviso that the educator be allowed to harbor within him just a little of the spirit of reform.... ■

*Anthony Lewis is in the Washington Bureau of The New York Times, reporting on the Supreme Court. He devoted a Nieman Fellowship in 1957 to studies in the Harvard Law School. This is from a talk at the Harvard Law Review dinner.*

July 1961

# Are We the Best Informed Nation?

BY JAMES W. MARKHAM

“Communications specialists” and working newspapermen sometimes glibly assert without a shred of proof that the American people are the best informed people in the world. This is a broad statement and one that requires support, because if true, it offers some assurance that the mass media of this country are doing a reasonably fair job. If this thesis is not true, it is time to rid ourselves of the false sense of complacency it engenders and begin to work harder to make it true....

But at the very least one can confidently assert that the mass media are available in overwhelming proportions to the people of this republic. Never before in any other country have so many been subjected to so great a flow of words and pictures so rapidly and (in a physical sense) so efficiently. Moreover, if one is to judge by the apparent confidence with which advertising spends billions of dollars a year in the media, he must conclude that people in considerable numbers *are exposed* to media content.

If we admit that the media are available in unequalled volume and that the people are exposed to vast quantities, does it necessarily follow that we become best informed, or for that matter, even well informed? Elementary school teachers know that availability and exposure do not necessarily insure reception and understanding....

During the more recent McCarthy uproar a poll showed that at least one-fourth didn't know who he was. A good many people couldn't identify Christian Herter, then the newly appointed Secretary of State. An equally large number either didn't know where Formosa is, or had forgotten. The evidence seems to be ample and convincing of the sometimes appalling inability

of the public to assimilate information from the media....

The reasons why we don't get through to the people are diverse and complex. They are to be found at the heart of the communications process. Some theories blame the media; others blame the public. Still others find both media and public at fault. Some causes are as yet undiscovered: We suspect them but can only speculate about them.

One theory (or perhaps it is no more than an educated guess) suggests that we are on the verge of becoming “news-drunk.” Many of us, in the scramble to keep up, expose ourselves to more news than we can really hold. We become surfeited with excess verbalizations about mundane affairs. Like Wordsworth, we find the world is too much with us. Indeed, it is suspected that there may exist a saturation point in the human-news absorptive capacity beyond which we may even begin to build up resistance. At this point we engage in the practice of selective attention. We stop listening or focus attention elsewhere. Usually we seek

column of \$3-a-word Sino-Japanese War news. The sudden disappearance of the usual war news from the Orient evoked not a single peep of protest from his half-million readers. Next day, by way of diabolical emphasis, our editor consigned “Little Orphan Annie” to the wastebasket. He was deluged by more than 1,000 complaints in letters and phone calls.

Another theory, a logical outgrowth of the first, relates also to our communications participation behavior. This view holds that because so much of the news has a disturbing effect on us, a part of what seems to be public apathy may be a deliberate self-protective mechanism. We have come to associate our news participation with feelings of anxiety and insecurity. To shield ourselves we tend, perhaps subconsciously, to resist or avoid the news and the meaning behind it.

A third rationale has to do with the way information is presented in the media and its effect on audience habits. The average person's stock of information about foreign affairs, according to Erich Fromm in “Escape From Freedom,” consists of fragmented, news-reel-quality snippets of knowledge without context. The same indictment could be made, though to a lesser degree, of the average person's knowledge of domestic and local affairs.

This disjointed, segmented, kaleidoscopic impression may be due to

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**If we admit that the media are available in unequalled volume and that the people are exposed to vast quantities, does it necessarily follow that we become best informed, or for that matter, even well informed?**

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more diverting fare. We turn slothfully to the comics and sports.

A Chicago editor one day in 1937—in a rare moment of skeptical insight—conceived an experiment which revealed the fickleness of reader habits. He scrapped his customary page one

two crucial weaknesses in traditional news presentation methods: the evanescent, isolated, one-dimensional quality of much of the news stream; and the way it is written and displayed (or broadcast in short flashes). This kind of surface-of-the-news presenta-



tion, designed to save the busy audience time and effort, provides piecemeal exposure to mass-produced raw factual messages and has brought up a generation of dilettante scanners and page thumbers. Information served in this fashion has not only cultivated careless reading and listening habits, but it has also failed largely to provide a framework to give it significance, at least for the mass audiences.

Furthermore, people with limited education (but not necessarily limited intelligence), as David Riesman has pointed out, seldom have a framework to locate such data as the media provide—especially that which does not appear directly relevant to their lives. Without such meaningful context, the facts don't come through; or if they do, they are soon forgotten. The

Commission on Freedom of the Press 13 years ago declared that our society needs “a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning.” By the term “society,” the Commission meant “every member” of the society—not just the better educated.

But what about the more educated person who can provide his own framework? A steady diet of sterile news (a notable exception must be made in the case of that provided by a few newspapers and broadcasters) has come near to alienating him entirely. Despairingly he turns from public affairs to other interests, after reluctantly concluding that keeping well informed isn't worth the effort of filtering out much of the “noise” from the channels of communication.

The media are faced with the unprecedented and overwhelmingly difficult task of relating isolated facts, of providing the framework of understanding, of making sense for the average reader out of the maddeningly com-

plex, chaotic confusion of universal events. The processes of public education are extremely slow; it takes a long time to raise the information level of the masses.

The media might have more success in such an endeavor if they stopped aiming at the great apathetic amorphous mass public at large, quit feeding it with the lowest-common-denominator-quality information, and started readjusting their sights gradually toward the more educated segments of the population. There are indications that if more of this were done, the average person would catch up faster.

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**Whatever the extent of public apathy and indifference, the media are obliged to care. They cannot default in taking the initiative in the difficult task of making the average person *want* to be better informed.**

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The mass media and their apologists should stop comforting themselves with the worn rationalization that the public is well informed and realize how far short of this desirable goal they are falling. The challenge is great. To communicate understanding, as Bingham says, is an infinitely more difficult job than to communicate assorted facts, but a nobler one.

If this seems like an unrealistic adjustment to require of our media, how much greater is the adjustment that must be made by the people? The public is probably no more equal to the responsibilities of the jet age than are the media. At about the same time the communications revolution brought the world into our living room, we found ourselves thrown suddenly into a position of world leadership. Less than 50 years ago we were still thinking of ourselves as a nation apart from European entanglements.

The new position of world leadership, coming with rapid social and economic change at home, required a ter-

rific adjustment in our conception of the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. It was too much for the citizen with a public conscience, who was expected to be cognizant of and concerned about affairs in far-away Korea or in remote points in Laos, a country his grandfather never heard of. He is called upon to have opinions about the struggle for power in the Congo when he comprehends few of the subtler ramifications of a tax issue before his local township board.

The times demand a greater degree of participation in the media and in public-opinion processes than ever before. To be concerned we must learn to care about the course of affairs. It would seem that more people would interest themselves in what is going on out of selfish motives of survival and the de-

sire to help make a better world. But it may be more comforting to one's faith in democracy and popular government “to believe that people care and are misinformed than to realize how little they care,” Riesman concludes. On the other hand, Dean Theodore Peterson puts it squarely up to the people: “...does the citizen in a democratic society have the right to be misinformed, ill-informed, or uninformed? While the press has begun to see its own responsibilities,” he adds, “it has done precious little to make readers see theirs.”

Whatever the extent of public apathy and indifference, the media are obliged to care. They cannot default in taking the initiative in the difficult task of making the average person *want* to be better informed. ■

*James W. Markham is professor of journalism at Pennsylvania State University.*

March 1963

# For That Hole in the Forms

BY EDWIN A. LAHEY

**I**t is a time-honored custom for the out-of-town speaker to tell you what's wrong with newspapers.

Forgive me for flouting tradition—but I don't think there's a goddamned thing wrong with newspapers.

I'm proud of my business and grateful to it for a satisfying life as a reporter. I'd rather cover a President than be President. I'd rather cover the county courthouse than be the town banker. I'd rather be club editor than president of a country club to which a reporter couldn't belong.

If journalism had not rescued me from the working classes, I would today have about 40 years seniority on the Chicago and North Western Railroad. This would perhaps have permitted me to work the day shift in the train yard at Proviso yards in Chicago.

When I need some self-justification for this professional smugness, I recall as my example a man named Jack Burke, a pit boss in a Havana gambling joint. I

met him during an investigation of Batista's links with the U.S. underworld five years ago. I asked Burke how he had got into the racket, and he recalled the event with some pride.

"I used to drive a milk wagon in San Francisco," Burke told me. "After a while I noticed that I had to work 29 days to get a day off, but that they worked the horse only every other day. That's how I became a crap dealer."

To belabor the point, I have never for a moment regretted the day that I had a chance to become a reporter. And my most thoughtful prayer at this stage of life is that my bosses will remain solvent and that I'll hang on until it's time for them to give me a gold watch and some matched luggage.

My strong feeling about a business that has been good to me makes me impatient with intellectuals who criticize the American press for its banality, its parochialism, and its imputed failure to keep our people dewy-eyed and

well informed.

Frequently these intellectual discussions use The New York Times as a measuring rod for the deficiencies of us provincials.

There's always a gaping hole in this presentation.

The New York Times is a great institution, everyone agrees. If it did not exist, the Ford Foundation would have to start one. But there's room in this country for only one New York Times. God forbid that we could support more than one. If we ever got into an orgy of keeping well informed to the point that everyone was reading the equivalent of The New York Times, there'd be no coal dug, no yarn carded, no automobiles bolted together.

Nearly every highbrow discussion of journalism in which I've participated has ignored the dichotomy of the newspaper business. So long as we have a free-enterprise society, newspapering is first of all a profit and loss operation, and after that a thing of the spirit.

A. J. Liebling is the most devastating critic of the U.S. press that we know. But read Liebling, and you sense that he is still suffering from a traumatic emotional experience he had back in 1930, when some hardheaded character took a look at the account books at the New York World, decided he didn't want to lose any more money, and killed that great institution.

The callous business judgment which killed the World also left Liebling with a lifelong bitterness. Why? Simply because Liebling, as an idealistic young man, had overlooked the fact that the romantic life of a reporter in a battered hat is impossible unless some advertising hustler in a hard hat is bringing in the sheaves.

The tiresome discussions about the role of the press in a free society could probably be deflated a little if newspapermen and their critics alike kept in mind the unique and dichotomous nature of journalism in a democratic society resting on a free-enterprise system of production.

Newspapering is a mass production, assembly-line manufacturing process, first and foremost. And like any other



A.J. Liebling. Photo courtesy of UPI/Corbis-Bettmann.

manufacturing process, the assembly line shuts down if the customers don't buy the merchandise.

But there is a slight difference that makes our manufacturing business unique. And you'll pardon me for repeating that ancient story about the debate over equal rights in the French Chamber of Deputies. When a speaker remarked that there was only a slight difference between men and women, the chamber arose as one man and shouted:

"Vive la petite difference!"

"La petite difference" in our business is this:

We are the only commercial enterprise specifically covered by a guarantee in the Constitution of the United States. I refer, of course, to the freedom of press specified in the First Amendment, a simple and well worn phrase packed both with opportunity and responsibility.

Shaken down, this is what it means:

After we have filled the forms with ad copy, with the crossword puzzle, with Ann Landers or Dear Abby, with the daily bridge hand (where north and south for some reason always get the cards), with recipes for Lenten meals, with the vital statistics, with the night police report, and with the canned material from New York, Washington and Hollywood, we find a little hole remaining in the type.

That is where comes to flower the brilliant thought you had in the shower. That is where reporters find space to report an unjust conviction, or some evidence of stealing in high places, or the preposterous utterances of some politician suffering from delusions of grandeur.

It's that little hole in the forms, where we express ourselves, that the First Amendment was written about. The expressions of the spirit that go into that free space, sometimes noble and courageous, sometimes petty and self-serving, are the things that make "la petite difference" between us and all other manufacturing industries.

That freedom of the press of which you are custodians is precious.

And editors would be less than hu-

man if they were not at times hypersensitive about freedom of the press. They would also be less than human if they did not sometimes overemphasize the privilege of freedom enough to blur their vision of the responsibility that is part and parcel of the privilege.

I do not offer this as serious criticism of the people in our business. When editors are either hypersensitive about their rights, or insensitive to their responsibilities, a better balance is soon restored by time, events and the pressures of competition.

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**...the romantic life  
of a reporter in a  
battered hat is  
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I think that an editor's sense of responsibility is sometimes blunted temporarily by his personal environment, which can permit a cultural gap to develop between editors and readers. Let me explain this theory. A \$20,000 editor will live in a \$20,000 suburb; he will play golf and poker with \$20,000 people; inevitably he will think \$20,000 thoughts; with enough environmental conditioning, an editor could find a cultural gap between him and the people on the wrong side of the tracks. This cultural lag, if it exists, can betray itself in a delayed awareness, on the part of the editor, toward a fresh wave of news affecting groups outside his personal life. I think this lag was apparent in the early 1930's, in the explosive rise of a labor movement which is now almost respectable. It has been apparent in more recent years, among some editors who have forlornly wished that this boring story of the racial crisis would just go away.

Ours is a nerve-racking business. It follows that hypersensitivity about free-

dom of the press appears more frequently in our ranks than does insensitivity to duty.

In 36 years as a reporter, I have had my share of personal experiences with arrogant or corrupt people who took it upon themselves to stop the flow of information. But I have difficulty getting agitated about these characters. Somehow or other the information starts to flow again. You steal it, you keep harping about it, you get legislators on your side who want their names in the paper, and they carry the torch for you.

To me, a much more serious problem than suppression of news by public figures is the selection of news by reporters. I have been aware of this particularly since living in Washington. There's just too much of the world for the human mind to comprehend any more. The reporter or editor who can settle on a news budget on any given day without some secret apprehension about what he's missing is probably a very rare bird.

On many a day when I am afflicted with this problem, I think with nostalgia of a German who was on the night desk of the old *Wesliche Post* in St. Louis. President Harding was on his deathbed in San Francisco. Right after the German editor had locked up his front page for the night, the AP bulletin phone rang, and a voice said:

"Flash...Harding dead."

"Vee got enuf news already," the editor said as he hung up.

We can all envy the stolidity of that editor. If we had it, the incidence of ulcers in our business would certainly decline.

And with that German's sluggish self-possession, editors and reporters as a group might be slower in their wrath about threats to the freedom of the press.

We've had an uproar in recent weeks about news management and suppression. I hesitate to criticize the brethren in Washington with whom I share the daily burden of futility and frustration. But I think that extended residence in that insidious atmosphere tends to make many of us too touchy about

what goes on amongst the federal payrollers behind closed doors.

I derived only one lasting impression from the Cuban crisis—John F. Kennedy, looking very much like Matt Dillon, one of my own heroes, walked up to the mouth of a cave and told Khrushchev to throw out his gun and come out with his hands up. The break in the tension that followed may some day appear to be the most important event of our generation. The fact that the President did this with some clever news management has failed to disturb me.

I think many of you are still upset by the Pentagon order which requires all officials in the Department of Defense to report to the Public Information Secretary the substance of any talks they have with reporters.

This sounds like implied censorship. It carries the germ of something that could be contrary to public interest.

But in fairness to Art Sylvester, formerly of the Newark News, who is Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, another side of this order should be considered.

Ever since the armed services were consolidated in 1947, with the statutory provision that the Secretary of Defense must come from civilian life, there have been flare-ups of guerilla warfare conducted by the information services of the military service branches against the civilian authority imposed upon them by law. This warfare has been carried on through the leakage of contrived stories behind the backs of civilian information officials. The purpose of these illicit leaks is generally to influence public or congressional opinion against the decisions or pending decisions of civilian authorities.

The Pentagon directive which has created controversy is quite simply a defense weapon of the civilian authorities against the furtive insubordination of the information officers of the separate service branches. Secretary of Defense McNamara, with a proper concern for morale, does not like to have this discussed publicly, but that's the fact of the matter.

If and when a form of news manage-

ment like this becomes a vehicle for concealing information to which taxpayers are entitled, I think we can be certain that somebody will break the blockade.

There's another generally ignored fact that should be remembered when we talk of news suppression. Find me a government official with more than a handful of payrollers in his department, and I'll find you a stool pigeon, an informant who at some time in his career wants to get even with his boss.

It may seem crude for me to stand here and plead for an honorable place in history for the stool pigeon. But let's face it—life in our honorable profession would be more difficult without them.

This is a timely occasion, incidentally, for discussing the role of the stool pigeon in government. A significant magazine story casting scorn on Adlai E. Stevenson's role in the Cuban crisis could only have come from some informant close to the President and the National Security Council. After noting the uproar caused by this story, I had the feeling that if Mr. Kennedy came before a group of editors again and asked them to exercise self-censorship, he would be laughed off the platform.

And now I offer a final reason for restraint in our concern about freedom of the press.

The incidents involving suppression of news are actually conflicts between mortal men and an institution.

You are the institution. You'll be around.

The payrollers are the mortal men. In the long run, they've got to lose.

I doubt that many public wrongdoers have gone unpunished. At some time or another an unexpected shift in the wind topples the screen and reveals them in all their ugliness. Or the voters finally catch up with them, usually after long and painful efforts by newspapers to expose them as fakers. Whatever they do, life eventually closes in on them. And if you aren't around to record the event, your successor will be. The important thing to remember is that you'll have the last word.

As we enter these conflicts with pub-

lic payrollers, we could gain some serenity by reminding ourselves that our adversary is probably a lot more scared than we are.

I'll close by recalling a story about John Eastman, Publisher of the old Chicago Journal.

One day Mr. Eastman found Bob Casey, then a young reporter, full of fury about some bit of effrontery or arrogance he had just experienced with a public servant. Eastman advised Bob to simmer down.

"Bob," he said, "I sit in my window with a bouquet of roses in one hand and a sockful of dung in the other. And my friends and my enemies pass."

Perhaps if we remember John Eastman's advice to Bob Casey in our recurring crises over freedom of the press, it will help us all to relax. ■

*Edwin A. Labej, Nieman Fellow 1939, is Chief of the Washington Bureau of the Knight Papers. This was an address to The Associated Press News Council. A request for an advance copy yielded what is said to be the only prepared text of a Labej speech.*

September 1960

## Asking Rude Questions

BY HARRY S. ASHMORE

...I remember going over to the President's house.... And he said, "You know it's only three years—you're the third class [of Nieman]. But I think maybe you people are doing a great service to Harvard." This shocked us because we didn't think we were. I said "Well Mr. President, what are we doing?" "Well," he said, "you are running around this campus asking rude questions. Many members of this faculty haven't had a rude question asked in 25 years, and I think it's very good for Harvard University."... ■

September 1964

# Calvin Coolidge and the Press

BY LOUIS M. LYONS

...The press conference as an organized biweekly meeting was instituted by Woodrow Wilson, fell into disrepair under Harding, and was reinstated in a very limited form by Mr. Coolidge. Press relations of earlier Presidents had been individual, informal, uninstitutionalized, down through Theodore Roosevelt and Taft. Mr. Wilson, with his concern for open covenants, wanted to maintain a public dialogue through the press. But the World War closed in on him and cut it off, not before he was glad to be rid of it.

Warren Harding's flamboyant vocabulary of "normalcy" did not lend itself to clear channels of communication, and he seldom bothered to be informed. So Secretary of State Hughes had at times to take a hand to straighten things out the day after a press conference. After one gaffe that stirred international complications, Harding restricted the conference to written questions submitted in advance. Harding's skin, also, was too thin to take press criticism; when scandal mounted in the unhappy later part of his administration, he let the press conference wither away.

Mr. Coolidge further restricted the limited form that Harding tolerated. The President could not be quoted. There would be no oral questions, nothing spontaneous. Correspondents would submit written questions in advance and use such replies as the President vouchsafed, only as background information. "There ought not to be any reference to the fact that there is a news conference here," he admonished the correspondents....

On the authority of Lyle Wilson of

the United Press, who was there through the whole period, the editors say Mr. Coolidge approached these conferences relaxed, with no preparation. When he picked up the little pile of questions he was seeing them for the first time. Incredible as this seems, internal evidence bears it out. Often



President Calvin Coolidge in cowboy outfit with press photographers. *Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

enough his answer was that he had no information on the subject, and this was announced without the slightest intimation that he meant to find out. None of this: "We'll have that for you next time, make a note of it, Pierre." No, the President was making himself available to the reporters, insofar as convenient, to satisfy their curiosity about such matters as had fallen to his attention.

It was always a matter of intense curiosity what was on the little slips he let flutter down on the desk as he shuffled through to find one he chose to answer.

"I haven't any information about the action of the Federal Reserve Board in lowering the re-discount rate," or "We have got so many regulatory laws al-

ready that I feel we would be just as well off if we didn't have any more."

The slips had already had a cautious screening by his secretary, C. Bascomb Slemph, who was the kind of Republican who could survive as a congressman from Virginia. His relations with the press were built on mutual suspicion. Slemph went on to be Chairman of the Republican National Committee.

It never happened when I was there, but Lyle Wilson says that on occasion Mr. Coolidge would go through the whole pile of questions and find none to his liking, then blandly announce, "I have no questions today," and the press

corps would troop out, newsless.

This was a different era. Correspondents were a different breed. Mr. Coolidge refers frequently to his desire to be helpful to the press. He wants to give them all the information he can. He always talks as though this was a personal favor he was doing them.

"I haven't seen the Muscle Shoals Bill and know little about it.... There is nothing I can say in relation to a new arms conference. It has no relation, as far as I can see, to any discussion about our debts... I am a good deal disturbed at the number of proposals that are being made about the expenditure of money...."

These arid comments might be lightened by bits of humor or wry needling of the reporters.

“The Secretary of War has not resigned. I don’t expect he is going to, and I hope that for the sake of his peace of mind that his resignation will not be reported in the future oftener than once in two weeks. I don’t want to restrict the reporting but I think that would be often enough.”

“I don’t recall any candidate for President who ever injured himself very much by not talking.”

“I haven’t any specific reports about any states [in the campaign of 1924]. My reports indicate that I shall probably carry Northampton [his home town]. That is based more on experience.”

Asked about a book which he hadn’t read, he was reminded of a reviewer who said he never read a book before he reviewed it, because it might prejudice him.

Asked about a General Hines, he said he wondered if it didn’t refer to a Major Hines. But in that case he was in the position of a man who was asked by a stranger for the location of a macaroni factory. The man asked if it might not be rather the noodles factory. The stranger agreed it could be. “Well, I don’t know where that is either.”

These nuggets could not be quoted or ascribed. He kept reminding them of that. “It seems that it is necessary to have eternal vigilance to keep that from being done.”

He often makes little jokes about the assiduous correspondents and their hard work. He suggests they ought to be paid more. He quips one day about “a great many questions today, but I find that many are duplicates or triplicates or other cates.” He is pleased to find his chore thus lightened. But he is insistent on his anonymity. Stuck with this, the correspondents soon invented a “White House spokesman” as authority for what they gleaned from Mr. Coolidge. But Mr. Coolidge got on to that and scotched it.

“Of course it is a violation of the understanding to say that the spokesman said so and so and put in quotations on that. I think it would be a good plan to drop that reference to these conferences. It never was

authorized...one might as well say that the President said so and so...it is perfectly apparent that when the word [spokesman] is used it means the President.”

He then refused to let them use anything about his objection to the spokesman. “It was just said for the information of the conference. That part of the conference we will consider carried on in executive session.” Thus he puts off-the-record even a reference to being off-the-record.

When he caught someone taking down his remarks in shorthand, he objected. “What I say here is not to be taken down in shorthand. Otherwise it interferes with my freedom of expression.”

He objected at times to the way press conference information was used. “...They are not in any sense interviews to be given out by the press, or statements...but simply information that I give to the press in order that it may intelligently write reports and comments about the subjects that I dwell on....”

He resolutely refused even such an occasional request of an exception as to quote his views on baseball, which must have struck the correspondents as unique.

(Here is Mr. Coolidge on baseball. This is August 1924, an exceptional season, for the Washington Senators are in contention as the pennant race comes down toward the wire.)

President—I suppose the Washington baseball team is the one that represents the whole nation. The others have some local claims. That which comes from the city of Washington, I suppose, represents the nation in its entirety more than any other team. If it should be so fortunate as to secure first place, in that respect I suppose it would be more agreeable to the whole nation than that which could be secured by having any local team win the pennant. I don’t know as I can make any statement about the present condition of our team that hasn’t been made by someone else. I am not an expert on baseball, though I enjoy the game. I haven’t made any plans yet about at-

tending the World Series, but should that be the case I assume that it goes without saying that I would want to see the opening game.

Press—Mr. President, would it be permissible to quote that remark about baseball?

President—No, I don’t think so.

Withal, he claimed to enjoy these press sessions, and one can imagine it was a welcome change of pace, a chance to talk to people who weren’t after something, who were certainly a brighter and livelier crowd than the political hacks left to him by the Harding administration. And they might just happen to hit upon some question a President ought to be hep to.

Sometimes he even solicited their opinion, once when he was looking for a new Secretary of the Navy in place of Mr. Denby, whom he refused to fire for ceding the naval oil reserves to private interests but was certainly relieved to have resign. He told the reporters he wanted a good administrator, out of business. If they knew of one, he’d be glad of any suggestion. The ensuing appointment of Ray Lyman Wilbur was a press conference suggestion, according to the editors.

When he had to go to Gettysburg, he asked the correspondents’ judgment whether by train or car. Told the railroad was a rocky prospect, Coolidge opined that if they knew they had the press on board, the railroad should be apt to be solicitous in its service. As to what he was going to put into his inaugural address: “I don’t know. If any of you think of anything that ought to be covered, I should be obliged if you would suggest it.”... ■

*Louis M. Lyons, former Nieman Curator, uses “The Talkative President: The Off-the-Record Press Conferences of Calvin Coolidge,” as a springboard to write about the President and the press. The book is edited by Howard H. Quint and Robert H. Ferrell, University of Massachusetts Press.*

March 1966

# Custodians of the City

BY HARRY S. ASHMORE

I was in Greenville when the age of electronic journalism first came creeping in, and I have always thought that a kind of monument was erected there on the old Piedmont by my first Managing Editor, the late A. T. McCain. He was an appropriate man to do it, too—for he was one of that old breed that started out as Morse operators. He claimed to have been deafened by the telegraph key, but it was a wonderfully selective deafness. He could detect the sound of a cork popping at a hundred yards, but he couldn't hear anybody from the business office, and he could make out the composing room foreman only when he said "yes."

Mr. Mac's great moment came when the Piedmont got into the radio business and erected a 300-foot tower out on Hogback Mountain. Word came down that a picture of this marvel had to go on the front page. The cut came back from the engravers one column wide and 19 inches deep, and Mr. Mac headed for the saw. He put the top three inches on page one and jumped the rest to the truss ads. His response to the outraged cries from the front office always seemed to me a model of elementary logic.

"The damned thing looked the same all the way up and down."

Well, broadcasting still looks pretty much the same all the way up and down. But it has certainly grown sideways, and shoved a good many newspapers over the edge in the process....

On my own balance sheet, you [newspaper editors] are doing a little better than you used to—but I can't say that it is really your fault. On the news side some of you finally seem to have recognized that you can only meet your electronic competition on the Texas League principle—you've got to hit 'em where they ain't. And one place they conspicuously are not in providing a systematic, comprehensive run-

ning interpretation of what's going on in the world. They'll get there first with the bits and pieces of news, and they'll swamp you on a really big set piece like a political convention, but they're not going to get out there and meet you in between. The broadcasting business isn't even up to puberty yet, and it's already so fat that it won't put out the money and effort—and endure the controversy—required by fully effective use of its great documentary capacity. It's a lot more profitable, and a lot safer, to give Dave Brinkley another 15 minutes of film clips and six more commercials than it is to turn him loose among our spreading social ills with a camera crew.

What this means is that broadcasting has settled down as a mass entertainment industry, with just a little frosting of news and public affairs programming. This may turn out to be in the public interest, convenience and necessity after all if it forces newspaper editors to go back to their original business, where you can still offer a unique service—back to the news and commentary trade.

Hard news, interpretation and advocacy—that's where you can set the pace and broadcasting can't meet you on your own terms. The morning newspaper I read these days is one that has recognized this elementary truth and set out to act upon it. Of course, the Los Angeles Times did not impair its financial health when it merged out the morning competition in the country's biggest megalopolis. But, still, the Times is surrounded by no less than 11 television channels and a body of glassy-eyed citizens who seem to be natural-born TV viewers. The editors meet this condition by putting together a complete, well-written news report, backed up by expert comment on every serious subject from art to zoology. They have done this by (1) meeting the sal-

ary competition for first-rate talent, no matter the source, and (2) making room to use the result by throwing out most of the junk that used to clutter the paper, and by the best and tightest departmental organization I have seen anywhere.

The fact is that hard, cold cash register considerations now demand that every metropolitan newspaper cut out the trivia and treat seriously with its readers. Lou Harris has defined a highly significant area where the television audience is in retrograde—among people who are educated and have money enough to pay for something richer than bland television fare. The Harris poll reports:

"TV appears to be losing its audience among adults who have been to college, whose incomes are \$10,000 or over, and among suburban residents."

This ought to suggest several things to the most obtuse newspaper business office—one of them being that there is a core readership that can pay a high enough circulation rate to offset the mass advertising income lost to television. And since it's a class audience it ought to be possible to jack up the rates for the advertising you do have left—on the demonstrable theory that only newspapers are reaching the big spenders.

Acting on this principle, newspapers undoubtedly will become leaner—which, I am told, is good for the health. But I think they also need to become meaner. If Lou Harris is correct, you have inherited by default the dependence of respectable citizens who go to college, live in the suburbs, and acquire more than their share of worldly goods. But you should not allow this to obscure the most profound truth I ever heard uttered before ASNE in my years as an active member—Jonathan Daniels' admonition that journalism is *not* a respectable business. It would be an interesting exercise to see how many newspapers have foundered on the fatal error made by a publisher who stood in the bar of his country club and thought he was listening to the voice of the people. And now we have entered a remarkable era of expense accounts

so flexible the fellow standing at the club bar next to the publisher is likely to be his editor.

You can't justify your existence—and your special immunities under the Constitution—even with a superlative news report. You're also supposed to be advocates. And this side of utopia, when you advocate something really important, and do so effectively, you're going to split your following and outrage a good many of your customers, and very probably they're going to be among your most important and influential customers.

Let us not leave this profound but abstract truth dangling in the air. Let me suggest to you the urgent, continuing assignment that confronts every editor of a newspaper of consequence.

You gentlemen are the ultimate custodians of The City.

It is possible, of course, that we may get blown up by a hydrogen bomb. But it is also possible that we may not be lucky enough to enjoy so neat and simple an ultimate solution—and that we will continue to have to live in those urban complexes that constitute your circulation territories.

If all of you decided to leave foreign policy to The New York Times and Walter Lippmann I wouldn't be unduly alarmed....

But when we come to The City—that presumed refuge of all the gods of our culture—you gentlemen are indispensable. This is your domain. A newspaper will certainly reflect the character of the community it serves, and if it is to survive I suggest that the metropolitan newspaper will also have to accept the obligation of shaping the character of that community.

You face real if fragmented competition on the national scene—from network TV and from magazines and books. But there in the city, and metropolitan, and all other zones where you and the circulation manager live, the newspaper is the only responsible

voice.

I suppose, in charity, I should note the possibility that there are cities where broadcasters are performing notable local public services and providing strong local leadership in public affairs. I can only say that I don't know of any. I most often find local TV, such as it is, a kind of obscene caricature of

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**It would be an interesting exercise to see how many newspapers have foundered on the fatal error made by a publisher who stood in the bar of his country club and thought he was listening to the voice of the people.**

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network TV. Local broadcast news, as I encounter it around the country, usually consists of 60-second airport interviews with people affluent enough to afford the services of a public relations firm. Since the interviewer ordinarily spends more time on camera than the subject, the only lasting impression I take away is that TV newsmen have remarkably good teeth.

No, you don't have any local competition in your role as custodian of your city's conscience—and no national competition either, since the meddling outsiders come in only when you have a political convention, a race riot, or some other natural disaster. Your ambulant colleagues take off once order is restored, and that, of course, is precisely when things get tough for a newspaper that accepts its obligation to tell the community not only how and why it went wrong, but what it ought to do about it, and where it is likely to go wrong next time.

...You can look out your office window and see your city pockmarked by all the signs of decay—physical, social and moral. It may be that most of your subscribers have blacked out these sights, planted them out with shrubbery in the comfortable refuges of suburbia. But you know what's there—and you know what it means.

What it means is that we are not going to do anything effective about the cities until we tackle the problems of land use head-on. That means taking a new look at property taxes. It means taking a look at the manner in which the real estate promoters use land for what they happily call "tax shelter"—the whole system for interlocking state and federal taxes and exemptions and write-offs that seem to put a premium on bad land use and a penalty on good land use. It means really effective planning and zoning, with all the outraged cries of mother, home and free enterprise this is bound to evoke. It means a willingness to go to the mat with the landowners, the

speculators, the promoters, the lending institutions, and all their fuglemen in and out of public office. It means, in short, taking on the richest and most influential people in town.

Why should you? Well, if for no higher reason, because the metropolitan press is the only agency that has a vested short- and long-range interest in making the American metropolis habitable. If you don't do it, nobody will.

So, gentlemen, this is your assignment for today, and for this year, and the next, unless, of course, you decide to join the parade and sign on as editor of the shopping guide that has just become a new suburban daily out in West Euphoria. In that case you may have as much as 10 years left before the smog comes and automobiles glut the shopping centers—just about enough time, that is, to work your blood pressure up to a level suitable for residence in John Birch country. ■

*Mr. Ashmore, a 1942 Nieman Fellow, is Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions and is Director of Editorial Research of the Encyclopedia Britannica. This is an address he delivered to the American Society of Newspaper Editors.*



Winter 1978

# Uphill All the Way

BY ALDEN WHITMAN

...Having been introduced to newspaper work on a thriving paper that received its United States and world reports by Morse code—when the telegraphers actually used a Prince Albert tobacco tin for sound amplification as they typed copy on their Underwood No. Fives—I have never ceased to marvel at more advanced means of copy transmission.

Although teleprinters have supplanted telegraphers and the wonderful sound of Morse is heard no more, the tap-tap-tap of typewriters persisted in city rooms across the country until a year or so ago. Now those machines are being phased out in favor of electronic gizmos, by means of which reporters and deskmen create and shape stories silently—and without paper. Apart from the hazards to eyesight inherent in these beasts, they strike me as portending the demise of classy newspaper writing.

I cannot conceive how it is possible to compose an intricate news or news-feature story without thought or reflection upon its structure and wording. There are the inevitable false starts, leads that improve with reworking, paragraphs that brighten with polishing. Traditionally, a story of any degree of complexity and class was the result of an almost mystical interaction between the writer, his typewriter, and a pile of copy paper. Now this harmony is on the way out.

Electronic writing accounts, I believe, for the decline of newspaper prose so evident in the country's newspapers. More and more stories are being written with one sentence per paragraph. Words are employed repetitiously, mindless adjectives are tossed like radishes garnishing a salad in which the lettuce is all iceberg. The anguish and pleasure is being taken out of writing.

Writing on a piece of paper in a

typewriter somehow lends an illusion of permanence to one's prose. Writing noiselessly on a screen, on the other hand, reinforces the temporality of one's endeavors. Push the wrong button, God help you, and the words disappear forever.

In a city room, there are limits to the benefits of technology—assuming that reporters, deskmen and editors are eager to produce stories both informative and literate....

Where is it written that editors alone decide what is worth covering? Where is it written that city hall or the White House are the best beats in town? Where is it written that reporters are creatures of their editors? Despite the prevalence of college degrees, reporters often fail to make the most of events around them; they are too often lazy and superficial; they are unwilling to be outsiders, to be tough, to work for their readers. In this respect not much has changed in 50 years. Yes, conditions of work are better, wages are higher, and professionalism as measured by formal education has increased—but good gut reporting remains a scarce commodity....

The effects of absentee ownership have blighted newspaper people increasingly over the last 50 years. The Hearst chain gang system that dominated the '20's and '30's has been considerably modified; more and more papers are coming under the ownership of fewer and fewer corporations. Within the Hearst system (like that of Scripps Howard and others) each paper was a likeness, with minor modifications, of the flagship paper. In modern times, however, that practice has all but been abandoned in favor of local coloration and absentee book-keeping.

In order to show a good profit, this has led to a noticeable tendency to do things on the cheap. The profit, not the

product, is too often the owner's measure of his newspaper. When a paper in Florida has its owners in New York, the pages tend to run lean in news matter and heavy in the ads. With very few exceptions, such newspapers are not likely to be provocative in their coverage or in their editorial policies.

Growing with the shift in the ownership pattern of daily papers has been the suburban press, a weakling 50 years ago. The well-known flight of middle class whites from cities has engendered boom times for suburban papers. Increasingly, however, these are not independent, but links in some corporate chain. Thus, the papers in suburban Chicago, for example, are owned by just a few companies, and the same is true for New York.

What is truly worrisome about the concentration of press ownership in relatively few corporations is that this situation tends to put a lock on meaningful press freedom. In the days of the founders, it was relatively simple and inexpensive to start and sustain a paper; now, however, it is difficult and costly. How much more difficult and expensive it will be to buck an entrenched corporation remains to be seen. Monopolies are never easy to budge, and I suspect that monopoly power, as exemplified in corporate control, does not bode well for press freedom.

If my views are more saturnine than roseate, it is because I would like to see the United States a land of feisty newspapers, written and edited by men and women of independent mind and skeptical spirit, to whom nothing is sacred except their responsibility to report their times forthrightly. After all, a reporter's ultimate employer is not the publisher of the newspaper, but rather its readers; they should be served with holy zeal. By doing so, every reporter will uphold the First Amendment. ■

*Mr. Whitman is a freelance book critic whose reviews appear in newspapers all over the United States. He wrote for The New York Times for 25 years.*

Summer 1979

# Covering the Women's Movement

BY PEGGY A. SIMPSON

When the modern women's movement emerged in the early 1960's the bulk of the mass media met it with disbelief and ridicule. Headlines talked about "libbers" and "bra burners." Nearly every woman in the public eye was asked if she believed in "women's lib"—most denied vehemently any association with the movement.

Despite this opposition, the movement prospered and spread beyond the most extravagant predictions of the Betty Friedans and Gloria Steinems. The story involved what was happening to the family, to schools, to churches and to the entire world of work and government policy, not just what President Carter was doing to Bella Abzug. In other words, despite the scornful views of many editors and reporters, the story became too big to ignore or belittle.

From the first stirrings of feminism, conflicts arose within the journalism profession about how this story of great social change should be handled. The civil rights movement for blacks had caused disputes in newsrooms where the story was ignored; the civil rights movement for women created similar problems. The friction often involved individual women reporters and the virtually all-male management about the assigning, editing and display of stories concerning the women's movement. Newspapers frequently dismissed crusaders for civil rights as outside agitators or communists. Similarly, the leaders of the women's movement were often branded as loonies, lesbians or sex-crazed libbers, and made the butt of crude cartoons and office jokes. Yet in a relatively short span of time, vast changes occurred in attitudes about women and their day-to-day treatment.

How did these changes happen at a time when most editors and news man-

agers thought the movement was a joking matter? How did the message of the demonstrators—and of the conservatively clad but increasingly militant members of professional women's groups—reach the country as a whole? How did the public learn about the first breakthroughs?

At first, most serious news about the conditions underlying the demonstrations appeared on the women's pages, and gradually crowded out the more traditional coverage of society balls and debutantes. Stories appeared about quotas that had excluded qualified women from graduate schools, medical and law programs; about law firms that refused to hire women attorneys, about on-the-job discrimination, about the poverty of families headed by women, and about rape and violence toward women.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, however, many newspapers revolutionized their women's pages by replacing spot news with a stylized feature format. Some papers gave more in-depth coverage to issues than to developments concerning women and fami-

lies. One unforeseen consequence of this change was the disappearance from many papers of much day-to-day coverage of the women's movement. This news was squeezed out of women's pages and was not accepted in the rest of the paper's space allotted to general news. Many veterans of the women's movement credit Elizabeth Shelton of The Washington Post with having written the most comprehensive and thoroughly researched articles on the mid-1960's emergence of the Status of Women commissions and the creation of federal women's commissions in every state in the country. But when the Post dropped its conventional women's pages and led the national move toward a new "Style" section the paper literally abandoned any systematic coverage of the women's movement.

Gradually a small group of national news reporters centered in Washington began to build up expertise in feminist issues. Eileen Shanahan, then an economics reporter with The New York Times (now Assistant Managing Editor of the Washington Star), recalls getting a telephone call from an unknown woman attorney in New York who told her that a major constitutional amendment was scheduled to be voted on before the House of Representatives within a week and that The New York Times had run only one five-

September 1971

## The Xerox and the Pentagon

BY HERBERT KUPFERBERG

...To the office secretary, the Xerox machine is the greatest invention since the coffee break. In an instant, carbon paper has been made obsolete. True, many offices, including my own, constantly exhort the girls to continue using carbon paper for routine tasks, but what girl in her right mind is going to waste her time—and soil her fingers—with that stuff, when it's possible to re-

cline gracefully against the Xerox, watching the copies spew out and passing the time of day with other girls awaiting their turn at the machine? ■

*Mr. Kupferberg, Associate Editor of Parade, is a former Editor for the Arts for The New York Herald Tribune.*

paragraph story on it.

Disbelieving at first, Ms. Shanahan checked out the story, and subsequently covered the ERA debate herself. Later that year, 1971, she compiled the first national statistics of women in the law (only 9,103 women lawyers out of 324,818 law school graduates; only four women had been clerks for Supreme Court justices; many barriers prevented women from entering law school), and did another groundbreaking survey of the many suits women were winning by citing the little-known federal laws that prohibited sex discrimination in employment.

From his perspective as a labor reporter, James Hyatt of *The Wall Street Journal*, at that time in the newspaper's

Cleveland bureau, wrote some of the first comprehensive stories about women and work. Charlotte Saikowski, then a reporter and now Chief of the Editorial Page of *The Christian Science Monitor*, was another pioneer who covered the women's movement.

Vera Glaser, now a correspondent with Knight Ridder Newspapers, was one of the first reporters to question a President about the scarcity of women named to high federal positions. In early 1969 Ms. Glaser, then Washington Bureau Chief of the North American Newspaper Alliance, asked President Nixon at his second news conference "whether we can expect a more equitable recognition of women's abilities or are we going to remain a lost sex?" She noted that he had filled about 200 top-level federal jobs and that only three appointees had been women. The reporters tittered, Nixon looked startled, and then said he would name more. Ms. Glaser said that the mail and telephone calls generated by the exchange prompted her New York editor to ask her to write a comprehensive five-part series about the women's movement. The stories, which were used in about 50 newspapers, dealt with women's lack of economic and political power; Supreme Court rulings that held women were not equal under the Constitution, and the emergence of national groups lobbying for changes. Indirectly, the question also prompted the creation of a White House task force on women monitored by Arthur Burns, Nixon's senior counselor.

Other Washington reporters who developed specialties in the

women's movement at this pivotal time included Isabelle Shelton of the *Washington Star*, Frances Lewine of the *Associated Press*, Barbara Katz with the *National Journal*, Marlene Cimonis of the *Los Angeles Times's* Washington bureau, Helen Thomas and later Sara Fritz of *United Press International*, and Kay Mills of *Newhouse Newspapers*.

Most of these reporters covered the women's movement on a volunteer basis, in addition to their regular beats at the Labor Department, the Treasury Department, the White House or Congress. The stories were based on information from sources they had developed within the emerging network of women's groups. Editors rarely assigned the issues mainly because they still didn't see the movement as significant and worthy of serious and continuous coverage. Whatever was printed was the result of the reporters' initiative and conviction.

Around the country, other women reporters—most of them young—were getting stories into their newspapers and having occasional luck in persuading their editors to send them to the first national conventions of the National Organization for Women and the National Women's Political Caucus.

On television, Barbara Walters was not only a featured interviewer on the "Today" show but also she added a half-hour interview show of her own, "Not for Women Only," that NBC syndicated across the country. It treated seriously and in depth issues then surfacing as a result of the women's movement—issues that affected men and society as a whole, not just women.

Marlene Sanders of ABC was a pioneer in producing serious documentaries about health and legal issues involving women.

Sylvia Chase of CBS, at her own request, began to add coverage of women's national political meetings to her regular national reporting beats. Many local shows appeared, some modeled after Mary Catherine Kilday's "Woman Is" production begun in 1973, on WRC in Washington, D.C.

In my own case, I edited a weekly



The head of the Venezuelan delegation to the 1975 International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City receives a message from a colleague. *Photo courtesy of The Associated Press.*

paper in Hondo, Texas, after college, joined the AP in Dallas in 1962, and rotated between that bureau and the state legislative bureau in Austin. In 1968, I was transferred to the Washington AP to cover the Southwest regional beat from the Capitol. At that time I had not reported on any major elements of the early women's liberation marches and had never met anyone who called herself a feminist. I did know a lobbyist from the Texas chapter of Business and Professional Women who was unsuccessfully trying to get a state Equal Rights Amendment passed. She never approached me, during my two terms covering the Texas Legislature, and I never called her, so a persuasive state senator easily assured me that women would be in terrible straits if Texas's

protective labor laws and community property laws were altered by the ERA.

Coming from a general news background—and having fought vigorously to avoid the debutante-society pages where most women reporters were isolated—I was irritated, on arriving in Washington, to find that only the women on the AP staff were assigned to stories relating to women. Although a few accounts about the successful breakthroughs of women in various fields were being written, most were about wives of famous men.

In the fall of 1971 I got a call from Deborah Leff, a staff aide at the newly organized National Women's Political Caucus. She urged me to cover a Capitol Hill meeting between some founders of the caucus and Lawrence

O'Brien, then chairman of the Democratic National Committee. The caucus was launching its move to use the party's new reform rules to get more women delegates elected to the national convention. That first story led to many others as presidential candidates, one after another, agreed to put women on their delegate slates, thus altering the make-up of the Democratic convention and moving women onto front-page political stories.

I thought of myself not as a feminist but as a reporter covering a good news story that, for some reason, almost all my male colleagues had ignored. The AP did not at first assign me to the Democratic convention, despite the fact that during the preceding six months dozens of my stories had dealt with the

Summer 1979

## Yes Virginia, There Is an Agnes

BY JEROME AUMENTE

...Louis M. Lyons, as Nieman Curator, continually struggled against the ban on women from the program. His correspondence with the University administration in the early 1940's shows that he was frankly puzzled by its adamant position prohibiting women applicants. Eventually this musty, ill-defined tradition would fall to dust and brittle pieces when given a good shaking, but someone had to rattle it.

Lyons was not overly optimistic. In a letter to The New Republic's Bruce Bliven as late as 1943—five years after the start of the program—he showed his pessimism. While recommending people for possible jobs at the magazine, he included a list of qualified women. "If this sounds as if I am in a strong feminist mood," Lyons writes, "I am. I tried to break down the Nieman guards to admit women candidates this year and got my ears pinned back by J. B. Conant. I have a feeling that we are going to need more Anne O'Hare McCormicks and Dorothy Thompsons

in journalism in the future. But I guess we aren't going to bring them to Harvard. I don't know why The New Republic shouldn't do something about it."...

When Lyons asked Conant about admitting women to the Nieman program, he recalled the president's answer: "Why, you serve whiskey at those Nieman dinners, don't you? Let's not complicate it. It's going to be all right, isn't it?"

Conant had a crystal ball in his office with "No" painted on the bottom, which he consulted when approached on dubious projects. But Professor Schlesinger and Curator Lyons were not impressed. They hammered away until the president yielded with a parting admonition to Lyons: "The blood be on your head."

Mary Ellen Leary was used to hesitation about letting women into traditionally stag domains. She was an experienced political reporter for the San Francisco News when she applied to

the Nieman program. Frank Clarvoe, Editor of the News, nominated her for the Fellowship in 1943, and Lyons wrote back that he was greatly interested in the application and pleaded for time to check whether there was "an attitude against women as Fellows or a deep-rooted policy that really prevents their being considered."

The cover of the March 12, 1948 issue of Fortnight, a California news magazine, depicted Mary Ellen Leary at her typewriter with her coffee cup nearby and her desk piled high with paper debris. In the magazine's press section was a long story with a one column cut and the cutline: "A fine girl—except that she is a woman." (I leave that for 1979 readers to puzzle over.)

The column began:

"The boys in Sacramento were pretty skeptical when the San Francisco News sent a woman to cover the 1945 Legislature. But last week, as she returned for her third legislative session, they recognized that the only woman political editor of a major daily paper in California knows her job."

The article continued to describe Ms. Leary as "tireless...but deceptively frail. Her toughness, even her brass, surprise those who have not seen her

battle by women and minorities for more delegate seats. I was astounded. I was puzzled that a reporter who had become a specialist in an important area was not assigned to follow the story wherever it led—in this case, to the national political conventions. Clearly, my editors and other media executives did not consider the women's political movement to be a bona fide story meriting continuing and expert coverage.

Other reporters were getting the same signal. Nevertheless, despite the added workload and lack of appreciation from top management, some of us continued to write about the women's movement.

Why? Because the story became progressively better and led in directions

in action. Yet when she enters a press conference late the boys all rise as though the queen herself has just stepped in. Such chivalry bespeaks respect plus a touch of ingrown, male envy."

And those whiskey-ridden stag dinners came up again. It seems that the Capitol Press Association gave an annual stag dinner at the Governor's mansion. Mary Ellen Leary had not been invited. The president of the association received forthwith a searing note from her: "As representative of the News I expect to be invited to every party, but as a woman I don't intend to go to any of them." The magazine reported that she won the battle, was invited, and later on even attended a few dinners.

In a long and thoughtful review of her 1945-1946 Nieman year Mary Ellen Leary recalls the advice of Virginia Woolf, who wrote in 1929 that if a woman wanted to write fiction she needed, at minimum, a room and 500 pounds per year.

Mary Ellen writes: "I would add, as a symbol of a new step in feminine recognition, this nearly 20 years later (1946), that for real equality now a woman must also have the right, or the possibility at least, of admission to

unforeseen a decade before. But editors still did not recognize its significance and, as a result, many of the benchmarks of change in the 1960's and 1970's were ignored—even by the self-assigned specialists.

Some of these unreported milestones included the three Supreme Court rulings on cases from Georgia, Indiana and California striking down state laws that, since the early 1920's, had restricted work opportunities for women. These cases were filed by women on assembly lines who were blocked from better paying jobs because state laws limited the hours they could work or the weight they could lift. The nullification of these laws had sweeping consequences and opened up whole new worlds of work for

Harvard....

"...Curiously enough, Mrs. Woolf's essay opens as though she had anticipated this very year of Nieman's first acceptance of women. Her charming essay, 'A Room of One's Own,' on women's limited opportunities through history, takes flight at the very point when she is barred from admission to the library of a famous English university."

Virginia Woolf described her attempt to enter the library: "...[the] door was blocked by a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library accompanied by a Fellow of the college or furnished with a letter of introduction...."

Mary Ellen Leary realizes the significance of her own admittance—as a Nieman Fellow—to the main reading room of Widener.

"Whatever distress this caused the patient puzzled clerks at the desk and whatever exceedingly small distraction it may have offered students of the other sex, the damage is adequately offset, I think, by the gain for women in all time, all kinds of activity, all future

women.

During congressional action on the 1964 Civil Rights Act, opponents added a ban on sex discrimination in an unsuccessful attempt to kill the entire bill. The gesture was seen as a political joke—by editors, reporters and news executives as well as by members of Congress. Years passed before the real implications and possibilities of the sex discrimination provision became clear and were analyzed seriously by the media.

Many law professors, like Martha Fields, who teaches a "Women and the Law" course at Harvard, contend that courts are using a double standard to measure race and sex discrimination. Many public officials and much of the media suffer from this dual vision. An

efforts at self-development and self-expression.

"Because Charlotte and I were Nieman's, sloshing in quite ordinary fashion through Harvard Yard and up the icy library steps to enter Widener cloaked in every 'privilege of the University,' every other door becomes just a little easier for women to enter. I think we sensed this, while we defied anyone taking note of it," Leary writes.... ■

*Mary Ellen Leary and Charlotte L. FitzHenry were the first two women admitted as Nieman Fellows. This was in 1945 and today, until one looks at the time and the context, it seems odd even to note such an occurrence as something special.*

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illustration of this is the furor that ensued after Frances Lewine of the Associated Press asked President Ford a two-part question at a televised news conference. She wondered if he agreed with the guidelines laid down by his administration against federal officials patronizing segregated facilities. After Ford said that he did, she asked why he continued to play golf every week at the exclusive Burning Tree Country Club, which no longer barred blacks but still refused to admit women. Ford answered with a caustic quip about golfing and quickly took another question. According to desk editors at the AP, the New York executives were upset that the question was even asked. Ms. Lewine says her subsequent removal from the AP's White House staff may have dated back to that query. Ford's Press Secretary, Ronald Nessen, in a book about his White House years, called her question "the worst misuse of a question at a presidential news conference to advocate a personal point of view."

Over the years, it also became clear that reporter specialization in the women's movement or its many related issues was not as valued by the management as much as expertise in civil rights, labor or environmental issues. National and international political forums about the changing role of women were treated as feature stories, rather than serious news events.

When the United Nations held an international conference on women in Mexico City in 1975, almost none of the major newspapers sent their specialists in the women's movement—among those absent were Shanahan of the Times, Shelton of the Washington Star, Cimos of the Los Angeles Times, Glaser of Knight Ridder or Fritz of UPI. Instead, the Times and The Washington Post sent reporters who wrote eminently readable feature stories—but who failed to interpret or underscore the significance of the events. The television networks sent crews to cover most of the conference but fo-

cused on conflicts or featured events. National Public Radio sent a reporter-producer team, Linda Wertheimer and Kathy Primus, who broadcast special wide-ranging reports on women from around the world and their problems.

But I was practically the only reporter sent from Washington who was experienced in covering the U.S. women's movement and who had written on the international status of women. My experiences in Mexico City showed that, despite a commitment by top AP editors in New York to treat the conference as a serious story, everyday pitfalls and problems tended to trivialize the meeting.

When I got there, other AP staff

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**'I tried to break down the Nieman guards to admit women candidates this year and got my ears pinned back by [Harvard President] J.B. Conant.'**—Louis M. Lyons

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members already had written stories about arriving dignitaries. The stories usually revolved around such questions as to whether or not they liked the title "Ms." My own opening day conference story, which was discarded, included background on the scope of women's problems throughout the world and reported Mexican President Luis Echeverria's unusually strong keynote address appealing for equality for women everywhere. In its place, under my byline, was a flowery feature story picked up from a Mexico City paper about the sex appeal of the Soviet woman cosmonaut who led her country's delegation to the conference.

Ordered to put aside a serious story about the frank admission by the chief Cuban delegate, Vilma Espin, that male chauvinism still was a problem in her revolutionary socialist state, I was assigned instead to interview U.S. sex symbol Burt Reynolds, who was in town promoting a film, about his views on "liberated women."

But the most frustrating incident involved a photograph of half a dozen Mexican and Argentine women struggling over a microphone. The incident had no relevance to the proceedings—but it made a dramatic photo and was circulated around the world with a caption about "women fighting at the International Women's Conference." I first knew of the photo 10 hours after its release when New York requested a story to explain the conflict. Since the dispute was extremely parochial—and involved only six women out of six thousand at the conference—there was no story. Unfortunately, that photo was the most widely distributed picture of the conference, and helped to rein-

force a stereotype in the minds of many editors and people in general that women can't get along and that they resolve conflict by shouting and pulling hair.

Later, in 1976, at a conference on women at the University of Texas, Australian feminist and former cabinet member Elizabeth Reid described with sarcasm and

emotion the expectations of many Australian politicians that she would further her career in government through the use of cosmetics and sex. A UPI story of that speech twisted her bitter recollections into recommendations to women that they use sex and beauty to get ahead. The National News Council ruled foul play—and UPI promised to do better.

In the past decade the coverage of women's new roles in society has changed dramatically. More women are among the previously all-male ranks of economic, political and diplomatic reporters. A few have moved up to become editors and publishers. Most local television news programs have at least one anchorwoman and more women are producing and reporting on network news. Advertisements now are beginning to show women in careers and in charge of more than eradicating "ring around the collar."

In new stylebooks, the AP, UPI, The New York Times and The Washington

Post all have adopted far-ranging provisions to eliminate stereotypical and condescending references to women. And that most respected of business newspapers, *The Wall Street Journal*, recently completed the most thorough series to date on the impact of the women's revolution.

But that is not to say there are not problems ahead. This is partly a problem of success: Many editors think the problems are solved, now that there have been a few women in the cabinet, more women named to judgeships, and nearly every level of job has had its "first woman." Many other editors say the women's movement isn't a story anymore because the conflict and drama have diminished....

A question remains: Can the movement continue to make its case with the news media, let alone the general public? Can it educate reporters and, via the newspapers, tell the nation about the inequities that still remain and, in some cases, are worsening? Are the enormous changes throughout society affecting men as strongly as women, or seen as significant enough for editors to assign reporters to monitor them? Are new writers developing the expertise to go beyond personality conflicts between the White House and activists to report on conditions facing women in factories and typing pools, about the resentments of men facing serious challenges for jobs from women, about the anger of millions of women isolated in low-paid, dead-end work ghettos? Are reporters aware of the new frontier facing many women in professional jobs, or concerned about the conflicts between careers and personal relationships?

Many of the journalists who became early experts on the women's movement have left the reporting field, although some now have wider influence as editors. For many who remain, there is increasing tension between the reporters and the feminists they cover, as conflicts develop within the movement over strategies for the future. There are fresh versions of the classic reporter's dilemma: how to be close enough to know what's really

happening in a situation without being too close to report it objectively.

My own experiences illustrate this point. Last year, I wrote two stories which earned me considerable enmity from some leaders of major women's groups. One concerned presidential assistant Midge Costanza, who was being eased out of her job as advisor to President Carter about women and other groups outside the power structure. I wrote that she was fired not because she opposed Carter's policies limiting federal funds for abortions for poor women, nor because she criticized Carter's friend Bert Lance, but because she was not competent in her job. A subsequent story told of opposition from Rosalynn Carter and her daughter-in-law Judy Carter to the nomination of Bella Abzug, but subsequent events bore out the basic animosity of this administration towards her. In both cases, I was told by leading feminists that I shouldn't have written these stories even if they were true.

Last summer, during the lobbying for an extension of time for the ERA, Marlene Cimens of the *Los Angeles Times* followed a delegation of West Coast women as they talked to members of Congress. She received criticism for her story, which reported on the clumsy and arrogant tactics of the group. She had not known the encounters would turn out that way—and in fact told office colleagues about her personal uneasiness and the contradicting pressures she felt—but she wrote the news as it happened.

Other stories are not being written about the women's movement because reporters are too close to the situation. But most of the important stories are not covered because they would take too much time to develop, and editors do not consider the issues to be front-page material.

When the ERA was clearing Congress, there was very little coverage of it, very little consideration of it as a constitutional amendment with potentially important consequences for all society. Now, with the amendment in trouble and the odds stacked against it for approval, the mass media are again

reacting apathetically.

There are many stories about the conflicts between the pro-ERA and anti-ERA factions—the rhetoric about unisex toilets and women in combat. But where are the analytical, interpretive stories about what the loss of the ERA might mean for the country and for women, specifically? Where are the evaluations of judges' statements that their rulings on pending court cases will be influenced by the nation's decision on the ERA as to whether or not women should have equal constitutional status?

Some other unreported stories are:

- An analysis of the labor market isolation of women either going to work for the first time, or returning after long absences, to low-paid jobs where wages will be kept down indefinitely because of the surplus of women just like themselves.
- Examination of the job market prospects of millions of women who became pregnant in their early teens, dropped out of high school and, with even few educational credentials, will be competing very soon for work.
- An analysis of the far-right conservative strategy to campaign against the ERA and abortion rights as a fundraising and organizing maneuver to then use against the overall labor and civil rights movements.
- An exposé of attempts by socialists to take over leading women's groups as part of the continuing factional dispute over ideological goals.

Many similar stories wait to be written, more research must be pursued, many questions have yet to be asked. Someday we hope there will be no need for specialists in the women's movement and the social changes attributed to it. But for now, only experts are able to cover and interpret a story that is still unfolding. ■

*Peggy A. Simpson, Nieman Fellow 1979, is a congressional correspondent for The Associated Press, Washington, D.C.*

Winter 1983

# Press Performance: Enough Is Too Little

Encouraging words on a new and healthy phenomenon—the press is taking a hard look inward and examining itself.

BY EUGENE C. PATTERSON

...I bring encouraging word of a relatively new and very healthy phenomenon: The press is taking a hard look inward and actually examining itself. The supposedly arrogant, heedless, nattering nabobs of negativism are engaged in a searching review of their practices, if not their consciences.

The argument isn't bringing much agreement, thank heaven....

I wonder if the general public is aware of the depth of this debate that is going on within the press. Television has reduced so much of human discourse to superficial scripts of conflict and flickering entertainments that this quiet and critical debate, one editor to another, may not have been adequately noted in the last year or so.

Every editor could see and discount the many weaknesses in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's arguments in his 1978 commencement address at Harvard. But few could or did miss the uncomfortable closeness to truth in Solzhenitsyn's observation that "hastiness and superficiality—these are the psychic diseases of the 20th Century, and more than anywhere else this is manifested in the press." The pitiless Russian went on: "In-depth analysis of a problem is anathema to the [U.S.] press; it is contrary to its nature. The press merely picks out sensational formulas...fashionable trends of thought and ideas are fastidiously separated from those that are unfashionable, and the latter...have little chance of finding their way into periodicals or books or being heard in colleges.

"Your scholars are free in the legal sense," Solzhenitsyn said, "but they are hemmed in by the idols of the prevailing fad.

"...a selection dictated by fashion and the need to accommodate mass standards frequently prevents the most independent-minded persons from contributing to public life and gives rise to a dangerous herd instinct that blocks successful development...[a] self-deluding interpretation of the state of affairs in the contemporary world...functions as a sort of petrified armor around people's minds....

"It will be broken," Solzhenitsyn concluded somberly, "only by the inexorable crowbar of events."

These are heavy words to be loading onto a press that isn't accustomed to looking inward. Self-delusion. Fashionability. Herd instinct. Distortion and disproportion. Hastiness and superficiality. Unmoral judgments. Arrogance. Self-righteousness. Cynicism. If all of this is right, we don't sound like very nice people. But anyone who has worked in Washington will feel some unease under his flail.

Sooner or later the press, if it does its job, delivers an unpopular message to just about everybody and a portion of those offended will always adjudge us as sinful and unclean. But there's another side to just about every one of the allegations, of course. The press serves the public interest doggedly and most often well under heavy blows and unkind pressures that go beyond the imagining of most citizens. And those

justifications of our shortcomings have their place in the constructive debates that should shape our responses.

But consider William Greider's suggestion in his new book: that maybe we're going about our basic business in the wrong way, and that the press "has to reinvent its definition of news."

"The governing impulse is to simplify and startle," Greider said, as he reflected on the hullabaloo he set off in the press as well as the government by writing the candid story of Budget Director David Stockman's thoughts and acts.

Greider concluded the Washington press "communicates much less coherently than it thinks it does."

"The reason for this is that there are fundamental flaws in the ways the news media package reality and convey it to the general population. Americans consume more information about public affairs now than at any previous point in history, yet they do not seem to have gained a deeper understanding of events.... The values slighted are the ones probably most valuable to the consumer: context and comprehension."

How would Greider repair that? "The business of news ought to take responsibility for what the consumers of news understand," he wrote. "I think the audience will understand if reporters try to explain more and startle less..."

"The business of news ought to take responsibility for what the consumers of news understand," Bill Greider said.

That deceptively simple statement goes very deep. In our high-tech time, low-reach news is showered on readers or listeners like a light snow that evaporates on contact. That is not the point of the First Amendment. Unresisted, it is the death of free expression through atrophy....

I personally feel the need for a new inventiveness more strongly now than I did in April 1978 when I told the ASNE, in my farewell talk as outgoing president, the following, which I feel like saying again:

"We are in a period of search and change toward a new dimension of journalism, I believe.



“We remember the generally obedient press born of depression and two world wars, which tended through the 1950’s to respect the authority of established power to define this nation’s purposes and interest.

“We well remember the convulsive switch to adversary journalism in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, when domestic discord and a mistaken war turned the society as well as the press from a general obedience to an adversary sense of fallibility of the powerful institutions we live under.

“This adversary posture made for a sturdier press and a stronger society. It should endure.

“But I sense a current self-examination in the press, addressing the question of whether throwing rocks at authority is enough, or whether better reporting of issues should be added to our investigative approach.

“It might be called explanatory journalism. In that new dimension we would commit to the goal of telling an issue whole—taking greater responsibility for bringing clarity to the pros and cons of it—with simplicity which can only spring from a writer’s comprehension....

“The adversary press, which rebelled against the conformity of the obedient press, can in turn shield itself against a new conformity—that of a mindless anti-authority—by emphasizing a dimension of issue-oriented explanatory journalism that will make us as newly demanding of ourselves, to inform the public on the choices before it, as we have become demanding of authority figures to justify *their* exercise of power.”

Five years later, I feel even more strongly that we must exercise ourselves to explain complexity, as well as to monitor authority. ■

*Eugene C. Patterson, Editor and President of the St. Petersburg (Florida) Times and the Congressional Quarterly, gave the 1983 Press-Enterprise Lecture at the University of California, Riverside.*

Summer 1986

## The Us-First Syndrome

BY SAM ZAGORIA

**F**or whom do reporters write? For the readers?

Well, yes and no.

After two years inside a daily newspaper, I have concluded that among the hundreds of stories each day, there are a few shaped and targeted largely for the eyes of editors of other newspapers.

The “we got it first” boast is a standard ingredient in newspaper conversations. It was tradition when I was reporting and editing at the Post 35 years ago, and time has not diminished its hold. Editors’ competitive juices run fastest when primed by an exclusive. That’s when you see the closed-door story huddles, the staff lawyers poring over every word, the newsroom speculating about what’s up.

Do most readers know or care? I doubt it.

This is an exercise in one-upmanship, played out on the front pages for a journalistic audience.

True, it pushes reporters and editors to dig deeply, to overcome cover-ups and stonewalling, in order to alert readers to facts that sources have chosen to keep hidden. Recent history has shown the Post does the job well, “watchdogging” the public and private sectors—Watergate, the Pentagon papers, Sen. Joe McCarthy or the current Pentagon procurement excesses. The paper has had the courage to print in the face of threats, court proceedings, and some public disfavor.

But is there a downside? Are some stories overplayed simply because a reporter got it first? Are some published even though they are fragments? Are some rushed to print without adequate effort to give the target a chance to respond?...

Is there a danger of a newspaper’s being “used” by a leak-master to discredit a rival or to advance a cause? The

source has all the advantages— anonymity, more attention than if he held a news conference, and a friendly report by a writer who may feel an obligation. The poor reader is rarely alerted as to why the story was leaked, because this may give away the source.

The preoccupation with “first” also affects how the Post deals with stories appearing first in another paper. There is a tendency to discredit or play down—for example, last year’s KGB spy defector story....

Most readers are oblivious to the intramural contests. They read only one paper—New York City papers don’t carry Washington grocery ads or theater times—and readers don’t sit around keeping score on which paper has more “firsts” than another.

A democracy is dependent upon the media for information, information that tells both the bad and the good, of achievement and incompetency, about the decent and the indecent. But editors on all papers have to make sure that the lure of an exclusive story or the added sparkle to a contest entry doesn’t lead to shortchanging the readers.

Take a little longer, but get it all, put it in perspective, give all sides a chance, maybe even force the source to put down the mask. And, if some other newspaper does come up with the story, rise above the sophomoric response. In an era of newspaper monopoly, or near-monopoly, there should be secure editors. If a story appears a day or two later, few Post readers will know or long remember. ■

*Sam Zagoria is a 1955 Nieman Fellow. He is Ombudsman for The Washington Post. ©1986, The Washington Post Writers Group. Reprinted with permission.*

*Summer 1986*

# Standards and Principles

The market for mediocrity has diminished the incentive for excellence.

BY TED KOPPEL

...I don't know what's happened to our standards. I fear that we in the mass media are creating such a market for mediocrity that we've diminished the incentive for excellence. We celebrate notoriety as though it were an achievement. Fame has come to mean being recognized by more people who don't know anything about you. In politics, we have encouraged the displacement of thoughtfulness by the artful cliché. In business, individual responsibility has been defused into corporate non-accountability. In foreign affairs, the tactics of our enemies are used to justify the suspension of our own values. In medicine, the need to be healed is modified by the capacity to pay, and the cost of the cure is a function of the healer's fear of being sued. Which brings us to the law—the very underpinning of our system.

The law is supple and endlessly rich in meaning. It is also being abused as rarely before.

What Isaac Newton discovered to be true in physics is also applicable in human affairs: Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. I fear that unless we restore a sense of genuine

value to what we do in each of our chosen professions, we will find that even the unprecedented flexibility of the American system can and will reach a breaking point. The legal profession is becoming an abomination, as often encouraging litigation purely for profit as for justice. The crimes and quarrels of the rich are endlessly litigated—until exhaustion produces a loophole or a settlement. The quarrels of the poor are settled in violence, and those crimes, in turn, are plea-bargained in courthouse corridors during a coffee break.

Our criminal justice system is becoming a playground for the rich and a burial ground for the poor. It is increasingly difficult to argue that we were worse off when the rich resolved their disputes by dueling. It is even difficult, when one considers the conditions in most of our prisons, to make the case that we have progressed much beyond the brutal, but expedited, justice of flogging and a day or two in the stocks.

Which brings me to my own profession, indeed, my very own job and that of several of my distinguished col-

leagues here. Overestimated, overexposed and, by reasonable comparison with any job outside sports and entertainment, overpaid. I am a television news anchor, a role model for Miss America contestants and tens of thousands of university students in search of a degree without an education. How does one live up to the admiration of those who regard the absence of an opinion as objectivity or, even more staggering to the imagination, as courage?

How does one grapple with a state of national confusion that celebrates questions over answers? How does one explain or, perhaps more relevantly, guard against the influence of an industry which is on the verge of being a hallucinogenic barrage of images, whose only grammar is pacing, whose principal theme is energy?

We are losing our ability to manage ideas; to contemplate, to think. We are in a constant race to be the first with the obvious. We are becoming a nation of electronic voyeurs, whose capacity for dialogue is a fading memory, occasionally jolted into reflective life by a one-liner: "New ideas." "Where's the beef?" "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." "Window of vulnerability." "Freeze now." "Born again." "Gag me with a spoon." "Can we talk?"

No, but we can relate. Six-year-olds want to be stewardesses. Eight-year-olds want to be pilots. Nineteen-year-olds want to be anchorpersons. Grown-ups want to be left alone—to interact in solitary communion with the rest of our electronic global village.

Consider this paradox: Almost ev-

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**We are losing our ability to manage ideas; to contemplate, to think. We are in a constant race to be the first with the obvious. We are becoming a nation of electronic voyeurs, whose capacity for dialogue is a fading memory, occasionally jolted into reflective life by a one-liner: 'New ideas.' 'Where's the beef?' 'Today is the first day of the rest of your life.' 'Window of vulnerability.' 'Freeze now.' 'Born again.' 'Gag me with a spoon.' 'Can we talk?'**

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everything that is publicly said these days is recorded. Almost nothing of what is said is worth remembering. And what *do* we remember? Thoughts that were expressed hundreds or even thousands of years ago by philosophers, thinkers and prophets whose ideas and principles were so universal that they endured without videotape or film, without the illustrations of photographs or cartoons. In many instances, even without paper, and for thousands of years, without the easy duplication of the printing press.

What is largely missing in American life today is a sense of context, of saying or doing anything that is intended or even expected to live beyond the moment. There is no culture in the world that is so obsessed as ours with immediacy. In our journalism, the trivial displaces the momentous because we tend to measure the importance of events by how recently they happened. We have now become so obsessed with facts that we have lost all touch with truth....

It's easy to be seduced into believing that what we're doing is just fine; after all we get money, fame and, to a certain degree, even influence. But money, fame and influence without responsibility are the assets of a courtesan. We must accept responsibility for what we do, and we must think occasionally of the future and our impact on the next generation; or we may discover that they, too, have grown up—just like us. ■

*Ted Koppel, who has been with ABC News for 22 years, was named Anchorman of "Nightline" when the broadcast was introduced in 1980. He also is Editorial Manager of the program. In addition to his "Nightline" responsibilities, Mr. Koppel anchors "Viewpoint," an ABC News broadcast which is aired five times a year and provides a forum for criticism and analysis of broadcast news. He made the above remarks upon receiving the Broadcaster of the Year award from the International Radio and Television Society last October in New York.*

Winter 1989

## Has Money Corrupted Washington Journalism?

Money, money, money makes the world go 'round—but what does it do to journalists?

BY JAMES S. DOYLE

Q: What is your salary?

A: My salary is \$100,000, Sam.

Q: How much do you make, Sam?

A: Well, I make quite a bit, Reverend Falwell.

This Sunday morning television exchange between Sam Donaldson and Jerry Falwell was recounted in an October Washingtonian column by former Senator Eugene McCarthy—a sarcastic piece filled with observations about the self-importance of the Washington press corps. If its members continue to assume the powers and privileges of a new religion, McCarthy argued, they must demonstrate their moral superiority, at least by refusing honoraria and making public their sources of income.

The cover piece of the same magazine is entitled "Money Fever." It says of Washington, "This is now a rich place, full of six-figure incomes, million dollar homes, luxury cars. Where does all this money come from? Is it blinding us to what's really important?"

I am uneasy about one segment of Washington's new rich—the journalists.

Six years ago I moved across the Potomac from Newsweek's Washington bureau to become the Executive Editor of a group of national weekly newspapers—Army Times, Navy Times, Air Force Times, Federal Times. (Since then we've added two titles, Defense News and Space News.) While the 100 reporters, editors, photographers, artists and news assistants who work with

me are all covering the Washington bureaucracy, they are part of a workaday journalism world which is far closer to the pay scales and lifestyle of Richmond than Washington.

Some of them will become top-of-the-heap Washington bureau types. But for now they are part of a journalistic infantry struggling to make house and car payments.

I have been struck by the difference in lifestyle and in attitudes of my former and present colleagues. (Not the least of the contrasts is the impressive digging of many of my troops and the stories of substance they turn up about government—often to find their stories picked up and rewritten, without attribution, by the national media.)

I am not the only observer who senses that the Washington press corps has become fat and happy, removed from its readers, listeners and viewers in at least one respect—by income gaps which put many Washington journalists far above the average American. Articles on the subject have been appearing more frequently.

In the past a few of my Washington colleagues had their heads turned by both proximity to power and lots of disposable income. Now this is becoming a general condition which separates a lot of the Washington press from the rest of the country.

A well compensated writer at one of the news magazines told me, "The star system has moved from television to the print media. There were always a handful of stars. Today every major

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publication and not a few minor ones have stars. These are not necessarily superstars in terms of influence, but simple people who earn salaries close to or in excess of six figures. It's ironic that even as their salaries have jumped, the influence of print journalists has diminished.

"...Forget about the TV appearances and lectures. Simply by making such huge incomes journalists have less in common with their readers. When you are on the prowl for tax deductions, how can you identify with the average Joe?"

"At our place there is always talk about getting more of America into the Nation section. But the 'big feet' who draw the big salaries are often pushing inside-the-beltway stories. They are making big bucks, and they have enormous influence over story selection. It's common for them to push out a piece on Gary, Indiana for an inside baseball piece on Rostenkowski and Dole.

"Journalists who vacation in Europe, stay at posh hotels, and attend dinner parties with the elite have nothing in common with Middle America."

A Los Angeles Times Poll showed in 1985 that almost half of newspaper journalists but only 18 percent of the general public had incomes over \$40,000. The pollsters, I.A. Lewis and William Schneider, wrote in Public Opinion magazine, "What we end up with is an impression of newspaper journalists as something like 'super yuppies.' They are emphatically liberal on social issues and foreign affairs, distrustful of establishment institutions (government, business, labor), and protective of their own economic interests."

I think it's fair to say, although I can't prove it, that many print journalists in Washington earn more than Supreme

Court justices, cabinet officials, governors, mayors, full professors, school superintendents, and other community leaders. It didn't used to be so.

Is this why journalists have not pressed an agenda that would focus on the economic problems of many Americans—including a generation of immigrants not afforded the same opportunities as my parents and me? Can one be so comfortable, living among such wealth, and not avert one's eyes and professional attention from the problems of the less affluent?...

"There certainly is a new classification of reporter—the Journalist Performer," wrote Washington Post Ex-

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**Stanley Karnow, the author and former Washington Post foreign correspondent, finds the quest for celebrity status more corrupting than the money. 'Reporters, who are supposed to be detached observers dedicated to digging up the truth, have become show biz stars. As a result they have allowed themselves to be co-opted, and can no longer serve as investigators or critics of those in high places....'**

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ecutive Editor Ben Bradlee. "A lot of them were never journalists, like [Chris] Matthews, [George] Will, [Pat] Buchanan and [Tom] Braden.\* Some of them were terrific journalists who got bored with the reporting side of it and became mesmerized by the political side. [Robert] Novak is the lead dog there. But I think this Journalist Performer has been the object of parthenogenesis, developing over the last generation or two. Certainly the Alsops, the Lisagors slowly became characters, and it's not too large a step from character to performer."

Bradlee asks, "How much real journalism is being done by the celebrity

\*Bradlee is making a point here. All four write for newspapers but have little or no experience as reporters.

reporters? You and we are doing really serious reporting day after day by reporters whose names are not household words yet, and they probably never will be."

Washington Post columnist Colman McCarthy wrote this: "When I look at the blowhards on television—Buchanan, Kinsley, Novak, Shields, McLaughlin—I enjoy the rough and tumble of it all, but it's farcical that these guys are journalists. They're into hootchy-kootchy, carnival antics that get suckers into the tent for the con of thinking that all the gab is what the news business is all about. Koppel isn't much better. When he has on Kissinger,

Haig and almighties like that, which he does in disproportion to the victims of government violence, it's painful to see how obsequious Koppel becomes...."

"The best reporters and columnists are those who regularly get into the community—its soup kitchens, literacy programs, schools—as volunteers. That way they stay in touch with those on the margin.

Which often enough is where the crucial news is to be found."

Holdings Carter III sent along a five-year-old Wall Street Journal "Viewpoint" he had written noting that it "understates how strongly I feel about the subject." The top journalists, the column said, "move in packs with the affluent and powerful to Washington (just doing their job, of course), then swarm with them in summer to every agreeable spot on the Eastern seaboard between Canada and New Jersey. When any three or four sit down together on a television talk show to discuss the meaning of current events, it is not difficult to remember that the least well paid of these pontificators (in whose rank I occasionally fall) make at least six times more each year than the average American family."...

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Stanley Karnow, the author and former Washington Post foreign correspondent, finds the quest for celebrity status more corrupting than the money. “Reporters, who are supposed to be detached observers dedicated to digging up the truth, have become show biz stars. As a result they have allowed themselves to be co-opted, and can no longer serve as investigators or critics of those in high places. Sam Donaldson may sound defiant at news conferences, but he is merely acting the part of the tough journalist. He is playing a role, and everybody knows it. Nobody takes him seriously and thus he reflects the fact that nobody takes the press seriously.”

Karnow notes that most news about foreign affairs and other complex subjects gets to Americans by way of newspapers and not television, but that television is important because it is “validating.” A syndicator told him his column would be helped if he could get a slot on a talk show. He gets few invitations and small fees when he lectures on subjects about which he has written books. TV anchormen lecture on the same subjects to packed houses. “It used to be that you derived authority from being in print,” Karnow said. Now television gives what you have written credibility....

“I see two problems in Washington journalism,” says Lars-Erik Nelson, Bureau Chief of the New York Daily News. “This city has no white working class, no industries, no factories.... The normal stresses of American life are barely visible here and apply mostly to a black population on the other side of town.... The real change is the professionalization of everything in journalism. Political reporting is now a full-time beat, four years out of four. The New York Times has a guy who does nothing but arms control. The Washington Post has a guy who does nothing but campaign finance. The Los Angeles Times has a diplomatic correspondent who only does the Middle East and another who only does the Soviet Union.... Too often, they are

intelligible only to the people they cover. Sample New York Times page one lead: ‘Arms Negotiators Agree on New Counting Rules for Aircraft.’ Leading the paper! Others plunge into investigations that are not intelligible to anyone at all.

“Prediction: You will see even more punditry. Television has supplanted newspapers for bringing basic facts to the American people.”...

Finally, many of my correspondents took exception to the suggestion that Washington journalists as a group were among the well-off. “Certainly a sizable group of journalists in this town are well enough off to be legitimately called an income elite,” wrote Ben Bradlee.

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### **Fame and fortune have not helped the quality of reporting from the capital, nor the political analysis.**

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“The average national reporter at The Washington Post, few of them ‘Former Journalists,’ makes more than \$55,000, probably very close to \$60,000 now. But I don’t know how really elite that makes them. It sounds elite as hell when you think of the days when reporters weren’t paid at all well.... Certainly the status of journalists has changed enormously. It’s okay now for your daughter to marry one.”

Richard J. Maloy, Bureau Chief of the Thomson Newspapers, puts in a strong word for the great number of hard working reporters who “are part of a very large subculture in the Washington press corps,” the regional reporters. “First of all they are talented or they couldn’t cut it. Secondly they are journeymen for the most part and are paid at or near the top of the AP scale which is the benchmark for this town. AP scale for a journeyman everywhere is around \$36,000, and the differential for Washington means a journeyman here makes \$40,000. Is that so much that it separates a reporter from his readers? I don’t think so. Steelworkers

in Lorain, Ohio make that. So do automakers in Detroit. So do GS-12s in Washington.”...

Stanley Karnow said, “I don’t think it’s a matter of journalists becoming an income elite. After all, Izzy Stone was always relatively comfortable. The real danger is the feeling of self-importance among many reporters.

“In 1971 when I returned home after years abroad, the National Editor of The Washington Post said to me: ‘There are 25 members of the Post national staff and 25 members of The New York Times Washington bureau and we are the most powerful people in America.’ What hubris!”

Hubris is what I’m talking about. I agree that, like my own staff, much of the underclass of Washington journalism is still struggling financially and professionally. I worry about the message they get from the top names in Washington journalism. Fame and fortune have not helped the quality of reporting from the capital, nor the political analysis. In a somber piece on “the brain dead politics of 1989,” author Kevin Phillips commented that “cerebral atrophy also means to afflict the nation’s opinion-molding elites. The pundits are not providing great insights, and the pollsters help nurture Washington’s paralyzing ambiguities.” This is not the golden age of Washington journalism. ■

*James S. Doyle, a 1965 Nieman Fellow, is a Vice President of The Times Journal Company of Springfield, Virginia, and Editorial Director of the Times group. In 1969, he joined The Washington Star as National Correspondent; in 1973, he became special assistant to Archibald Cox, the Watergate Special Prosecutor. He served until the end of the trials. His book, “Not Above the Law,” was published in 1977.*

Autumn 1990

# The Impact of Public Opinion Polls

## Do they shape or measure opinions?

BY BILL KOVACH

At the AAPOR meeting 10 years ago I talked about a user's view of the polls. I talked then about my experience as an editor of The New York Times and of the enormous benefit which The New York Times/CBS poll had brought our reporters and readers, especially during political campaigns—how our own polling capability had freed us from dependence on self-serving analysis by candidates; had given us an independent check upon the course and integrity of the campaign process. We had, it seemed, achieved at least a part of the dream of progressive reformers that a disciplined, scientific approach to public opinion surveying would free the voice of the people from control by subjective party bosses and the tyranny of the smoke-filled room. Democracy of permanent referenda; constant accountability.

I know some of you were at the meeting because when my article appeared on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times last year, raising questions about the use of public opinion surveys by the press, I received a number of letters asking how I squared that article and that speech.

It was a troubling question. Consistency is not a hallmark of daily journalism, but now that I've shifted to a more academic setting it is a characteristic which seems to receive more attention. So I dug out my old speech and must admit I was relieved to find the roots of my present concerns in that speech. And they are clearly concerns

which have only grown with time. As I put it then:

"All in all I guess it's safe to say that I have become a believer in the careful use of polling in my work and fully understand the value of it as a tool to construct a better and more informative story. However, there are some things that disturb me still and these



© Cartoon courtesy of Doug Marlette.

troubling thoughts have grown with the proliferation of polls in daily journalism."

Briefly, the concerns I listed then were:

First, the use of political polls as horserace reporting devices—to focus on who's ahead at a given point in the campaign.

Second, the impact on the sequential primary process by which presidential candidates are chosen—an impact I feared could frustrate the democratic process as poll results created unrealistic expectations of performance or whipsawed public emotion by creating an almost daily contest of

popularity which campaigns attempted to control.

Finally, whether the increased use of polling in the process was creating a closed, self-feeding system which reduced rather than expanded the public dialogue by including in the debate only those questions which attracted pollsters and campaign managers.

And I must report tonight, I do not believe those fears were misplaced. If the 1988 presidential campaign did anything it fundamentally challenged the hope that public opinion surveys would strengthen the public's informed participation in the process. In the high tech political Star Wars of 1988, what the political process produced for the people was either a paid advertising media visit with old friends, or the product of a reported media which was mesmerized by and incredulous of the extent to which campaign organizations were capable of dictating the context within which the electoral decision would be made. We may have been able to blow away the smoke which filled the rooms in which political decisions were made. But we have replaced it only with a carnival sideshow house of mirrors in which a potential voter is hopelessly trapped in a disorienting hall which is reflecting and re-reflect-

ing the same images.

The real shift in the political campaign of 1988 was the degree to which the independent judgment of the editors and reporters covering the campaign was neutralized by campaign strategies and tactics. This domination may best be represented by the extent to which the dominating themes struck early during the campaign—Willie Horton and the Pledge of Allegiance—began as paid advertisements, but became the focus of the news reports. A paid media based on focus group analysis of emotional appeal in the end determined the news agenda.

The tools of persuasion and ma-

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nipulation are awesome and they are cynically used. And just as we use many public opinion surveys to measure the most obvious questions, these tools are used to measure prejudice, but never to plumb understanding or the level of awareness behind the opinion. The political system adjusts its messages to appeal to these measured emotions in order to move the opinion in one direction or another—suppress or increase its intensity.

But where is the system which attempts to counter this process of using public opinion to round up and herd voters like so many cattle, with the liberating force of information? To use these tools of measurement more effectively and creatively to balance appeals to emotion and prejudice with knowledge which offers understanding and balance?

Increasingly our use of technology—the computer, television, demographic targeting—permits individuals, isolated in their private places, to respond to direct appeals. Less and less is it necessary for citizens to attend public places and meetings in which his or her interests are put into a public context—are required to relate to the needs and desires of a neighbor. The context within which personal opinion must contest with public responsibility. Such personal isolation, which encourages selfish concerns and threatens democracy with a mean-spirited Balkanization—a competition for power uninspired by a sense of community or common good.

Advertising by candidates—fine-tuned on a daily basis, when necessary, by continuous tracking polls and combined with the ability to create targeted audiences about whom increasing amounts of information is known—offers constantly expanding opportunities to manipulate public opinion on the basis of narrow, tightly focused, and highly emotional issues.

And into this volatile atmosphere the American press contributes what? Essentially a measure of the relative success of the manipulations. A study by Gary Orren at Harvard University found that almost 50 percent of the

political stories which ran in three newspapers during a period of 22 days preceding the 1988 presidential election, cited poll results. During the four months from September 1987 through January 1988, 113 horserace polls were published on the Republican candidates and 123 on Democrats—all before the primary season officially began.

Each of these stories arguably came at the expense—in time, thought, energy, resources and space—of a story which could provide basic information about the state of our society, about the issues confronting us, about the alternate solutions which might be considered, about the true state of our personal tax burden or the military budget or the quality of education.

The question now is whether the press has the time or the will to concern itself with its contribution to education and understanding.

In most news organizations the journalists who plan campaign coverage are, by and large, a sandlot pickup team which comes together annually at best (usually only quadrennially) to plan a strategy for covering “this year’s elections.”

And when they do they are stepping into a world in which the opinion researchers, advertising strategists, public relations packagers, have been working day and night for the preceding year or two or three under the prod of competition to find new and better ways to sell an idea, create a demand, understand a market. Even the best, most dedicated journalist under such circumstances is a babe in the woods at the beginning of each campaign he or she covers.

And while journalists are trying to pull together yet another ad hoc system, the system of political manipulation is recruiting from the most successful marketing and advertising companies in the world. They even have now an advanced training school—The Graduate School of Political Management in New York—a school which features disciplined academic study in polling, political management of the media, campaign ad-

vertising and promotion, demographic targeting, and “using polling information and orchestration of the news.” A school whose funding by Philip Morris and Ford Motor Company reflects the growing commitment to and investment in the process of political manipulation by corporate America.

In a correspondence from my friend Adam Clymer pointing out inconsistencies in the article I had written for the Times last year, Adam said:

“[T]he best reason for public opinion polling on issues lies in the nature of our society, i.e. a Democracy. I think people do have opinions and more thoughtful ones than a lot of their governors believe. I think the people should have something to say about how they are governed....”

As with much of what Adam believes about journalism generally and polling specifically, I emphatically agree with that observation. But I find myself increasingly concerned with the role of the press in a self-governing society to provide the information upon which those opinions are based. And here is the nub of my criticism of the use to which the press has now put the instrument of public opinion sampling:

The focus is too narrowly fixed on the process and the course of the campaign—the dynamics and thus the excitement and entertainment value inherent in campaign coverage.

Public opinion surveys could be of enormous benefit to a responsible news organization’s approach to all coverage, not just campaign coverage. But not the way we use public opinion surveys. Not simply to learn who is ahead and how this or that issue is cutting.

In 1988 the print press seemed bewitched by the made-for-television nature of the campaign and offered reams of copy about the staging of events, the manipulation of candidate behavior, and the crafting of personal images. How is a citizen to make an intelligent decision on the basis of such understanding?

Into the vacuum left on reporting issues of substance the public opinion survey is thrown. But to determine

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what? What issues seem to be important? How many agree with the Bush or the Dukakis position? What racial, ethnic, or regional appeal each candidate has, and so forth. My question now is: How much is a bushel basket full of such data to a voter? What clue does this give a potential voter on the ability of one or the other to manage the S&L crisis or to address the quality of American education?

Our democracy is not merely a matter of registering preconceived notions and opinions of individuals. That approach was rejected in the design of our government in favor of a representative system by which the matters of government would be debated and issues resolved by consensus achieved by compromise. Responding to opinion in terms of its public impact not its private attraction. Most public opinion surveys now conducted by news organizations, in effect, record private opinion, and the consumers confuse the results with public thought. Few surveys examine the depth of understanding behind an opinion or the context of an opinion. When, for example, was the last time you saw a report on political opinion which required a response to the same question in more than one context? Questions which require the respondent to consider the consequences of an opinion?

I will admit to being narrow-minded, even simplistic, in my concept of the journalist's role in a democracy. I believe it is the journalist's role to inform public opinion. That in a self-governing society, the daily press is the only widely available system of education we have. If the voters are to receive the information they need to make informed choices on issues which confront them, it must come from the press.

To fill this role—which I believe is the only one which justifies the protection given the press in the Bill of Rights—then the press must know the extent to which opinion is based upon prejudice, emotion or information. The press must know what information the public needs in order to make more informed judgments. For that opinion—informed or not—is likely to be

transmuted into a political position from which laws and policy will be fashioned. To the extent that the opinion is fathered by prejudice and ignorance so too the law or policy will harbor the same public poison.

So I worry that our current use of public opinion surveys does much less than it can to fulfill the public purpose to which political coverage is committed. Rather, because it focuses on the surface movements of opinion rather than their informing depths, I am afraid the press is unwittingly a part of the process of manipulating opinion devised by the political campaigns; that by concentration on a constant measuring of the success or failure of a campaign we have become a sort of extended focus group—another in the corridor of mirrors in the campaign fun house yet again reflecting the same light in a closed system—not introducing new lights to the process.

It is part of the old question: Do opinion polls shape opinion or do they measure opinion? I think a compelling argument could be made that in the absence of strong and sustained reporting on the facts underlying an issue...polls can and do shape and create opinion.

And by measuring campaigns in terms of the questions they ask of themselves, I am concerned that the independent polling strategy, which I felt 10 years ago had freed the press of dependence upon the subjective reading of polls by campaign organizers, may now be making the press an even more integral part of the strategy of the imaginative campaign manager.

Hannah Arendt has said: "Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed."

Judge Learned Hand has said: "We have staked everything on the rational dialogue of an informed electorate."

As the fragmentation of American society hurtles ahead, we are increasingly becoming a nation of individuals who share less and less common information. Advertisers—purveyors of information designed to influence our taste and our economic behavior—seek to fix us, like insects impaled in a col-

lection tray, as part of a narrowly defined group with set prejudices, tastes and desires. As these groups become more clearly separated one from the other—narrowly focused vehicles to reach them with tailor-made messages are designed. The result threatens a constantly shrinking pool of Americans who begin each day with some sort of shared knowledge and understanding of events and issues and experiences.

It is imperative to the continued health of self-government that the press compensate for this trend. That the daily reports keep filled the common pool of information and shared experience of the body politic. In this endeavor public opinion surveys could be of enormous benefit to a responsible news organization's approach to all coverage, not just campaign coverage.

Consumers of news, I am convinced, look to the daily press for information which they can use. Information which helps make a confusing and complicated world a little easier to understand, to confront. A news report which very simply helps them make it through the day. During the election season the potential voter depends even more fundamentally upon the daily press. To help editors design such news reports, public opinion surveys can be key tools. But not the way we use them now. Not simply to learn who is ahead or the appeal of this or that issue.

What is missing from our use of the tool is the key ingredient of context—upon what information or misinformation is the opinion based? What do the people know about the issues? And knowing this the press can then perform its most vital function—providing the information for enlightened self-government. ■

*This past May in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Bill Kovach, Nieman Foundation Curator, gave this talk at a meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research.*



Spring 1991

# Investigators' Checklist

Every campaign adds another important item—  
what will it be this time?

BY ANN MARIE LIPINSKI

A year before the 1988 election, Wall Street Journal reporter David Shribman delivered a detailed and delicately written profile of TV minister Pat Robertson, one of a series on presidential candidates that appeared on the Journal's back page. About a third of the way into the piece—"Robertson's Conversion From Rakishness to Faith Culminates in His Crusade for the White House," it was headlined—Shribman quietly corrected some of the dates in the Virginia Republican's biography.

"While in law school, Mr. Robertson attended a party and saw a young woman lean over some candles, catching her hair on fire. He put the fire out, winning his introduction to Adelia 'Dede' Elmer," Shribman wrote. "They were married secretly on Aug. 27, 1954, in Elkton, Md., known as a venue for quick marriages. Their son was born 10 weeks later."

Two days after that story appeared, The Washington Post reprised the

Journal's revelations and put them on page one. The story, written by T.R. Reid, pointedly detailed "a number of exaggerations and misleading statements" about Robertson's life that the Southern Baptist minister had been forced to correct, "that most painful" stemming from the Journal's discovery.

The Post went on to catalog several inconsistencies in Robertson's statements about his education and business experience, all of them under the dramatic headline: "Painfully, Robertson Corrects Record; Marriage Date, 10 Weeks Before Birth of Son, Is Acknowledged."

The two stories provide fitting bookends for the library of investigative campaign reporting, a collection whose curators and contributors have yet to settle on a definition of their pursuit, let alone a style.

As the investigative discipline evolves from a tradition of spectacular revelations of corruption to explorations of

complex systems and personalities, journalists competing on the campaign trail are faced with important decisions. Do we cast our net for personal wrongdoing and corruption or pursue the broader profile? Do we investigate character as vigorously as campaign fi-

nances? Does evidence of a moralizing minister's premarital relations merit bold page one treatment or make more sense as a detail in a reflective assessment of "a modern-day Elmer Gantry," as Shribman wrote?

While many of the central questions are similar to those posed in most newsrooms considering any investigative pursuit, they are exaggerated during campaigns by the highly competitive nature of the story.

Some of the quandaries were neatly summarized in a lecture at the University of Missouri School of Journalism in 1987 by Gaylord Shaw, then a reporter for the Los Angeles Times. Shaw, now Newsday's Washington Bureau Chief, was explaining that in preparation for the 1988 election, Times' reporters were traveling around the country interviewing presidential scholars about their studies of former Presidents, looking for guideposts to help prepare profiles of the candidates.

"The scholars said that the first thing you should do is find everything that they've ever written and see how that has changed," Shaw recalled for Missouri's students and faculty. "So we looked up a lot of what Gary Hart had ever written. Two reporters found that Gary Hart had written that once he had been stranded in the woods out on the prairie somewhere—in Kansas, I think—and he was confronted by timber wolves a few feet away from him. He stared down the timber wolves and he survived.

"Well, you take that and you talk to some biologists and wildlife experts and you find that timber wolves have been extinct in that area for a hundred years.... So this is where we were on the story. But our problem was, looking back on it, we were in the library looking up things about timber wolves and stuff like that, and The Miami Herald was in the bushes. They got the story and we didn't, although we quickly recouped."

Each campaign, it seems, adds a new item to the investigative reporter's checklist. Before Hart, questions of marital infidelity were rare. Before Geraldine Ferraro, a spouse's business



"Before Geraldine Ferraro, a spouse's business dealings were given passing notice."—Lipinski. Photo courtesy of The Associated Press.

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dealings were given passing notice. Reporting on plagiarism, military service, drug use and psychiatric health—each traces its lineage to a specific candidate or campaign before which it seemed improper or irrelevant to raise the question.

Brooks Jackson, a correspondent for Cable News Network's Special Assignment staff and a former investigative reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, recalls a time not long ago when reporters neglected the most basic public records checks of candidates—the kind of research that today is integrated into even routine investigative reporting. Jackson cites the stories that followed Richard Nixon's 1970 Supreme Court nomination of G. Harrold Carswell.

### The Carswell Story

A reporter checking the courthouse, in Wilkinson, Georgia, turned up a copy of a 1948 *Irvington Bulletin* and the text of a campaign speech in which Carswell said, "segregation of the races is proper." Moreover, Carswell edited the *Bulletin* at the time the speech was published on page one. Following the disclosure, the Senate rejected Carswell's nomination.

"For whatever reason, a reporter went down and looked up that speech," said Jackson. "At the time, that kind of research wasn't really on the reporter checklist. But today, partly as a result of that story, the first thing you do [in investigating a candidate] is run a Nexis search. That's an example of the kind of thing that we sort of learn as we go along."

Two decades after the Carswell stories, Christopher Drew, an investigative reporter in the *Chicago Tribune's* Washington bureau, follows the example of Supreme Court nominees to illustrate how far beyond checking old newspaper clips we've come in investigative pursuit of candidates.

"When I went up to background [Douglas] Ginsburg when he came up for the Supreme Court I raced all around Boston, making the important checks, looking through courthouse

records, finding his ex-wife. I was thinking mainly of money corruption and legal ethics. It never occurred to me in 1987 that I should be asking his colleagues at the Harvard Law School if they'd ever seen him take a puff off a marijuana cigarette," Drew said.

"In the past several years, the requirements for checks on candidates has increased exponentially, all in the direction of personal behavior...."

Jackson adds: "With each political campaign we find something we should have had on our checklist and didn't. The reporter who figures out what that is first, gets the story."

In recent conversations about preparing for the 1992 presidential election with about a dozen editors and investigative reporters, "checklist" is the word that surfaced most often. The word, it seems, defines the gap between the event-driven inclinations of most political reporters and the methodical, often tedious, requirement of investigative work. It also hints at the bias that several editors revealed for divorcing political reporters from background probes of the candidates. "The investigative types don't fall prey to the kinds of claims about which political reporters are much more naive," said James O'Shea, the *Tribune's* Assistant Managing Editor.

Reporter Steve Weinberg, Editor of *The Investigative Reporters & Editors Journal*, said he is often called by campaign reporters looking for the "magic bullet" to pierce a presidential candidate. "It's never that simple," Weinberg explains. "These kinds of stories are a long process. There are lucky reporters but no lazy lucky reporters."

Weinberg said that after President George Bush named Dan Quayle as his running mate he got "about 30 calls an hour from journalists wondering what they should do and where they should go for background." Many of them wanted to know the "trick" to obtaining college transcripts and were disappointed to learn from Weinberg that he had never obtained such records without careful cultivation of a source.

"Journalists in general fail to practice anticipatory journalism," Weinberg

said. "Sometimes that's difficult but in presidential campaigns it's a little easier. You almost always know with some advance notice who the main candidates or even nominees will be. To wait until the night before the convention to start checking out candidates is inexcusable, especially for the major papers.... I would make sure I had done at least the superficial investigative checks on everyone ahead of time."

Weinberg lists voting records, campaign donors, financial and ethics disclosures of the candidates and their staffs, special interest group ratings, and speaking fees and honoraria as the first level of checks, followed by research of court records, real estate and business ties, education, health, birth and marriage records, and a thorough exploration of background, friends, family and character.

Tempted by the sensational impact of the Hart sex scandal or the leak that led to the Joseph Biden plagiarism flap, some reporters forget that most worthy investigative stories are much harder earned.

William Alfred, a playwright and Harvard professor, tells the students in his dramatic writing class about the importance of building what he calls "police files"—dossiers he keeps on each of the characters as he's writing a play. The files contain detailed information on their childhoods, families, friends, habits and (a particular of Alfred's) their first memories. Most of what he collects in the police files does not appear in any literal sense in his plays. "But you need to know the character so well that you can hear the way he speaks," Alfred says. "When he does something, you need to understand why, given his background, that was the only way for him to act."

I kept thinking of Alfred as Weinberg talked and, oddly, how suited the playwright's advice is to the reporter investigating a candidate. *Newsday's* Shaw...cautions that "you can't spend all your time looking up what kind of grades these folks made in junior high school and not be turned on to more current, potentially explosive stories." But, like Alfred, Shaw says it is that kind

of background information that often leads to or explains a larger truth. “Those kind of details tell you a lot about a person and set the foundation for more specific instances, like the one that did Gary Hart in.”

Adds Weinberg: “You do a mini-Robert Caro, that’s the ideal. And almost always along the way, those checks yield specific stories. But even if they don’t you’re hopefully ready to explain why a certain contribution has come in or why a certain person has been added to the campaign or why a candidate is voting a certain way. Build files on these people and have them ready when the time comes to spin off a story along the way.”

Daniel Biddle, who won a Pulitzer Prize in investigative reporting for the Philadelphia Inquirer in 1987 and was part of that paper’s massive and controversial investigation of Ferraro and her husband (what Biddle calls “the journalistic equivalent of the American buildup in Saudi Arabia”) said he thinks that one of the problems in subjecting candidates to truth squad inspection is that we never tell readers when they come up clean.

### If Candidates Are Clean?

“It would be great if every single campaign claim, promise and statement about one’s experience and what one has accomplished could be put to the test,” said Biddle, explaining how he would direct an investigative reporting team during the campaign. “But what if we find out good things? What if we subject these people to unbelievably rigorous standards and they come up clean? Given the historic lack of super-straight, super-clean, public-interest-minded leadership, a presidential candidate who withstands a scrupulous background check is a good story. That’s real news.... But we usually don’t print a story if they come up clean. I’ve got to think that one through.”

As the election year approaches, the recession may limit the investigative work envisioned by some journalists. Financial cutbacks at many news organizations, especially after high outlays for coverage of the Persian Gulf War, are threatening to limit the pursuit of such labor-intensive work. Small or

medium sized news organizations, where the breadth of research proposed by journalists like Weinberg is rarely tolerated, are unlikely to undertake any such projects....

“Public attitudes notwithstanding, this is our job,” said Shaw, speaking of the value of investigative campaign reporting in an election year. “If the media don’t do it, who’s going to? If we don’t do it, voters are left with the candidates presenting their own picture of things, colored and flavored the way they want it. This independent look at the people who want to be President gets to the very heart of what we’re about. Talk about public service—this is it.” ■

*Ann Marie Lipinski directs the Chicago-based investigative reporting team at the Chicago Tribune. Lipinski was one of a group of three Tribune reporters who won a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting in 1988 for a series of stories on corruption in the Chicago City Council. She is a member of the Nieman Fellows class of 1990.*

Summer 1991

## Operation Washington Shield

Administration’s manipulation of news embraced diplomacy and politics, as well as the battlefield.

BY MURREY MARDER

“The media, be it press, TV, radio or other form, impresses me and, I’m sure, the general public, as being a voracious, insatiable animal. It claws, snaps, tears at and insults just about anyone it faces, especially those feeding it information. I sometimes wonder whose side the media is on.”

—An angry reader, in *Letters*, *St. Petersburg Times*, February 6, 1991

“The American media surrendered to a barrage of propaganda... a credulous and jingoistic press.... The administration...knew that it could rely on the media’s complicity in almost any deception dressed up in patriotic costume... a servile press...”

—Lewis H. Lapham, *Editor*, *Harper’s*, May, 1991

In the Persian Gulf crisis the diplomatic, political and economic reporting was manipulated by the Bush Administration as much as the military press, only more subtly.

The Administration engaged in intensive news management to shape and exploit crisis information far beyond the battle zone throughout the six-month buildup for the war, as well as during the six-week conflict. Indeed, the press was maneuvered into looking like a “voracious, insatiable” inquisitor to some Americans, and to others just the opposite, a “credulous...jingoistic...servile press.”

Surpassing any injury to journalistic pride, however, is the capacity that the Bush Administration has demonstrated for shrinking First Amendment rights in “a new world order.” A press so readily manipulated during months of

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preparation for war tempts fate in either peace or war.

Major news organizations that have protested “virtual total control” of the press by the Pentagon during the Gulf War have narrowly focused on direct constraints in the war zone—military censorship, restricted press “pools,” military “monitors.” From the first week of the crisis, however, the White House, Defense Department, State Department and other agencies used a dozen more discreet techniques to manipulate the substance, flow and timing of non-military as well as military information to protect and support the Administration’s policy. These techniques included the calculated use of deliberate ambiguities, evasions, half-truths or outrightly misleading information.

The news management of Operation Desert Shield might well have been dubbed Operation Washington Shield. As journalists should know better than others, the less blatant the control of news, the more effective it is.

Walter Lippmann, drawing on his own World War I experience, observed in his classic study, “Public Opinion”:

“Military censorship is the simplest form of barrier [to public information] but by no means the most important, because it is known to exist, and is therefore in certain measure agreed to and discounted.”

The Bush Administration achieved a level of control over the American print and broadcast press and public opinion that Presidents Johnson and Nixon would have given anything to have had during their turbulent years of the Vietnam War. It was months into the Persian Gulf crisis before allusions to a new “credibility gap” were made by frustrated reporters, but that stigma did not adhere to the Bush Administration. It set out from the beginning of the crisis determined to manage the news in a manner that would make it no easy mark to attack for deception.

After the February cease-fire in Iraq, however, the contrast between a controlled or managed press and an uncontrolled press was inescapable. A

free press revealed the desperation of Iraq’s Kurds, forcing the Bush Administration to change policy and aid Saddam Hussein’s latest targets, who had been encouraged to revolt by the President’s own loose rhetoric.

Until then, the Bush Administration’s hold on the American press stretched from the Persian Gulf to the United States and back—literally. Its news managers not only could make all bombs targeted on Iraq look smart; they could equally make frustrated reporters at televised briefings look stupid, or appear to be snarling watchdogs.

When officials discovered the hostile reaction by average Americans to the questioning of spokesmen in uniform, they rehearsed the press briefings to sharpen the antagonistic perception. Ergo, a press that “claws, snaps, tears at and insults just about anyone it faces, especially those feeding it information.” The reality was just the opposite press failing: inadequate questioning, skepticism, probing.

It was not the Administration’s objective simply to taunt the press. The purpose was to diminish and discredit

it as a competing force in shaping public opinion, even though the Bush policy had overwhelming support from the public and from the press itself.

The crossfire over press performance has boxed the compass. It has stretched from Pentagon encomiums for “best war coverage”—which makes experienced reporters wince—to charges that reporters “more often resembled government stenographers than newsgatherers.”

New York Times columnist Tom Wicker, a persistent and thoughtful critic of the news coverage, saw a “dangerous” precedent in the Bush Administration’s easy success in limiting what it wanted the public to know. “Perhaps worse,” Wicker wrote, “press and public largely acquiesced in this disclosure of only selected information.”

His columnist colleague at the Times, Anthony Lewis, called for urgent “self-examination...in our business...” He found “most of the press...not a detached observer of the war, much less a critical one,” but “a clique applauding the American generals and politicians in charge.” Lewis labeled



Walter Cronkite and a CBS camera crew use a Jeep for a dolly during an interview with the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, during the Battle of Hue City, Vietnam, 1968. *Photo courtesy of the Still Picture Branch, National Archives at College Park, Maryland.*

“television...the most egregious official lap dog during the war.”

### But First-Class Reporting, Too

Blanket characterizations pro or con, however, are ill-fitting for anything as diverse and discordant as the American print and broadcast press. In the record number of columns of space and hours of broadcast time filled by any American crisis in a comparable time span, there were innumerable examples of balanced, penetrating, first-class reporting, as well as countless pieces of shallow, witless, gullible work.

No segment of the press was uniformly in one category or another: clearly not television. Cable News Network was indispensable for news coverage, with Peter Arnett in Baghdad as an extra bonus—and anti-press target. Public television’s MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour consistently provided more balanced and penetrating news, debate and analysis than any, and sometimes all, commercial channels.

This article disproportionately cites news coverage of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, all with large staffs and all available for home delivery in Washington. They therefore have special impact on Congress and on the large Washington-based national and international press corps often influenced by their coverage.

Congress and press have an important symbiotic relationship of stimulating each other into public scrutiny of government that is not well-known outside the Washington-New York-Boston corridor. In the Gulf crisis the *Times*, *Post* and *Wall Street Journal* all supported Administration policy, along with most of the nation’s press, contributing to the fact that in this crisis cross-stimulation of press and Congress [failed] to produce a more probing examination of Administration policy. For the major news organizations were misled no less than the smaller ones.

Out of political fear of challenging the broadly supported commitment of

American military forces to a war zone that could erupt before the congressional elections in November, Congress virtually abdicated its responsibilities in scrutinizing Administration policy.

Except for limited hearings, Congress avoided questioning crisis policy until jolted into debate by the Bush Administration’s carefully timed, post-election disclosures that it was doubling American forces in the Gulf, and openly shifting from economic sanctions and military pressure against Iraq, to offensive war. With American and coalition forces poised for a U.N. authorized war, Congress, forced to choose, voted for it after its first real debate in the crisis. Such a debate months earlier would have stimulated deeper press questioning of U.S. policy and vice versa. There Administration strategists-news managers could claim a double success.

Journalism’s highest awards this year went to news coverage of the Gulf crisis, along with profound individual journalists’ criticisms of press performance in a war that the rest of the nation cannot celebrate ecstatically or exhaustively enough.

### Vietnam a Reason for Controls

Just what caused the American press to incur so much damage to its own self-esteem in this war, in contrast to its pride in vigorous reporting in the Vietnam War, will be explored and debated for years to come. The unending criticism of the American press for the loss of the Vietnam War, however ahistoric, contributed heavily to the controls imposed by the Bush Administration in the Gulf War. A journalistic cynic might add, at least the messenger cannot be shot for losing this one.

But the resourcefulness of the Bush Administration, and the magnitude of the journalistic task, should not be underestimated. Veteran reporters did penetrate many of the Administration’s calculated ambiguities, half-truths, evasions, misleading guidances and other tricks of the news management trade.

There was unquestionably insuffi-

cient awareness in the press as a whole, however, of the added demands that war or the threat of war make on press vigilance: The inherent adversarial relationship between government and press is at its peak in wartime, when the President is both Chief Executive and Commander in Chief of an authoritarian structure. Truth is the first casualty not just in war, but equally in preparation for war, for both rely heavily on secrecy, evasion and deception.

What is disclosed and concealed from press and public in the initial stages of a crisis has extra criticality for all that follows. The press invariably is at its most vulnerable point when the rationale for crisis action is put forth.

“It is not truth” the government is intent on communicating at that time, “they’re selling something they’ve done,” Hodding Carter III, State Department Spokesman in the Carter Administration, and now a television commentator and producer, explained on the MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour on September 30, 1990.

“Panama invasion, Grenada invasion” and in other deployments of military force, Carter continued, “the press initially accepts. It then begins to question.”

However, “for the first week after any military engagement,” Carter emphasized, “there is virtually never going to be sustained questioning of anything the government does—particularly the assumptions. It sometimes takes a month, it sometimes takes a year....”

Indeed, dozens of fundamental questions were not raised in the rush to report the American military plunge into the Persian Gulf. President Bush, for example, was not asked whether the Bush Administration took time to explore not only diplomatic alternatives, but also far more limited forms of U.S. military intervention, in differing configurations. If the press had done so effectively it could have learned very early in the crisis that the Administration had plunged into a hasty policy choice without exploring the implications with Mideast experts in or out-

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**The Bush Administration's...news managers not only could make all bombs targeted on Iraq look smart; they could equally make frustrated reporters at televised briefings look stupid, or appear to be snarling watchdogs.**

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side the government.

In the Gulf crisis, domination of public opinion was particularly essential for the Administration to sustain a venturesome and improvised policy, which was launched cloaked in calculated ambiguities to conceal its dimensions and intentions.

Even though the American troop deployment was ennobled as the core of a multinational force, fulfilling the United Nations' dream of collective security, the public had to be conditioned to tolerate a huge military commitment to war without warning.

No censorship of war zone controls could have long concealed the mushrooming of an American force from 50,000 troops—the target originally given to the press—to 540,000 in six months, matching peak U.S. troop strength in Vietnam after a decade of buildup. Exceptional news management was required to rationalize the growth of a defensive Desert Shield operation and to screen its seamless transformation into an offensive Desert Storm.

### **Controls Needed to Sustain Strategy**

Sophisticated information control techniques were needed to sustain simultaneously the interwoven diplomatic, political and economic components of U.S. strategy. They supplied the critical domestic and international support for American military power in the Gulf.

A disclosure at the start that at least 200,000 to 250,000 American troops were planned in the force level discussed in President Bush's first meeting with his military at a Camp David meeting on August 4, just two days

after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, could have played havoc with any news management. That would have aroused immediate questions about American offensive military intentions, United States seriousness for a diplomatic solution of the crisis, and prospects for any United Nations-endorsed multinational force, or cost sharing of the venture.

No American President has thrust the United States into a major war so swiftly and massively. The day after the

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**It was not the Administration's objective simply to taunt the press. The purpose was to diminish and discredit it as a competing force in shaping public opinion....**

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invasion of Kuwait, August 3, the President made a personal pledge to Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Washington to give that nation powerful American military support. By August 5, as he returned from Camp David, the secret planning to topple Saddam Hussein had begun, and the President stunned even the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff by publicly pledging to reverse the invasion of Kuwait. On August 6, American jet fighters and the 82nd Airborne Division began flying into Saudi Arabia. The news dominated American headlines the next day.

President Bush was determined to conceal both the magnitude of the American deployment and its full purpose, but he and his advisers also wanted to avoid a charge of crass deception. The President, therefore, in

his first press conference August 8 on the troop deployment, deliberately left open the option for an offensive military strategy, but spoke only of defense, and referred all questions about the size of the American force, or other military factors, to the Pentagon. That figure, given to the press on "background"—where it would not be open to on-the-record challenge—was the misleading figure of 50,000.

That initial press conference on troops to the Gulf offers a primer in American news management.

President Bush said U.S. troops were entering Saudi Arabia "in a defensive mode *right now*," and it was "not the mission to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait." He went on to say "We're not in a war. We have sent forces to defend Saudi Arabia" and "other nations will be participating...."

Veteran reporters like R.W. (Johnny) Apple of The New York Times, with

extensive diplomatic and political experience, quickly detected many of the calculated ambiguities in the President's remarks. To call the U.S. military mission "defensive," Apple wrote the same day, August 8, "really applies only in a tactical sense." The objective of American air, sea and land forces, including "a de facto naval blockade of Iraqi commerce"—labeled sanctions—he noted, was "intended to help force President Hussein to pull back" from Kuwait.

Furthermore, Apple reported, "although the White House and the State Department continued to express anxiety about the possibility of an invasion" of Saudi Arabia (to justify sending large ground forces), "there were no signs of [an invasion] on the ground, and some analysts continue to believe one un-

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likely.” Apple had deftly raised several caution flags for readers.

But Apple’s story, and the print and broadcast press across the United States, fell victim to “background” news management on a key factor that went into the headlines, the grossly misleading figure of 50,000 troops as the projected size of the U.S. force. His lead read: “Thousands of elite United States troops, the vanguard of a force that senior defense officials said may reach 50,000, took up positions in Saudi Arabia today as President Bush vowed to defend the Middle Eastern kingdom and its oil reserves, the richest in the world.”

And news analysis written the same day for *The Washington Post* by Patrick E. Tyler, who had served as a foreign correspondent in the Iraq-Iran war (during the Gulf crisis Tyler switched to *The New York Times*), wrote that the United States had “contingency plans to deploy up to 50,000 or more ground troops” to Saudi Arabia by the end of the month.

### Decision Reached at Camp David

The *Washington Post* on August 9 published the first behind-the-scenes account reporting that the President’s decision was reached hastily on August 4 at Camp David. There, White House reporter Ann Devroy and political reporter Dan Balz recounted, Defense Secretary Richard B. Cheney, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Colin L. Powell, and Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, laid out the military options for the President.

That account contained new pro-Administration information about the sequence of events, with the President as the central, “speed-dialing” figure in launching the troop deployment, convincing Saudi Arabia it needed U.S. troops, and negotiating with other world leaders.

Missing from that report, however, and also from a more revealing account in the *Post* on August 26 about the Camp David meeting, written by *Washington Post* editor-reporter Bob Woodward and reporter Rick Atkinson,

was the most salient fact: that an initial force of 200,000 to 250,000 troops was in the plan presented by General Schwarzkopf to President Bush.

It was not until after the war, on May 2, that those important numbers appeared in the *Post*, coupled with disclosures that punctured the news-managed image of constant unity and harmony among the crisis managers, in excerpts from Woodward’s book, “The Commanders.” The news managers had successfully masked the original large size of the American force concept when that was publicly volatile. Also suppressed was any timely news of General Powell’s strong reservations about shifting from sanctions and military pressure against Iraq to an offensive strategy—the argument the Democrats lost when Congress voted in January to support President Bush.

### Number Imbedded in Other News

The crisis therefore began with public misinformation about its expected magnitude, and the misleading number of 50,000 became imbedded in diplomatic, political, economic and other early crisis news, analyses and interactions around the world.

Editors and reporters soon discovered they had been gulled as force levels quickly swept past the 50,000 mark. They generally took that in stride as a cost of “background” gamesmanship; but a pattern for news management had been successfully launched.

Early on, therefore, it was widely recognized in the press, in Congress and elsewhere that the Administration’s stated policy contained numerous evasions, contradictions and unanswered questions. They were almost as likely to be winked at or rationalized in the press, however, as focused on.

After the first full surge of American troops reached the Gulf in August, *Time* magazine columnist Hugh Sidey wrote: “...Bush keeps moving: White House to Camp David to Pentagon to Kennebunkport to wherever. He pops up to shake a fist, then pumps out a smoke screen of fuzzy gray words. The blockade is an ‘interdiction,’ the de-

tained Americans are not called hostages, and what is happening is not war but a defensive operation. Bush’s press conference last Tuesday sounded like a court deposition—his lawyers and his rights under the U.N. Charter.

“While the world was watching Bush...[the U.S. military] sent more men and material further and faster than at any time in history. This huge cavalcade was not exactly secret, but nearly a week went by before the vast size of the operation dawned on an astounded world....”

For the news magazines, the President’s apocalyptic comparisons of Saddam Hussein and Adolf Hitler were rich nourishment for magazine covers, Armageddon-like language and battle-plan graphics which newspapers hurried to match.

*U.S. News & World Report* in late August produced a special double issue on World War II and the Gulf crisis, headlined “Defying Hitler”—with Hitler, Churchill and Roosevelt on the cover. “By next month,” *Newsweek* informed its readers at the end of August, “the Americans will be as ready as they’re going to be” in the Gulf, “with about 125,000 combat troops and support personnel in the theatre.”

Beyond manipulating the media about military aspects of the crisis, the Administration had numerous non-military priorities, requiring varying levels of concealment, obfuscation and partial disclosure. They ranged from finding a path through the Arab world’s suspicions of the West, and the constant Arab-Israeli crisis, to inducing Western allies and Third World nations to join the multinational force and offset the huge costs of the crisis.

At the same time, the Administration had to sustain the precarious and unprecedented consensus against Iraq that it achieved among the Big Five holding veto power in the U.N. Security Council. That required constant diplomacy to retain qualified support from the Soviet Union, for years Iraq’s prime arms supplier, and the uneasy toleration of China—all for a price.

Indeed these requirements all came with diplomatic, military and economic

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prices, which today are still unfolding.

This flood of developments engulfed a somnolent press, Congress and nation in the vacation-oriented month of August. Even if there had been no news manipulation to compound the task of short-staffed news organizations, they could barely cope with the surge of information pouring out of world capitals about the Gulf crisis: military, refugee, hostage, oil, diplomatic, religious, political, economic and other news, to be explained in the American context.

And to do that, the press itself had to crash-learn the fundamentals of the Gulf region. That meant everything from geography, turbulent history, disparate cultures and punishing climate, to the boggling complexities of nationalism, shifting loyalties and leadership, and alignments....

But the most effective news controller was the President himself, the dominant generator of information. With his whirlwind style of telephoning, he was global diplomatic-military strategist, Commander in Chief, information central for his own advisors, chief spokesman, and chief censor.

The President's disarming affability and frequent availability to the press obscured the reality that he and his advisors were manipulating public opinion with the intensity of a ruthless American political campaign, transferred to the international scene with a diplomatic gloss.

As a consequence, protests by American news organizations against Defense Department control of the press during the Gulf War do not reach the

Newsday columnist Sydney H. Schanberg labels those groups the press that "behaved like part of the establishment," and now is "feeling embarrassed and humiliated and mortified."

Schanberg, who won a 1976 Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the fall of Cambodia, was one of five independent writers who joined 11 smaller news organizations in an unsuccessful legal attempt to block the Pentagon's press controls on constitutional grounds, before full-scale warfare in the Gulf began in mid-January.

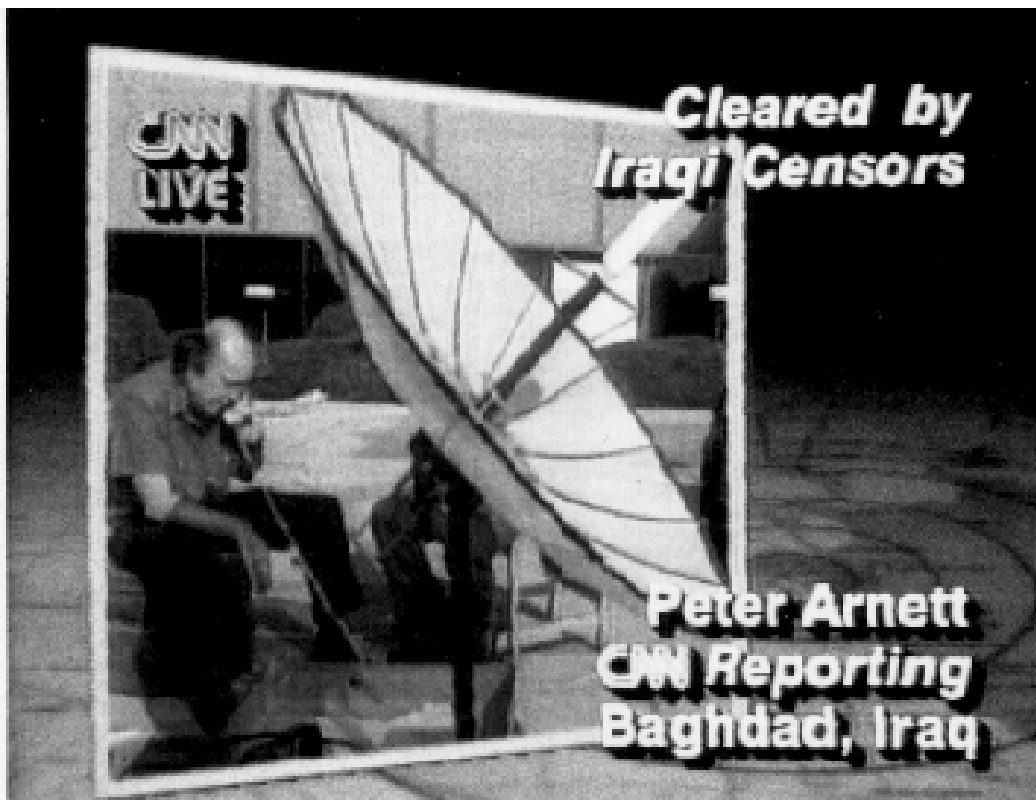
Those publications included *The Nation*, *Mother Jones*, *The Progressive*, *The Village Voice*, and *Texas Observer*.

Schanberg argues that the problem the press has is "its own scars from Vietnam. And Watergate. We were accused, mostly by ideologues, of being less than patriotic, of bringing down a Presidency, of therefore not being on the American team. And as a professional community we grew timid, worried about offending the political establishment. And that establishment, sensing we had gone under the blankets, moved in to tame us in a big and permanent way."

### Only the Press Can Heal Itself

Many journalists nod in agreement; many disagree. That is the nature of the American press. But there is a sizeable group in between.

For example, a leading participant



underlying problem that confronts the press. For news management was government-wide, without rules and regulations comparable to restrictions to the press in war zones. And the administration is free at any time, without waiting for a crisis or a war, to resort to that abnormal level of news management.

This is not to denigrate in any way the protests raised against explicit press controls, but rather to expand the focus of concern.

Organizations that protested [against explicit press controls] to Defense Secretary Cheney on May 1 were: four television networks—CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN; *Time* and *Newsweek*, the *Associated Press*, plus *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Cox Newspapers*, *Hearst Newspapers*, and *Knight Ridder Newspapers*.



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in the protest filed at the Pentagon was Michael Getler, Washington Post Assistant Managing Editor for foreign news. He wrote in the Post's Outlook section on March 17 that "the civilian and uni-

Gulf crisis was ridicule of the press, along with the more familiar reactions of anger or indignation. All underscore the inadequacy of press efforts to explain its functions to the public. Why

not be more candid with the public? Why not tell the public what the press does not know? Or caution the audience that a story is of questionable accuracy? Or in time of war frequently inform the reader-viewer-listener that all participants are engaging in propaganda, and the only sound guideline is caveat emptor?

Above all, the press must recognize that its vigilance has slackened markedly since

the beginning of the Reagan Administration. Its wounds in the Gulf crisis, therefore, were primarily the product of its own vulnerability. No one can heal that damage except the press itself. ■

*Murray Marder, Nieman Fellow 1950, went from copy boy (1936) to reporter at The Philadelphia Evening Ledger, to Marine Corps Combat Correspondent in World War II. In 39 years at The Washington Post his reporting helped topple Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy in the 1950's. In 1957 in London he launched the auspiciously named Washington Post Foreign Service—originally just him. He was one of the creators (1965) of the term "credibility gap" to describe the Johnson Administration's information dilemma in the Vietnam War; a writer of the Pentagon Papers disclosures (1971), and ultimately Chief Diplomatic Reporter of the Post. He retired in 1985 for further research and writing on manipulation of perceptions in foreign affairs.*

Fall 1992

## Popular Music

Political and social realities can be discovered in serious criticism of the medium.

BY ANTHONY DECURTIS

Last fall I attended a seminar on media coverage of Africa held at the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center at Columbia University. The two dozen or so participants represented an impressive range of backgrounds and ideological and professional viewpoints. The prevailing opinion seemed to be that coverage was highly inadequate, that it painted an incomplete and unfair portrait of Africa, quite possibly for reasons of an, at best, unconscious racism.

I essentially agree with both those conclusions. But, ultimately, what struck me as odd about the seminar was that coverage of Africa from a cultural perspective was—this time for reasons that might best be described as beneath consciousness—entirely excluded from the discussion. When I raised this point, I met with polite bemusement; it was considered, in near silence, for a moment then the conversation moved on, presumably to what were regarded as more serious issues.

Culture is not only as important as politics in its own right, but also one of the most profound ways in which political and social realities—and the fears and anxieties underlying those realities—find honest expression.

There is simply no question that for the past decade or so popular music has provided the most significant forum in which issues of importance to Africa could be explored and brought to the attention of millions of people. The "We Are the World" single and the

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**One of the stinging aspects of the Gulf crisis was ridicule of the press, along with the more familiar reactions of anger or indignation. All underscore the inadequacy of press efforts to explain its functions to the public. Why not be more candid with the public? Why not tell the public what the press does not know?**

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formed leaders of the U.S. military did a pretty good job of mopping up the press in Operation Desert Storm. No one seems to care very much about this except several hundred reporters and editors who know they've been had."

But Getler and two others at the Post also are proud of two Pulitzer Prizes for Gulf crisis work (one to Caryle Murphy, for 26 precarious days as the only American newspaper reporter in Kuwait chronicling the Iraqi invasion; a second to columnist Jim Hoagland for Persian Gulf and Soviet affairs commentary) plus a string of other awards.

What the Gulf crisis has done to the press, and also for the press, is to make its more reflective members look with wider eyes at the current role of journalism in the American structure. It needs many things; if its relevance shrinks crisis by crisis, it obviously will reach irrelevance. To prevent that, the press would be foolish to wait for government to resolve its problems; government is an adversary and knows it. But it would be invaluable to try to determine, perhaps by survey, what proportion of publishers and editors who pay lip service to that credo actually believe it—and act on that premise.

One of the stinging aspects of the

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**Many newspaper editors, particularly outside major urban areas, share that sense of wonderment about why smart adults who appear normal in every other respect would pursue a career writing about popular music. Such editors don't know much about the music, don't like it, and couldn't care less.**

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Live Aid concert brought the story of famine in Africa into virtually every American home. A series of concerts organized by Amnesty International dramatized the plight of political prisoners in African countries and around the world. A day-long concert calling for the release of Nelson Mandela, attended by more than 70,000 people in London in 1988, triggered a barrage of media debate about apartheid, corporate involvement with South Africa and, after the broadcast in the United States was stripped of its political content, the moral culpability of the international community.

And when Paul Simon released “Graceland” in 1986, no review of that album could ignore such charged questions as: Was it appropriate for a Western musician, whatever his stature and intentions, to travel to South Africa to record an album in violation of the United Nations boycott? Did Simon’s use of black South African musicians and musical styles constitute cultural homage or cultural imperialism? How did his borrowings relate to the entire history of white artists, from Picasso to the Rolling Stones, who have drawn inspiration and perhaps more than that from African and African-derived sources?

In our own country, the current presidential campaign makes grimly palpable the extent to which popular music—and specifically rap—has become a cultural battleground. Is it possible to discuss the work of Ice-T or Sister Souljah in purely aesthetic terms, independent of the attacks on them by the likes of President Bush and Governor Clinton? And, as in the days of Elvis and before, every group interested in limiting freedom of expression—an issue of no small significance to the

media—finds a ready target in the world of popular music, one of the few cultural arenas that has routinely admitted the voices of minorities and the working class.

This is not at all to say that popular music criticism can somehow substitute for incisive, analytical coverage of news issues. High-minded actions by millionaire rock stars will not save the world, and rapping about a problem does not solve it. If artists wish to engage the world of public events either in their work or outside it, their motives and opinions need to be examined as stringently as those of any other public figures.

The most skillful writing about popular music is able to do this, to balance a full array of concerns—the intentions of the artists, the aesthetic worth of their efforts, and their meaning in the surrounding culture—with grace, intelligence and insight.

The primary reason why so much writing about popular music is so bad is that, particularly at newspapers, pop music criticism simply isn’t taken very seriously. A couple of years ago I ran into a childhood friend who had become a surgeon. When I told him I was an editor at Rolling Stone, he asked, with genuine curiosity, if I thought I might ever be interested in going into “real journalism.”

Many newspaper editors, particularly outside major urban areas, share that sense of wonderment about why smart adults who appear normal in every other respect would pursue a career writing about popular music. Such editors don’t know much about the music, don’t like it, and couldn’t care less. That attitude obviously cannot help but undermine the quality of coverage. Not only do editors tolerate

the sort of bad or silly writing about pop music that they would never put up with in other sections of the paper, they subtly—or not so subtly—encourage it. In their staffing decisions and choice of assignments, they might even be said to create it.

Reporters who couldn’t cut it in news or, even more certainly, sports—the area with the most demanding readership and in which the standards of first-rate writing and in-depth knowledge are upheld most rigorously—are routinely busted to the pop-music beat. Liking rock ‘n’ roll and a tolerance for late nights in the hot clubs and crowded arenas in which the music is performed are thought to be the only relevant criteria for the critic’s job. Consequently the music rarely receives the type of probing, authoritative evaluation that is accorded without a second thought to the more traditional arts— theater or classical music, for example—or even to the movies.

If I seem to be singling out daily newspapers for criticism, I definitely don’t mean to. Publications that offer more specialized coverage of popular culture—monthly music magazines or so-called “alternative” weeklies—seldom do much better, though their problems are of a different sort. Such publications are typically more adventurous in their coverage, often to the point of being proudly and willfully obscure. The role of the critic is perceived to be something like “Ambassador to the Unhip;” the writing frequently is characterized by a chiding—even, despite all the voguish mannerisms—schoolteacherish tone. Attitude substitutes for perspective and opinions replace ideas.

The unstated question underlying such writing might be said to be: “But

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why don't you know all this already? It's so tedious to have to explain it to you." The stylistic excesses are sometimes justified as the writer's effort to mirror the energy of the music; in fact, they seem primarily designed to relieve the writer's boredom. Half-digested academic cultural theory combines with witless adolescent posturing and outrageously indulgent first person rantings to create writing that can be of interest only to the most hardened or masochistic insiders.

Popular glossy magazines, on the other hand, often fetishize celebrity and hold matters of substance hostage to the trends of the moment. "Criticism" in any sense of the term can scarcely be applied to this "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" approach to coverage.

In the hands of witty, keen-eyed features writers, such profiles can be fascinating glimpses of lives trapped in the soft hell of notoriety—or they can just be fun, journalistic bonbons. Most often, however, they serve to inscribe more deeply the idea that the rich and famous are not only different from, but better than, you and me.

Some general observations can be made. The function and meaning of criticism are shifting dramatically in every aspect of our culture. The drama critic at *The New York Times* may be able to shut down a play with a negative review, but few individual or institutional voices wield that kind of power any longer, and that's almost certainly for the good. Providing guidance to potential consumers of the arts—"Is it thumbs up or thumbs down?"—is one legitimate function of journalistic criticism, but it absolutely is not the only one, and it should not even be the primary one.

Besides, given the enormous cultural diversity of many of our country's communities, readers and viewers are becoming increasingly wary of placing their trust in one godlike critical figure. Consequently, the most honest and responsible critical writing these days does not hide behind the troubled, timeworn notion of "objective truth," but offers an informed, clearly stated

view that the audience can understand and evaluate, accept or reject. Criticism, however penetrating, should not be regarded as the final word; it should mark the beginning of a dialogue with the audience, not the end of one.

Like all arts writing, popular music criticism should be driven by the power of the writer's ideas, not the real or imagined allure of the subject. That is to say, whether the subject is Madonna or the newest, least-known, least-scintillating band on the local scene, the writer's perspective should provide the story's most lasting impression. Like all writing in general interest publications, critical writing about even the most rarefied, technically demanding or avant-garde subjects should be accessible to non-specialist readers.

Though *Rolling Stone* is primarily a music magazine, it does not cover music exclusively, and its audience is extremely diverse. Some of our audience began reading the magazine at its inception in 1967 and are in their 30's or 40's; others began reading it last year and are in their teens or 20's. Some people read it for the general interest features or political coverage; others read it for a broader assessment of the pop cultural scene that includes movies and television, and still others do read it principally for its music coverage.

Moreover, particularly in recent years, significant fissures have developed in the music audience; these are changes in *Rolling Stone's* readership that reflect changes in the society at large. Some of the magazine's readers are rap fans; others hate it. Some, both young and old, revere the titanic figures of the Sixties; others weary of tales about the good old days of peace, love and granola.

Finding a way to address such a splintered audience is a challenge. To avoid being driven mad, I try, both in my editing of the album review section and in my own writing for the magazine, to summon up an imaginary figure I term "the smart, curious reader." By "smart" I mean possessing a reasonable degree of comfort with the process of engaging ideas; for critical writ-

ing especially, this seems the minimal requirement. By "curious" I mean possessing a reasonable degree of interest in the subject, even if that interest is entirely abstract and is accompanied by little or no specific prior knowledge. The aim of writing addressed to this reader is work that rewards anyone who comes to it with an open mind.

To reinforce the notion of criticism as an ongoing dialogue, I also try to keep the section open to a broad range of voices, styles and viewpoints—assuming always that the critic is qualified and informed. A review by one writer will sometimes set forth an aesthetic vision entirely antithetical to the one put forward with equal conviction by another writer in an adjoining review. Some readers, like the sort of student who grows uneasy when, at the end of a vigorous class discussion, the teacher refuses to give the "right" answer, find this approach infuriating. Others, hopefully, find it liberating and enlivening, small but telling evidence of a democratic ideal in which differing ideas are all allowed valid expression.

Beyond this, there really is no magic prescription for ensuring first-rate critical writing about popular music or any other subject, cultural or political. The problems with coverage of the music result primarily from problems in how the music is perceived by the people who determine how it is going to be covered. Unless it is seen as a worthy subject that requires serious assessment in all its aspects by talented people willing to communicate with a general audience, the quality of the coverage will suffer. It isn't much more complicated than that. More than 25 years after Aretha Franklin sang the words of Otis Redding, defining in terms of an indelible pop song one of the crucial demands of the civil rights movement, the issue is still respect. ■

*Anthony DeCurtis is a writer and Senior Features Editor at Rolling Stone, where he oversees the album review section.*

Fall 1994

## The Old and Future Labor Beat

A veteran reporter complains that the press is ignoring blue collars and unions speaking for them.

BY MURRAY SEEGER

There was a time when reading the Tuesday page one "Labor" column in *The Wall Street Journal* was a required exercise for many reporters. There, every week, the bible of business printed short items of interest to those of us who covered labor. There were tidbits from the various government agencies dealing with workers and workplace issues, academic studies on wages and benefits, and a couple of insider items about trade unions.

No more. A scan of recent "Labor" columns revealed items about a professional counseling firm, businessmen who rent convertible cars on their "work" trips, corporate policies toward personal telephone calls (at home and on the road) and the foreign cities least expensive for expatriate American families.

The column is still called a "report on people and their jobs in offices, fields and factories," but the slug is quaint; except for an occasional item, the column ignores blue collars, farmers and organized labor.

Hardly anyone covers labor anymore. Instead, we have reporters assigned to "workplace issues" who work in the business editor's domain. Their copy competes for space with market, trade and corporation stories. In Washington, organized labor is an adjunct of the political and congressional beats where the word "union" is sliding with "liberal" into the dustbin of history.

In focusing on "the workplace," reporters have devoted reams of copy to brokers, engineers and managers who are able to articulate their problems and who closely resemble modern jour-

nalists in education and social background. Much less attention has been given to the mechanics, clerks and laborers who are the main victims of recent economic dislocation and to the unions that are their surrogates.

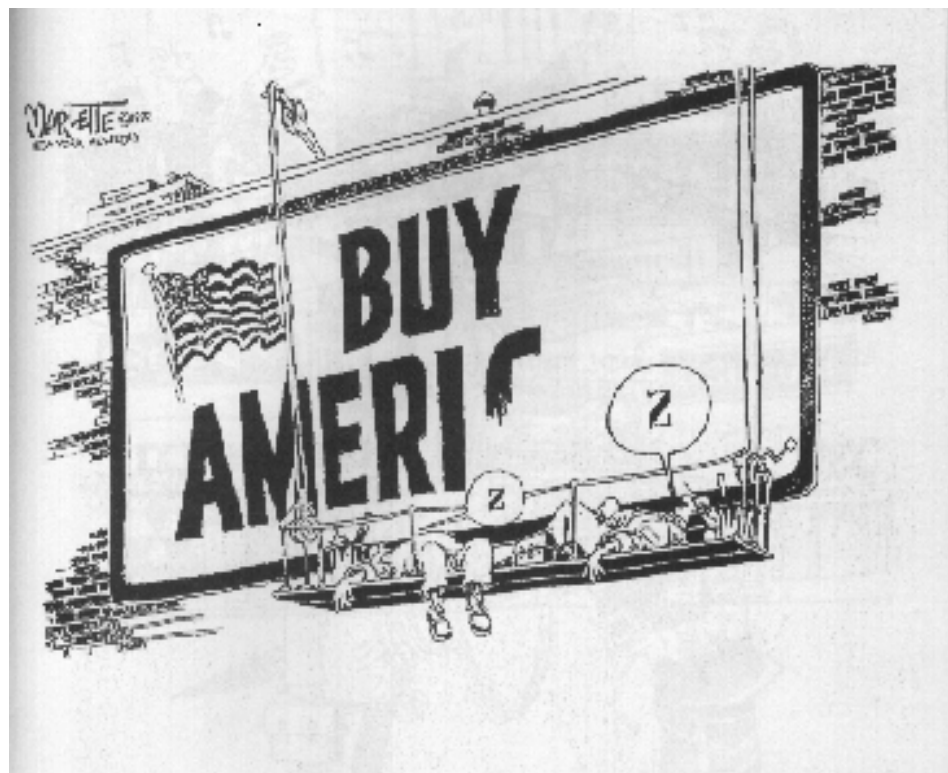
The printed and electronic media have played down one of the great stories of this era, the decline of work-

pers or new, high tech electronic services, or the products they advertise.

The U.S. Census Bureau in June reported a sharp increase between 1979 and 1992 in the number of persons earning less than the poverty-level annual wage of \$14,228 needed to support a family of four. In 1992, 18 percent of full-time workers earned less than \$13,091, a 50 percent increase over 1979 when 12 percent of workers were in that group.

Poorly educated women comprise a large proportion of these working poor, but the share of men in that trap grew 83 percent in those years; the female share was up 16 percent. Nearly half of the group is between 18 and 24.

Another study released last December showed that between 1979 and 1991, average, after-inflation wages



Cartoon © Doug Marlette, courtesy of Marlette.

ers' real income and the further elevation of upper income Americans. The implications of this widening of social and economic gaps escape many editors even though it means their readers have less money to buy their newspa-

paid high school graduates fell 12 percent.

College graduates' wages remained stable while those paid to individuals with two years' graduate work rose 8 percent. The disparity in pay between

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high school graduates and college graduates went from 38 percent to 57 percent in that period.

Labor Secretary Robert Reich, who released the study, observed: “A society that lives with a very large gap between the well-educated and everyone else makes for an unstable society.”

The long-term risk is the creation of a rigid three- or four-level class structure from which America escaped with the development of a mass middle class and firm belief that each generation could live better than its predecessor. Trade unions were major builders of the working middle class and the dream of ever-upward mobility.

Joe Klein of Newsweek recently suggested that we may never see again “a country where a single semi-skilled factory worker can comfortably support a family.” Does that mean a return to a working class of men and women living in company-owned housing, trudging off to minimum wage jobs in order to compete with workers in India or Bangladesh?

What about all the newly created jobs? The Washington Post found that between 1989 and 1993, “new growth” companies added a half million low pay jobs and a million average wage jobs while cutting more than a million high wage jobs. The net gain was 459,000 new jobs at either low or average wages.

In a country where nearly every social and economic group is organized, only the labor movement provides political representation to these lower paid workers regardless of their membership or non-membership in a union. Organized labor is the one lobby that campaigns for raising the federal minimum wage, which is the lifeline for many of these working people.

The contemporary press, with a few exceptions, covers them as an amorphous, anonymous group, not as working men and women who want their children to fulfill the American dream. Alfred Balk, who teaches journalism at Syracuse University, summed up the journalistic treatment of workers’ is-



This photo of the 1937 painting “Employment Agency” by WPA artist Isaac Soyer is reproduced by permission, Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photograph by Geoffrey Clements, © 2000: Whitney Museum of American Art.

sues last year in Nieman Reports:

“Day-to-day coverage tends to be a business-as-usual recording of layoffs, corporate downsizing and wage and job-opportunity shifts as if these were recession phenomena little related to something greater. This clouds comprehension of an economic upheaval that is far more than a recession—it is a revolution.”

There was a time when the labor beat held front rank. It attracted first-class reporters, produced great human-interest stories on a broad front of social, economic and political issues and brought readers to newspapers. Blue-collar shift workers were major subscribers to the big afternoon newspapers in Detroit, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, Buffalo and Chicago; the morning papers with their stock tables were for the white collars.

A good labor reporter not only recorded what was happening to men and women on their jobs, but also reported on the developments within unions, communities and politics. Union contracts led to other stories in City Hall, the State House and Con-

gress....

Labor reporting has declined in parallel to the perception that organized labor is declining as a dynamic, mass social and political movement. Membership in unions has declined dramatically in proportion to an expanding work force, but the actual number of union workers is remarkably stable. In 1992-1993, the AFL-CIO collected per capita payments for 13.3 million members of affiliated unions compared with payments for 12.6 million members in 1954-1955. There may be another million members for whom the affiliates do not pay per capita dues.

In addition, there are hundreds of thousands of other workers in other collective groups that bargain for contracts and improved working conditions but are ignored by the press. When all of the dues-payers are multiplied by the number of family members, retirees and sympathizers, no matter how one plays the numbers game the organized labor movement is still the largest single, multifaceted social force in the United States.

The disdain for organized labor re-

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flects other changes occurring in American society that are reflected in the conduct of the media. Newspapers, which still set the agenda for serious electronic journalists, have become an elite form of media, moving away from a formerly loyal mass audience to cater to the social and financial interests of a smaller, older, richer class of readers.

“Citizens now perceive the press as part of the insider’s word,” David Broder, senior political writer for *The Washington Post* and one of the few national reporters who keeps in regular touch with labor leaders, has observed. “We have, through the elevation of salaries, prestige, education and so on among reporters, distanced ourselves to a remarkable degree from the people we are writing for and have become much closer to the people (experts and politicians) we are writing about.” Broder cited a 1992 debate over the extension of unemployment benefits to two million workers that was covered by the *Post* as “a tactical battle between Bob Dole and George Mitchell” and between Congress and the President.

“The one perspective that is missing from these stories is the viewpoint and stakes of the two million people who will or will not get a supplemental unemployment benefit,” Broder continued. “Why? Because most of us don’t know these people. They are not our friends.”

William Greider observed in the book *Who Will Tell the People* that the death of urban afternoon newspapers caused the loss of a “singular angle of vision.” “Newspapers do still take up for the underdog, of course, and investigate public abuses, but very few surviving papers will consciously assume a working-class voice and political perspective.”

The Washington journalism establishment repeated itself in covering congressional passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement. After ignoring the AFL-CIO as politically irrelevant, these media mavens were surprised to find that NAFTA was nearly defeated by organized labor’s opposi-

tion.

“The Washington press has an increasingly corporate perspective,” Greider commented. “They identify with status quo ideology. The press could not bring itself to take the labor opposition to NAFTA at face value. In another era, 20 years ago, the press would be out talking to these people. Now it’s all done through focus groups and public opinion data.”

Speaking of the “political elite,” Richard Harwood wrote in the *Post*: “We socialize with them, talk the same language, have the same interests, live in the same neighborhoods, share life styles, schools for our children, clubs and poker games. It is no wonder that the pictures of the world we present to the newspaper audience and the spin we put on them are, in the strict meaning of the word, the ‘propaganda’ of the ruling class.”

Slaves to consistency, the sheep-like press pays little attention to the grassroots campaigns for President Clinton’s national health plan conducted by unions and the American Association of Retired Persons joined by the American Medical Association. More attention has been paid to the lobbyists for business.

Clearly, the outlook of reporters and editors has changed over time. In my generation, the Greider-Broder-Harwood era, we worked with many great reporters who had no college degrees, but great instincts and feelings for working people. My own attitude was sharpened by three summers’ work in the huge Lackawanna Works of the Bethlehem Steel Corp., where at 18 I became a member of the United Steelworkers of America. My education among 16,000 steelworkers was equal to, and perhaps superior to, what I learned later among 12,000 students at the University of Iowa. But today’s problems are greater than those cited by a bunch of old guys grouching about the “good old days.”

By ignoring any real concerns of working people, newspapers have accelerated a broad trend against reading of any printed news. Workers who

leave home in the morning without reading a newspaper come home and watch the evening television news. Instead of making their publications more interesting to workers, publishers and editors are desperately trying to book passage on the new electronic information highway where their fellow travelers will be only upper income.

On the other hand, all media organs cover issues of minority and women’s rights, partly because the newspapers, networks and local stations have responded to pressure to make their staffs more reflective of society as a whole. The younger journalists make sure their bosses are sensitive to issues of individual rights while collective rights are put aside.

The new journalists, with few exceptions, do not see workers’ rights as an issue of civil rights even though organizing and joining unions are rights protected by the Constitution and 60-year-old federal law. The “me” generation will complain of personal mistreatment without taking the logical response: collective action.

Workers in a broad perspective are often patronized and their grievances treated as economic and social phenomena. Younger journalists have exaggerated views of the skeletons in labor’s closet—corruption, rigid work rules, bloated payrolls. They view organized labor as a monolith, not as a collection of idiosyncratic units; they do not recognize unions’ interests as workers’ interests....

Certainly, the era of mass organizing and frontal confrontation between labor and government or big business has passed along with the charismatic labor personalities such as Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers and John L. Lewis of the Mineworkers. Still, there are good “workplace” stories awaiting broader discovery.

It is a mistake to concentrate workplace coverage on unions, but it is a bigger mistake to ignore them. Modern reporters with their lack of historic memory have failed to see the internal dynamics within unions to see how they have given strength to the civil

rights movement and enrolled minorities in numbers at least double their proportion in the overall population. Once slow to join unions, women now represent a substantial portion of all members and have moved into key staff positions, although they are underrepresented at the elected officer level.

While the hierarchy of the labor movement seems tired and aged, there is a new generation of younger, innovative leaders working directly on workers' problems at regional and local levels. This is where some of the best "workplace" stories can be found.

Unions have always limited their contacts with the press. They are not equipped to finance the kind of public relations and marketing campaigns their enemies mount. Instead of looking for p.r. types to guide them, reporters should read union newspapers that report labor activities at every level.

The organized labor movement stands out for its broad agenda in an age of single-issue, narrow interest politics. Despite its troubles, the labor movement enjoys a consistent, positive reputation as measured over nearly six decades by the Gallup Organization.

As Robert Kuttner, one of the few national columnists who can be called a liberal, concluded recently: "Labor remains the most potent counterweight to the increasing intellectual, ideological and political dominance of organized business and concentrated private wealth." ■

*Murray Seeger, a 1962 Nieman Fellow, wrote for the News in Buffalo, the Plain Dealer in Cleveland, the Times in New York and Newsweek from Washington. For The Times in Los Angeles he wrote from Washington, Moscow, Bonn and Brussels, with a specialty in economics. Bored in the West, he went to Singapore to write and edit for the Straits Times. He opened doors and windows as Information Director of the AFL-CIO and Assistant Director for External Affairs of the International Monetary Fund.*

Spring 1996

## Feasting on the Seed Corn

Media critic says that newspaper executives cutting into news coverage are risking the future for short-term gains.

BY ALEX S. JONES

**T**he question for the nation's newspapers is as stark as it is simple: Will they survive?

In a few years, most newspaper readers will live in homes served by the electronic equivalent of a giant water-main through which will roar a Niagara of information. They will have access to an almost limitless supply of data, seductively presented. To compare today's on-line offerings to what is soon to come is to compare hieroglyphics and papyrus to Time magazine.

So it is little wonder that newspaper companies are worried and confused—

even panicky.

Whether the nation's newspapers save themselves—and they can—lies almost entirely in the hands of their owners and top executives, who have the power to decide how money is spent, and in what amounts. These are shrewd and intelligent people, most of whom believe they are journalists, if only tangentially. They are also serious about their business and are guided by reason and pragmatism.

Therefore, it is all the more stupefying that the nation's newspaper executives are engaged at this critical mo-



New York Newsday Editor Donald Forst consoles photographer Erica Berger on closing of the paper. Photo by Mitsu Yasukawa, courtesy of New York Newsday.

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ment in undermining the very thing that is the absolute essential key to their survival.

The newspaper industry is binging on its seed corn.

To use the business jargon that is now ubiquitous from the executive suite of General Motors to the publisher's office of The Daily Bugle, the "core competency" of newspapers—that service that no one else can do better—is reporting the news. Yet throughout the nation, news budgets are being squeezed, news staffs depleted, news travel curtailed, news holes reduced, and the news itself dumbed down.

It is as though General Motors decided to compete with Japan by making a few cosmetic changes to mask the fact that the cars were actually less reliable and less innovative—and at the same time charging more for them. Any businessman would view such a strategy as suicidal, but that essential business plan is now in place at newspapers all over the nation.

For instance, at Knight Ridder's Philadelphia Daily News, the news staff has been cut and the news budget is so tight that only selected phones may be used to dial directory assistance, according to The Washington Post. The price of the paper, however, just increased 20 percent.

"To raise the price and cut content at the same time is beyond frustrating," Zachary Stalberg, the News's editor, told the Post.

At the Los Angeles Times, where the news budget is under enormous pressure, a sign showing the current Times Mirror stock price is positioned so arriving employees can see it, the better to understand why it is necessary that reporters no longer travel to sporting events that they used to cover.

But Times Mirror and Knight Ridder are hardly alone in seeking increased profits by reducing news costs. A recent survey of the nation's top editors

found that the major reason for their increased levels of stress is "lack of adequate staff, budget considerations, and a heavier workload," according to the Associated Press Managing Editors Association.

What is being undermined is the newspaper industry's core competency. As management gurus say, a

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**Many of the nation's major newspaper companies are publicly owned, and their stockholders had little taste for dwindling profits after a decade of double-digit annual increases.**

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core competency is what allows any business to exist. It is the product or service that customers perceive to have value. It is what motivates them to spend their money. At a dry cleaner, the core competency is doing a good job cleaning clothes. If you are the only dry cleaner in town, you don't have to be a great dry cleaner, but if another shop opens down the street, you have to get better fast. In that sense, Mark H. Willes, the Chief Executive of Times Mirror Co., is absolutely correct in comparing the Los Angeles Times to a box of Cheerios. While brand loyalty can carry a product for a while, in the long-term Cheerios must be better than other toasted oat loops to survive. A lot better, if the rival is much cheaper. The Los Angeles Times and all other newspapers are no different, except that their fundamental product is news.

The real risk within the newspaper business is that smart people like Mark Willes and Tony Ridder, Chairman of Knight Ridder Inc., and many other industry leaders seem maddeningly blind to the fact that expanded, enhanced news coverage is the only thing that assures the long-term survival of the nation's newspapers. They dismiss the concept as impractical, based on an outdated, romantic ideal of what newspapers should be.

But this is not a moral issue. It is a business one.

It is news that will attract customers, who in turn will attract advertisers as well as clients for the vast array of periphery businesses newspapers are now entering, from delivering magazines and custom publishing to audiotext and fledgling on-line services to selling coffee mugs emblazoned with the newspaper's flag. But without news dominance, these "added-value" ventures will wither.

If this long-term strategy is really so obvious, why don't these people act to bolster and expand their core competency while newspapers are still the premier news organizations in their markets? Why are they willing to waste such an invaluable—but increasingly shaky—advantage?

Because of money, of course.

The glorious decade between 1977 and 1987 may have ruined the newspaper business.

It was a decade of unprecedented profitability at newspapers. The Inland/INFE National Cost & Revenue Study for papers of 50,000 circulation reported average profits of over 20 percent in 1986; the profit margins were double that or more at some particularly bottom-line chains. Owning a newspaper seemed almost foolproof. Newspaper unions had been generally neutralized, and high technology allowed huge savings in production costs. Most newspapers were the only one in town, and the Reagan economy was booming.

Then came the 1987 stock market crash, to be followed over the next several years by the worst-ever advertising recession.

Many of the nation's major newspaper companies are publicly owned, and their stockholders had little taste for dwindling profits after a decade of double-digit annual increases. Wall Street's buying analysts considered profit margins short of mid-80's levels aberrant and temporary. Management generally agreed, and the newspaper



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industry went through five years of belt-tightening in every area, including news.

And public newspaper companies were not the only ones addicted to 20-plus percent profit levels. Many privately held and family-owned newspapers were operated just as voraciously, and often much less competently, than the public ones.

When the crunch came and revenues plummeted, it was only prudent to cut some expenses, including news costs. Newspapers are a business, and their owners should not consider them to be nonprofit public services. Solid business success is the surest guarantor of editorial independence.

But a solid profit is not the same thing as a 20 percent profit. And after a long round of stringent belt-tightening, many of the nation's newspapers are engaged in yet another round, this time justified by higher newsprint prices that surged after being artificially low during the advertising drought.

The bitter medicine of newsroom cost cutting, hold-downs and hiring freezes is nothing new to newspapers. But this time the situation is different, even compared to 1987. This time, the patient might die.

Newspapers are a cyclical business, and newsroom cost cutting usually occurs when business is bad. Newspapers have been able to get away with squeezing the news product because there was no real competition in that particular area.

There was plenty of competition on the advertising front: from radio, then television, then local cable operations that even the smallest markets could not escape and which made it possible for every automobile dealer to fulfill the fantasy of appearing on television. In recent years, direct mailers have been the most ferocious rival, and they have been joined in their assault on newspaper advertising by the U.S. Postal Service. The result has been a price war on preprinted advertising circulars that has hit newspaper advertising revenues hard. Locally owned businesses are increasingly rare, and

that also penalizes newspapers. Some big retailers tend to look strictly at price and have no personal stake in supporting the local paper....

Add to these woes the surge in newsprint prices that began in 1994 and, in some areas, the still-depressed overall economy, and it is not difficult to see why newspapers are under financial pressure.

To deal with these challenges to their advertising dollars, newspapers have cut costs and found new ways to produce revenue. Traditionally, they just raised ad rates, but in such a competitive advertising environment, that solution has become very risky.

The new newspaper theory is that circulation must produce more of the revenue, which is why—despite reductions in the news hole and letting newsroom vacancies lie unfilled—many, many newspapers have increased their price in the last year or two. The market would bear it, so they did it.

What the newspaper industry has not yet grasped is that there is a rival looming that is different from radio, television, cable or direct mail. This competitor—the electronic one that is murkily referred to as “the Internet”—directly challenges the “core competency” that newspapers have enjoyed for so long with splendid and unthreatened confidence.

As a local news utility, none of the other media has ever credibly threatened newspapers. The last time newspapers had serious rivals was when there were two genuinely competing newspapers in the same town, and that sort of all-out news battling is well outside the memory of most newspaper executives these days.

Even in the markets where there is competition, the newspapers either carve out different niches of the total audience or participate in joint operating arrangements. There are few cities where two serious newspapers fight it out for the same reader. The New York Times does not really compete with the Daily News or the New York Post. It did compete with New York Newsday, but that ended last year when Times Mirror shut the paper down.

In the rare places where there is genuine rivalry between newspapers, the impact on news budgets is the exact opposite of the current trend.

A wonderfully telling example is the case of The Denver Post, which is owned by William Dean Singleton, one of the most profit-minded and cost-conscious publishers in the nation.

Dean Singleton's Denver Post is in a fierce news battle with the Rocky Mountain News, flagship of the Scripps Howard chain. Over the past year, the Rocky laid off 17 managers and demoted some others, but publicly boasted that no downsizing had occurred in the news department. The Post, meanwhile, expanded its news budget as though Singleton took pride in making a lush news operation his signature.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In September, Dean Singleton acquired The Berkshire Eagle in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, one of the most distinguished small newspapers in the nation and one known for its oversized—by industry standards—news operation. Unfortunately, the paper's owners overextended in other non-newspaper areas. It was not their handsome news operation that forced them to sell, but when they got into financial trouble they cut the news staff to 40 from a high of 62. When Singleton bought the paper, he ordered news salaries cut and the news staff further reduced. An additional 11 editorial employees left or were not offered jobs.

The bulging newsroom in Denver and the decimated one in Pittsfield make the point. Newspapers will spend what they need to spend on news in order to protect their market position. It is good, common business sense. And when they don't have to worry about protecting their newsgathering dominance, they will apply a standard that makes 20-plus percent profit margins attainable.

The potential catastrophe for the newspaper business is that the people who lead it have not yet realized that they are in the position of The Denver Post, not The Berkshire Eagle.

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The Milwaukee Sentinel staff hearing of merger with the Milwaukee Journal. *Photo by Benny Sieu, © 2000 Journal Sentinel Inc., reproduced with permission.*

Newspaper executives simply have not been willing to imagine what seems increasingly obvious: that alternative newsgathering enterprises of high quality and great breadth can be created in their own markets.

What is going to be even harder for them to swallow is that the people who report and write and edit for these new news outlets are very likely to be some of their own employees...or, more accurately, former employees. Newspaper executives seem to believe that they have a patent on newsgathering, that because local radio and television and cable are little more than headline services, no one can come into their community and simply take the news away from them.

They are wrong.

It can be done, and—in some place soon—it will be done.

As an instructive case, think of Bloomberg News. Indeed, Michael Bloomberg is probably one of the people who most fervently hopes that the newspaper industry will continue to cannibalize itself for the sake of short-term profits.

Bloomberg News was created in the last few years as an entrepreneurial venture, virtually out of the air. It is now a serious, and very aggressive, news service specializing in financial

news and hungry for a bigger game.

Or consider CNN. It took vision and money to create and then suddenly it was an international institution. Now the very television networks that could easily have created CNN themselves have declared that they will try to catch up with Ted Turner.

Bill Gates is feverishly spending top dollar to recruit some of journalism's ablest people from both print and television. Is it difficult to imagine that this man, who wants every computer in the world to run on his software, also wants his company to be the prime provider of news—including local news—in every town in America?

Is it difficult to imagine that in Anytown, USA, fledgling electronic newsgathering operations will soon emerge? After all, there is no barrier to entry other than the raw cost of paying the reporters and editors who gather and present the information over the Internet.

Is it difficult to imagine that a local entrepreneur, or an ambitious local television station, or the local version of America Online, would hire away some of the local daily's reporters and editors by offering them a 50 percent raise and complete editorial freedom? Make no mistake, local television believes that the electronic future of local

news belongs to them, and they are hiring accordingly.

And might this local information and news enterprise become a business? A real business? With no presses, no distribution costs, and even better quality reporting than the local paper if that paper has been squeezing its news?

And might not such local electronic news outlets become franchises in their own right, to be assembled into well-capitalized networks offering first-class local news as an inducement to subscribe to an on-line service? Might Bill Gates be interested in such a network? Or Bell Atlantic? Or America Online? Or The Chicago Tribune Company?

So, how can newspapers save themselves?

They must pretend they are in Denver. They must fight and claw for news with the same unquenchable energy with which they wring every advertising dollar out of their markets.

They must open their news hole, hire good people, pay for quality, and vigorously promote the fact that they are doing all these things.

They must get ready to adapt their preeminent news machines to the electronic world, in whatever form or with whatever delivery system is required. But they must never forget that without the preeminent news machine, the electronic delivery will be to no avail.

They must make themselves as profitable and as tightly run as possible, but not by consuming their own muscle tissue. The real fat in newspaper expense is in the category listed on the Inland Cost and Revenue Study as "G&A," for general and administrative. The most recent study shows that between 1959 and 1994, the percentage of the annual expense devoted to G&A—everything from accounting to health plan management to janitorial services—ballooned from 21 to 33 percent. That is more than twice the percentage of any other expense category, including news and newsprint. G&A functions don't put a story in the paper or sell an ad. Some of these functions can be contracted to outsiders, who perform such work as their core competency and could do it more cheaply

and as well. Certainly, if newspapers need to cut costs, here is an area ripe for the squeezing.

They must draw comfort from the knowledge that their greatest defense is the creation of an overwhelming offense. And they must remember that the absence of an electronic rival in their particular market is not cause for complacency. Newspaper owners have long known that the world is full of people who would love to take their advertising away from them, and now they must extend that wisdom to include the certain conviction that the world is also full of people who want to eat their lunch as newsgatherers.

And they must decide to settle for a long future with lower profit margins rather than a much shorter future with the 1980's-level profit margins that, for the present, can still be wrung out of most newspapers.

Some newspapers will understand where their long-term interests lie and will invest in creating a local version of a news juggernaut. For them the electronic future is not a terror, but a sweeping opportunity.

Instead of feasting on their seed corn now, these shrewd few will be able to gorge later...on the markets of their less-wise newspaper colleagues.

*Alex Jones, a 1982 Nieman Fellow, is in the fourth generation of a Tennessee newspaper family that, beginning with his great-grandmother and grandmother in 1916, still publishes the family paper, The Greeneville Sun. Alex began his career at The New York Times in 1983. His series on the fall of the Bingham newspaper dynasty in Louisville won a 1987 Pulitzer Prize. He and his wife, Susan Tift, later co-authored a book on the Bingham, "The Patriarch." Alex left the Times in 1992 to work with Susan Tift on the first biography of the Ochs/Sulzberger family, which is scheduled for publication in 1998.*

Fall 1996

## A Grueling Standard to Live By

BY CAROLE KNEELAND

**V**iolent crime rates have been falling, yet sensational crime coverage on television news has been rising. So have the fears of viewers who have an exaggerated sense they might be victims of such crimes. At KVUE-TV, we decided it was time to fight back against a perceived crime wave we in the media helped create. We vowed to take a more responsible approach, trying to paint a more balanced picture of violent crime in our community. We've been working all year to raise the standard for covering violent crime news on television.

Violent crime can be easy to cover. It's shouted out to us on police scanners in our newsrooms. The video is dramatic. The police do the research. Often all the people we need to interview are right there at the scene—the victim, the suspect, the police, the neighbors. Our tendency has been to gather our video as quickly as possible and rush to air. Often the only questions asked were, "How good is the video?" and "Can we get live?" It's as if the police scanners were hard-wired into the television set. And the result is one meaningless violent crime story after another, wallpapering the television newscasts with blood, body bags, and police tape.

We decided we must begin asking ourselves the same type of questions about violent crimes as we ask about every other story we consider covering. After months of analyzing how and why we were covering individual violent crime stories, we arrived at these five questions as guidelines:

1. Is there an immediate threat to public safety?
2. Is there a threat to children?
3. Do viewers need to take action?
4. Is there a significant community impact?

5. Is it a crime prevention effort?

Violent crimes that didn't meet at least one of these guidelines would not appear in our newscasts.

There were daily, heated discussions as we made decisions, one violent crime at a time. We received dramatic video from our network of a man shooting another man in the head in Hawaii. Other stations aired it. We did not. The network sent video of a New York subway scene where four people had been killed by a gunman. Other stations aired that. We did not. An 82-year-old Austin man stabbed his wife and the police SWAT team surrounded his house for several hours before he came out. Clearly feeble and nearly blind, the man was arrested without incident; the woman survived. There was no history of abuse. Neighbors and family felt it was an isolated, private matter unlikely to recur. The other stations led their newscasts with it. We did not air it at all.

But these guidelines are a grueling standard to live by. It takes more time to be this deliberative about covering violent crimes. We still rush out to cover violent crimes, but we expect our journalists to gather more information. And there is considerable discussion before we air a story. Sometimes we don't. We deliberate while the competition is going to air with sketchy details and breathless reports live from the scene of the crime. We're not used to getting beat on a story. We're used to being first on the air with it. This sort of thoughtful delay goes against our competitive instincts.

One of the most difficult calls was a weekend murder of three people in the tiny neighboring town of Elgin. They were strangers to Elgin citizens—three men from Mexico, working temporarily in Austin, who came out to an

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abandoned house in Elgin to party. There was a lot of drinking, and then they started firing guns at each other. Three died. We spent two days asking our questions before deciding not to air it.

- Is there an immediate threat? Police said no. They told us the men had killed each other and they weren't looking for any suspects.
- Is there a threat to children? There were no children in the vicinity.
- Do viewers need to take action? The incident was over. The problem wasn't expected to continue. There were rumors this house had been used as a place of prostitution. Neither the neighbors nor the authorities could confirm that. We don't air rumors.
- Is there significant community impact? For two days we asked neighbors and other citizens of Elgin how they felt. We couldn't find anyone expressing great concern. People said no one knew these three men. They said it wasn't surprising when three men mix drinking and shooting, someone might get killed. They didn't feel the abandoned house would be used again for such purposes, or that anyone would follow their example.
- Is it a crime prevention effort? None was initiated.

Worried we might be accused of minimizing the story because they were Mexican nationals rather than U.S. citizens, we hypothetically changed them to three white guys from Lubbock, Texas. We came to the same conclusion that it wasn't important to air the story.

There were other violent crimes that did fit the guidelines, and we aired them:

- A University of Texas student murdered his wife and 4-year-old child with a gun that was illegal on UT property. In addition, there was a history of domestic abuse that, had it been stopped, might have prevented these murders.

- A white man pulled up in front of a black family gathering, pointed a shotgun, shouted some racial threats, and killed one black man.
- A young woman hitch-hiker was killed in a hit-and-run case by two men pulling a cattle trailer, and police were still looking for them. Another woman was abducted from the parking lot of the grocery store as she arrived for work in the early morning hours. Police were still looking for her killer. As part of our more in-depth investigation of both of those crimes, we uncovered a serious situation in a neighboring county where the sheriff's office didn't have a big enough staff to continue its pursuit of criminals. As a result, county officials allocated more money....
- When a gunman killed many children in a schoolyard in Scotland, we aired it. We also aired a similar attack on tourists in Australia.

Because we were spending less air time on individual violent crimes, we also had more time for stories on other important subjects: an explanation of how the flat tax proposals would affect viewers; an analysis of why the cost of living had skyrocketed in Austin; the story of a principal of an elementary school full of higher-income, successful students who decided to transfer to a low-income school where kids are failing because she thought she might be able to make a greater difference there. We did numerous stories on violent-crime prevention efforts by neighborhood groups and people working specifically to bring down the juvenile crime rate.

We don't hold our criteria out to be perfect. And we're not sure we've always made the right call. But we do feel we're making a difference by making the effort. We advertised that we were going to cover violent crime more responsibly, that we would give viewers a more balanced picture of violence in our community. We asked for feedback. We got a lot, overwhelmingly very positive. Viewers told us that they felt valued by us, that finally someone

was listening to their concerns. Some said they had started watching local news again. Austin Police Chief Elizabeth Watson called it commendable from a community service standpoint because she feels sensationalized reporting fuels unjustified fear.

But a few people worried that they might miss crimes they should know about, that we were somehow sanitizing the crime situation. They were helpful and instructive. Still, even now we carry far more crime, as a percentage of our newscasts, than the rate for Austin.

...One of our competitors labeled it censorship, as if every crime has a constitutional right to be on the television news. Yet that station, like all of us, chooses every day not to air some news for lack of interest or time. We've simply raised our standard for including violent crime in our newscasts and we've let the public know our standard.

The effect on the KVUE 24 journalists has been profound. They are investigating violent crimes more thoroughly. The level of discussion about violent-crime coverage is more thoughtful and constant, and the search for solutions is much more determined. We plan to continue on this course, trying to air information viewers need on violent crimes, while not deluging them with sensational violence. But we consider it a work in progress.

Of course, there's the bottom line: ratings. In February, the first ratings period when we were implementing this policy, we came out a strong number one, across the board, with every newscast. They were our highest numbers in a decade. We held our lead in May. There's no way to tell how much the new approach to crime is contributing to our success. But it certainly isn't hurting. ■

*Carole Kneeland directs a news staff of 50 as Vice President/News Director of KVUE-TV, an ABC affiliate in Austin, Texas. She covered state government for WFAA in Dallas from 1978 to 1989 and was the Austin Bureau Chief from 1981 to 1989.*

Winter 1996

## Needed: Long-Haul Commitment

BY MELANIE SILL

**T**he best environmental story I ever worked on began with a tip that had nothing to do with the environment.

A friendly source called investigative reporter Pat Stith at *The News & Observer* and told him about a state veterinarian who seemed awfully chummy with the North Carolina pork producers he was supposed to be regulating. Stith was working with Joby Warrick, another reporter, on a couple of stories involving the state agriculture department, so they added this tip to the list they were scouting. I was their editor on the stories.

Eventually we found out more about the state vet, who was indeed taking favors, but the piece about his wrongdoing had to wait. Along the way, Stith and Warrick nosed out a much more important and compelling story: Corporate hog production was expanding

rapidly without oversight; the expansion was harming water and air quality and driving independent farmers out of business, and pork producers had won tax breaks and jimmed the laws and rules to disable the system that should have been regulating their industry.

The news hit the paper in February 1995 in the form of a five-part investigative report called “Boss Hog: N.C.’s Pork Revolution.” The series and months of follow-up reporting awoke citizens and leaders to a host of concerns surrounding their new local industry, and eventually brought the state’s first significant regulation of hog farms. *Boss Hog* also won a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service and other national awards including the John Oakes and Scripps Howard Meeman Award, both of which recognize environmental reporting.



*Photo by Keith Greene, News & Observer, courtesy of The News & Observer.*

Hogs were nobody’s top agenda item in North Carolina, with the exception of a citizens’ group concerned largely with odor from large hog farms. The N&O series changed that. But our motive for reporting was journalistic, not moral. Something was happening that people didn’t understand. It was a story, not a cause. And while *Boss Hog* led to major reform, we embarked initially not on a crusade but on a hunting expedition.

On other occasions, I’ve worked with stories that fell into what I call referee journalism. One side says this, the other says that. There’s a controversy; a vote by a state commission or a decision by county commissioners is at hand. The newspaper does a situation piece explaining the environmental issue or hazard, reflecting the differing opinions of what’s happening, offering balance, and exploring as much objective information as possible to determine what is factually provable. After some amount of fighting, lobbying, negotiating or backroom dealing, the decision is made. Reporters stick with the story until the controversy is over, then depart for the next ruckus.

Referee journalism is an essential part of daily journalism, and when done right it helps people understand more about critical decisions unfolding in their communities.

Sometimes, however, we can do stories that are even more valuable—stories that reveal new information and, at the same time, deepen people’s understanding of the larger forces at play not just in one particular environmental dispute, but in a broader set of ongoing decisions. *Boss Hog* was such a story and illustrates how powerful journalism can be when it breaks new ground rather than simply summing up controversy or outrage.

The agenda for environmental action is set by any of a number of actors; advocates such as the Sierra Club, Environmental Defense Fund or other groups, government regulators, community coalitions, or industries looking for relief from rules they consider burdensome.

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The agenda for environmental news coverage, however, ought to be set by news organizations. The most valuable environmental coverage is part of a long-haul commitment to journalism that exposes not just one disaster or scandal, but that explains fundamental decisions, large and small, on the way to or from such dramatic occurrences.

That kind of commitment supported us as we dug further into the doings of the pork industry. The topic was, let's face it, obscure. But we knew we had support to follow our instincts—and our instincts told us something wasn't right.

The tip about the North Carolina state veterinarian who might be taking

were state environmental agencies, which had paid little regulatory attention to the pork industry, or environmental advocacy groups, which had other issues on their priority lists. Instead, Warrick and Stith built the story one bit at a time.

In the course of all this reporting, we met weekly (all still busy with other assignments) in the newspaper snack bar to catch up. One afternoon, as Warrick told Stith and me about the massive hog barns and waste disposal systems, a logical question arose: What happens to the, well, the waste? And isn't it a problem in Eastern North Carolina, where the water table often is measured in inches, where creeks and

were running their own show in North Carolina was that they were gambling with the land, air and water of the state's coastal plain. Hog lagoons planted in sandy soil were leaking, according to a never-publicized study by a researcher at North Carolina State University, a land grant institution where pork producers funded many studies. Warrick dug up that study and other fundamental research that had barely seen daylight. State regulators were almost ignorant of how the hog expansion—the number of pigs had doubled in four years to seven million—had affected the environment. Moreover, they weren't particularly concerned.

I've always liked environmental stories, both as an editor and as a reader. I'm not surprised by polls that show support among Americans for laws and rules that protect the air, water and other natural resources. Our readership studies show the same strong interest in stories about the environment.

The referee stories that are fodder for the daily news report are valuable, because no news organization can keep track of every environmental issue, and lawsuits do get filed. Journalists do a great service by seeking out the reality behind rhetoric offered by companies and advocates. Readers need stories that analyze the situation that prompted a proposal for a new law. They need for their local newspaper or television station to keep up with various environmental organizations, regulators and industry groups, and to report on what those players are doing and saying. Still, I think journalists and their communities profit greatly by portraying the advocates and activists as parts of stories rather than as their beginnings and endings.

In the case of Boss Hog, North Carolina's pork industry had grown so rapidly that no one—advocates, regulators, farmers, local leaders—seemed to possess an informed and detailed understanding of what had happened, why and with what consequence. The N&O, the largest daily but not the hometown paper for most of North Carolina's hog country, answered those questions in a way that showed the value of inde-



Aerial view of hog operation in Sampson County, North Carolina. *Photo by Robert Willett, News & Observer, courtesy of The News & Observer.*

gifts from hog farmers seemed like part of something bigger, and it didn't take long for Stith and Warrick to leave that trail for another. In looking through records, talking to people, and discussing what the reporters were learning, the three of us quickly recognized the connections among hog barons, political chiefs, and rural kingpins. We also decided that we would get little, if any, usable information from the anti-hog groups. They were part of the story, but they were not good sources of fundamental information. Neither

streams crisscross vast stretches of bogs and wetlands?

A few researchers, both in and out of government, had been looking into these issues. But no one could say how much damage had been done, or might be done. The industry simply had grown too much, too quickly, for anyone to say. The payola story had turned into an environment story, and much more.

The rest of the picture came into focus as our reporting progressed and we began mapping out our stories. The reason it mattered that pork producers

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pendent journalism for communities large and small. We had to do extensive original reporting to get the answers, because the picture offered by any of the interested parties was narrow and, given their interests, skewed. Stith had to spend hundreds of hours in the legislative library retracing the steps of Wendell Murphy, the nation's top hog producer, who had done his industry a number of good turns in legislation he sponsored or supported during 10 years in the state senate. None of these actions had spurred controversy; none of them drew reporters' attention, either. Backtracking showed us again how easy it is for journalists to miss stories when they don't generate conflict. But the legislative reporting showed political influence in action and put it in the context of the larger story of Boss Hog's expansion. The environmental damage could not be understood without an explanation of the regulations; the lax oversight made sense in light of Murphy's legislative record; the willingness of rural counties to accept big hog farms was easy to understand given the struggling economy of Eastern North Carolina. And the characters in this drama, from homespun millionaires like Murphy to hog farm neighbors with contaminated drinking wells, made it a story about people rather than about bureaucracies and companies.

This is the kind of journalism I love best—stories that make connections for people.

A second drawback to referee journalism, I find, is that it sends reporters hopscotching from crisis to crisis, fight to fight, with little concern for long-term coverage. A "nimby" fight over a new subdivision near a creek might occupy a reporter's time for months; once the vote is made and the issue is settled, how often does that reporter return to determine the environmental outcome? Environmental reports that expose damage often lead to task forces, study commissions or new laws. Those actions, however, are beginnings rather than endings.

Some of *The News & Observer's* most valuable reporting came after the

original stories were published. The governor and legislative bigwigs responded to the series by setting up a study commission and vowing to address the public's concerns. Legislators introduced bills to step up inspections and require new environmental safeguards on hog farms. But pork producers stalled or killed most of the initiatives. The N&O covered both the action and the stall—a process that required reporters to sit in long meetings of committees and commissions and to keep in touch with a number of sources on a daily or weekly basis. Then one morning in June, a large hog lagoon burst, spilling 25 million gallons of feces and urine into a river, and killing thousands of fish. For once, we didn't have to follow a disaster by rushing to report the situation that allowed it to occur. Our readers knew exactly what had happened and why.

A few months after the hog series, Warrick teamed up with environment reporter Stuart Leavenworth to dig into the story behind the decline of the Neuse River, which runs from Raleigh straight through the coastal plain to fish nurseries in the Pamlico Sound and the Atlantic Ocean. A series of fish kills, algae blooms and other disasters had earned this river a place on an environmental group's list of the nation's 20 most endangered rivers. Communities along the Neuse had just endured their worst fish kill season in memory. The N&O also had reported on declining fisheries on the Atlantic Coast of North Carolina; pollution in rivers like the Neuse was one reason for that crisis.

We launched the Neuse series not just to say that there was an environmental problem, but to report why it persisted and what it meant in a larger context. That reporting involved political dealmaking among powerful farm groups and state officials, including the government. Warrick and Leavenworth dug up and pored over extensive scientific studies that had been commissioned, carried out, and left to gather dust. The reporters discovered that the urban boom in the Raleigh-Durham area—a celebrated

success story in North Carolina—explained part of the pollution that was killing fish downstream along the Neuse. Raleigh's sewage plants were pumping treated water with high levels of nitrogen into the river, and city leaders were balking at spending the money to reduce that level of pollution. Other pocketbook concerns were keeping key players—farmers, developers and marina owners—from admitting their part in the river's demise along its run to the coast. As our understanding of the larger picture came into focus, graphics and photographs helped explain the pollution. Stories explained the political decisions and human impact.

The Neuse series did not begin as a crusade to clean up the river. Instead, we wanted to provide a reality check for readers confused by rhetoric over the Neuse's travails. We had published dozens of stories in which the governor or state legislators vowed to clean up the river—and dozens of other stories reporting that the Neuse continued to decline in quality. Our series dug deeper to show the choices being made by people in power and the effect of those decisions on the river. Readers could judge for themselves whether they agreed with the choices. Again, we used environmentalists, government regulators, scientists and farmers as sources, but not as starting points.

The Neuse series spurred plenty of government action and public discussion, as well as a flood of calls to key players (everyone from scientists to industry lobbyists) whose names we listed with the series....

*The News & Observer* clearly has an agenda for environmental reporting: We want to do it well. We devote reporting and editing resources, and a good bit of newsprint, to environmental coverage. We make choices about what stories to explore in depth and which ones to skip, and our pages reflect those decisions. But our best environmental stories, like the best ones in print and on broadcast around the country, reflect an understanding that very few informed sources are also uninformed. Experts often have per-

sonal interests on the line, or long-standing beliefs that color their appraisals. Thus journalism becomes even more valuable; we might not be purely objective, but we certainly can be detached. And rather than simply reporting accusations, claims and study results, we can take a more active role in helping readers and viewers understand environmental issues as part of broader social and governmental trends.

In recent months, readers who have called and written to me have expressed gratitude for the depth of *The N&O's* reporting both on the hog industry and on environmental hazards around the state. We take this as encouragement to do more—not just about big environmental threats, but about the unsexy and ultimately crucial issues related to urban growth in formerly rural areas. Other journalists might not see fame and fortune in covering silt buildup in creeks, failures of municipal sewage plants or the politics of environmental impact statements, but I think the big stories down the road are lurking in the thousands of little questions we encounter every day about what happens when dramatic change is forced on land, water or air. Our lesson from *Boss Hog* is that sometimes the best stories literally are right under our noses.

By the way, Pat Stith did get to do his story on the wayward veterinarian. He had taken favors. Our story brought a mild reprimand from his bosses, and he kept his job. ■

*Melanie Sill, a 1994 Nieman Fellow, is Assistant Managing Editor for special projects at The News & Observer of Raleigh. Her work as an editor includes a number of award-winning series, including "Children on the Edge," a 1993 series on juvenile crime in North Carolina that won a National Headliner Award, and "Boss Hog: N.C.'s Pork Revolution," which won the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service.*

Summer 1998

## This Is Watchdog Journalism

BY MURREY MARDER

...[T]here is far too little public understanding in the United States about the role of the press in the American system. And one good reason for that is that the press itself is much too secretive about what it does.

One of the prerequisites for greater understanding of watchdog journalism is to demystify the press. Help the public to understand what the press is supposed to do—and why the sweeping writ of "freedom of the press" is in the First Amendment.

Fear of the abuse of power was the galvanizing force in the American Revolution and continues to be the strongest justification for a challenging and thoroughly independent press.

The press, in turn, is obliged to perform honestly, fairly and with civility at all times.

Journalism is an odd mixture ofchutzpah and humility. Some of our colleagues tend to mix the two like they mix martinis—say, five parts chutzpah to one part humility, as in gin and vermouth. Others stretch that to a 10 to 1 mixture, while our extremists seem to use all gin, with not even a whiff of humility.

In our business, none of us can impose rules on anyone else, especially for behavior. You might say that is one freedom of the press. But we should have the strength of our own convictions to disassociate ourselves wherever we can from crude, discourteous behavior whether by packs of elbowing news people lying in wait for Monica Lewinsky, or by shouting, snarling participants in a television encounter posing as news commentators.

Not surprisingly, what the public sees becomes its basis for judging the press as a whole. If we want the public to see us as sound and reliable watchdogs on the use of power in the next

millennium, not attack dogs or lap dogs, then we must cultivate the qualities to command that respect.

That will not come easy. For in my view, watchdog journalism is by no means just occasional selective, hard-hitting investigative reporting. It starts with a state of mind, accepting responsibility as a surrogate for the public, asking penetrating questions at every level, from the town council to the state house to the White House, in corporate offices, in union halls and in professional offices and all points in between.

Operating as an instrument of democracy, watchdog journalism need not search for a new role as public journalism or civic journalism. When it functions as it is already fully qualified to do, it is public journalism. It is civic journalism, in the best meaning of those terms.

Question—Could you define "watchdog"?

Answer—If you ask the American publishers: "Do you engage in watchdog reporting?" Everyone's going to say, "Yes, of course we do." And I would think the answer is that, like everything else in journalism, you cannot set down absolute rules, saying this is watchdog journalism and nothing else is watchdog journalism. So I would think that one tries to concentrate on the concept.

Just to take the simplest example: If I go to report a story, I don't operate as though I'm there simply to listen to what someone says. If that's what I'm going to be doing then I am a stenographer. I'm supposed to be, in my judgment, thinking about what this person is saying, whether he is answering my questions, whether I, as a pseudo-surrogate for the public, should be asking other things. One of the oddities of



journalism [is] that the longer I engage in it, the less confident I am about my absolute ability to do the most simplest things directly. Now think of this: How many times have you read a story about yourself that you regarded as absolutely correct? The most difficult thing in the world journalistically is to report with reasonable accuracy a conversation between two people. Each has his own perception of what happened in that conversation. That's where the humility comes in.

One of the things I learned here at Harvard was academic gamesmanship, of avoiding questions and confounding reporters.... I had met George Bundy, Walter Rostow, young Arthur Schlesinger [all of whom went to Washington as Presidential advisers], and they had a form of academic gamesmanship which I had to learn how to penetrate. This is what so impressed Lyndon Johnson about Bundy, [who would] say, there are four factors involved in this situation. What I learned to do was to listen very carefully and think about what was being said because you thought about it and found out maybe there weren't just four factors; maybe there were five or seven. But he had overwhelmed you.

For me the watchdog reporter is always in a struggle, because he is always trying to extract time to think. The entire Washington public relations process is to overwhelm you with "pseudo-information." It happens to be very difficult, unless you have some secrets that I don't know, to take notes on a complex conversation and think about the questions you should be asking about the holes in what you are being told. The mind actually cannot do two things simultaneously....

Let me just be specific. In my Nieman year, Louis Lyons one day said, "There's a fellow you guys might like to meet. He's a German refugee." And so he brought in someone we never even heard of before named Henry Kissinger. I don't happen to remember anything memorable that Henry said at the time, and I'm sure he doesn't either. Curiously enough, when he came to Wash-

ington, he still acted like a Harvard professor. I went to see him at the White House. There was a blackboard, and he started drawing boxes on it. He was diagramming what he told me was going to be the structure of how he would operate in Washington. This exercise went on for about 30 or 40 minutes, and he filled the whole blackboard with boxes and arrows. And he stepped back and said with great smugness, "Do you have any questions?" I said, "What is the purpose of this exercise, to gain control of the bureaucracy?" He looked at me, smiled and said, "Yes." [President Carter's National Security Chief Zbigniew] Brzezinski did exactly the same thing. This is what I mean by watchdog.

In Vietnam, one of the brightest people I knew in the diplomatic service was [Assistant Secretary of State] Phil Habib. He was deeply involved in drawing up the whole governmental structure [for Vietnam]—courts, congress, executive branch. Very proud of himself, he explained it and said, "What do you think?" And I said, "Do you think you can do that in somebody else's country? You've created for them a system of courts, a congress and an executive branch—can we do that in somebody else's country?" He said, "Well if we don't, who will?" I said, "Maybe nobody should." He said, "But we always do that." I said, "I know that." He said, "We did it in Korea and Japan and it worked." I said, "Well maybe it won't work here...." That's what I mean by watchdog journalism. ■

*This excerpt is from remarks made by Murrey Marder, Nieman Fellow 1950 and retired Diplomatic Correspondent of The Washington Post, at the dinner of the first Nieman Watchdog Journalism Conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts, May 1, 1998.*

Winter 1998

## Making Sense Out of a Tragedy

BY JOHN SCHWARTZ

It was awful. We were all staking out the Craighead County Jail outside of little Jonesboro, Arkansas, one afternoon last March. Inside were two boys who the day before had shot 15 of their classmates and teachers in a mid-day ambush at Westside Middle School, killing five. Now the pack of us, probably 100 print and television journalists from around the world, was waiting for people to show up for the boys' arraignment. We surged toward each car that pulled up, and when one boy's family finally emerged from a car, the mob surrounded them hungrily. The miserable clot of family members hugged each other for strength and support as they silently made their way along the 50-foot walk to the building, the journalists moving with them like a human oil slick, silent, too, except for one British journalist who called out, "Have you spoken with the boy? Has he expressed remorse?" His accent drew the final word out to sound like "remauwss." Again, "Was there remauwss?"

I had no idea whether the boys felt remorse, but I sure did. These people of Jonesboro were made victims twice: first by the boys and then by us. Many of those thoughts were confirmed more than a month later when the Arlington, Virginia-based Freedom Forum cosponsored a public meeting in Jonesboro with the local newspaper and Arkansas State University. Though some praised the journalists for hard work and compassion under pressure, the general sense was that those of us who had arrived to tell the story had only contributed to the town's nightmare.

Retired Lt. Col. David Grossman of Jonesboro said that many he talked to spoke of "enormous anger" over the

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journalistic swarm. “The analogy that was made was one of flies on open wounds,” Grossman said.

Not a pretty comparison. But what the news media did in Jonesboro wasn’t very pretty.

The hat I usually wear at The Washington Post is that of a science writer; my reporting assignments usually involve coverage of the Food and Drug Administration, the Internet, and other science and technology topics. When the boys in Jonesboro opened fire, though, the regional bureau correspondents who would usually be sent were unreachable. I offered to go and ran for the plane with the clothes I was wearing and a borrowed laptop and cell phone.

In pulling together enough interviews to round out the first-day story, I rang up \$300 worth of phone calls on the plane to Memphis and wore out a cell phone battery on the drive to Jonesboro that night. Experts in adolescent psychology I had spoken to for stories on behavioral science told me that violence in schools was on the rise, though by most measures it was actually falling. Once I arrived that night, Jonesboro locals gave me what information they could.

I was proud of the stories I wrote that night and over the next few days, although, of course, they could certainly have been better—sharper, more

focused, smarter. But I was dismayed to see a lot of the other news reports that came out of Jonesboro. Many relied for many of their quotes and observations on “activists” who each took the tragedy as an opportunity to rehash their attacks on violent television and movies, or on the lack of religion in the schools, or whatever societal ill they were most involved in rectifying. Others looked to causes in dark undercurrents of violence and gun ownership in Southern culture.

As a science reporter, I was stunned by what I was reading and seeing about this story I was now covering. The most basic rules of epidemiology said that anything held up as a cause of a condition or a disease should include the afflicted and exclude the well. The Jonesboro story presented the opposite case. Kids across the nation see the same TV shows and movies. Guns were everywhere in Jonesboro, where the beginning of hunting season is a school holiday. Where was the distinction that could account for these two boys’ actions but which would explain why Jonesboro and a thousand other towns hadn’t erupted into bloody violence? And if there was something inherently Southern about the crime, how do we account for Mitchell Johnson’s upbringing in Minnesota? It didn’t make sense.

In fact, the powerful hold of incidents like the Jonesboro shootings on

the national psyche is not that they are typical but that they are unique. As I watched and read the stories about the “Southern gun culture,” I recalled that I learned to shoot a gun when I was growing up not too far away in Texas, and I fondly remembered

hunting trips with my folks. But I was no killer, and neither are millions of other kids in the South who learn how to shoot when they are young.

I was so troubled by the trip and the stories that came out of it that I wrote an essay for the Post’s Outlook section. The headline read “Pat Journalism: When We Pre-Package the News, We Miss the Story.” In it I wrote, “What bothered many of the town’s citizens—and still tears at me weeks later—was the way that many journalists looking for quick answers out of Jonesboro seemed to have brought them along in their luggage.”

I was prepared to be treated like a self-righteous prig by my colleagues, but their response was overwhelmingly positive. After the story appeared in Outlook, I received far more phone calls and letters than usual, all of them congratulatory....

The piece ended with this: “I’m not saying that we should ignore stories like what happened in Jonesboro. I’m simply saying that as journalists, we should cover these stories more thoughtfully, and with decency and compassion, instead of cookie-cutter bathos. We should, in other words, do what we’re paid to do: Get the story right.”

It sounded great, that last line. I’m still trying to figure out what it means. I do think that it means taking every story on its own terms: What makes one particular incident different from others is just as important as what makes it the same. It also means paying attention to more than just the accuracy of a story, our gold standard: It means getting the tone right as well. It’s only natural to try to play a story for all it’s worth, to try to imbue it with all of the emotion we think it can support. But sometimes we ring an alarm when a calmer message would do. Sometimes, I guess, you have to dare to be dull. ■

*John Schwartz is a science writer on the national desk of The Washington Post. He writes a regular column on social implications of computers and on-line technologies.*



Photographers line airport road to photograph one of the funerals of a Westside Middle School shooting victim. Nettleton cemetery is located across the street. *Photo by Bill Templeton/The Jonesboro Sun.*

Spring 1999

## Using Education Data to Build a Story's Foundation

BY CAROL NAPOLITANO

For at least a decade before the Omaha World-Herald published its five-part series "The Learning Gap," we had been searching for ways to provide parents and the public with a meaningful understanding of how students' scores on standardized tests were connected with what was actually happening in our schools.

Before we found a way to do this, the Omaha School District—the state's largest with about 44,000 students—released only subject scores on the California Achievement Test (CAT) for the district as a whole. Those scores didn't tell the public anything about the performance of individual schools.

"We would compare them to the previous year and to the national norm," said World-Herald Executive Editor Larry King. "The only analysis we did was 'Is it better or worse than the year before and the year before that?' Those trend lines tended to go up and down, up and down. It was hard to make sense of what it meant."

The public, including parents, had no idea whether some schools were performing as well as others on the tests. They could not compare how math scores in a math/science magnet school, for example, compared to math scores in other schools. And, in a district desegregated through busing, they did not know how scores of schools with busing programs compared with the scores of neighborhood schools that did not have busing.

Editors and reporters asked for more specifics, and the district began releasing scores by school and by grade. But when in the early 1990's we requested the CAT scores by race there was, as King described it, "a great reluctance."

In 1995, a management restructur-

ing left Mike Finney, the newspaper's Executive Editor, in charge of the day-to-day operation of the newsroom. A former high school English teacher, Finney had a great interest in education issues. He also had been a deputy managing editor at the Minneapolis Star Tribune, where reporters were conducting their own computer-assisted data analysis as a way of providing more in-depth reporting. Finney wanted the Omaha public schools to give us the CAT score data so we could conduct our own analysis of it.

"This was important information that every parent, every teacher and, in fact, every student ought to have access to," said Finney, who now is President and CEO of World Media Co., an Internet company owned by the World-Herald. "In knowing exactly what is going on, we have the best chance of making the decisions we need and the public policies we need to make the kind of schools we want."

Despite the logic of our argument and the fact

that the scores are public record, getting this information proved difficult. In 1996, after repeated requests, we threatened to sue, and the district finally agreed to release the data. We received scores for nearly 70,000 students who were given the test between 1992 and 1996. The data did not contain students' names, but it did identify the grade, school, gender, race and home ZIP code for each student, as well as whether the student received free or reduced-price lunch—an indicator of poverty.

After much deliberation about how best to examine the scores, we decided to limit our initial study to the district's 58 elementary schools and to use a multiple regression analysis. That analytical technique is a statistical procedure that can be used to explain the differences among data, in this case



Parents assist children in a fourth grade math class. Photo by Bill Batson, *The Omaha World-Herald*.

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*Photo by Kiley Christian Cruse, The Omaha World-Herald.*

differences among the CAT scores. The regression procedure calculated what the CAT scores were predicted to be, taking into account socioeconomic information about the students and the neighborhoods in which they lived.

Once we had this information about predicted scores, we could look at how schools actually performed and compare these two measures. Such a comparison had the potential to offer insights about student and school performance that had never been made available before to parents and the general public. The school district had

been doing a similar regression analysis for the past several years to assess the performance of its schools. But it would not release its results, even to members of the school board.

Our analysis showed that in a third of the schools, the gap between actual and predicted scores was statistically significant. In both affluent and low-income areas, some schools scored significantly lower than the statistical model predicted while some scored significantly higher. When we showed the school district the results of our regression analysis, officials said their

results were nearly identical. Only a few schools ranked differently. Nevertheless, the district told principals and teachers that the newspaper's approach was irresponsible.

"They were contending to their own staff that we were not to be trusted with this," said Paul Goodsell, a lead reporter for the CAT scores project.

After our regression analysis was completed, we knew there were significant differences between predicted and actual performance at certain schools. What we didn't know were the reasons why. To learn more, we needed to do some old-fashioned, on-site reporting. Using our data, we chose five pairs of schools to visit. Each pair had student bodies with similar demographics, but one school had CAT scores significantly higher than its predicted scores and one had CAT scores significantly lower. Each of five reporters took one pair in order to see any differences in how the schools operated.

For two weeks, this team of reporters spent every day observing in classrooms and interviewing teachers, principals, parents, students and others. Some evenings, we would attend after school functions. At the end of most days, our reporting team would meet and exchange information. As the days passed, we began to see patterns emerge from our observations. Schools scoring better than predicted had these things in common:

- Experienced and creative teaching staffs who stayed at the same school for long periods of time
- Effective classroom and school discipline
- Substantial parent and community involvement in the school
- The ability to recognize and address shortcomings in the school.

These patterns provided us with daily themes for our series that appeared over five days in April 1997.

Since that series ran, the Omaha school district has routinely released the results of its own regression analysis and continues to provide us with



*Photo by Bill Batson.*

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student-level scores. That has allowed us to do other education stories prompted by our analysis of data, such as one that showed a federally funded program to improve math and science skills among minorities was having a positive effect. We also have done our own analysis of standardized test scores for other school districts in the region and published those results.

While he can't place a dollar figure on it, Finney said the newspaper's investment in the CAT scores series was considerable because the reporters needed to be trained properly in how to do complex analysis of data and statistical software had to be purchased. Most of the money went into the hiring of two consultants to help us learn these new computer-assisted report-

ing skills and into the staff time it then took to properly analyze the data, interpret the findings, and decide on how to use the results to guide traditional reporting. Consequently, the entire project took about seven months.

With fully trained reporters and properly equipped computers, Finney said, this type of story can be done inexpensively and much more quickly. Nevertheless, reporters and editors must understand the limitations as well as the possibilities of statistical analysis and that no story is completely contained in the numbers. While such analysis helps us to construct a strong and detailed foundation, the soul of the story resides in our schools. ■

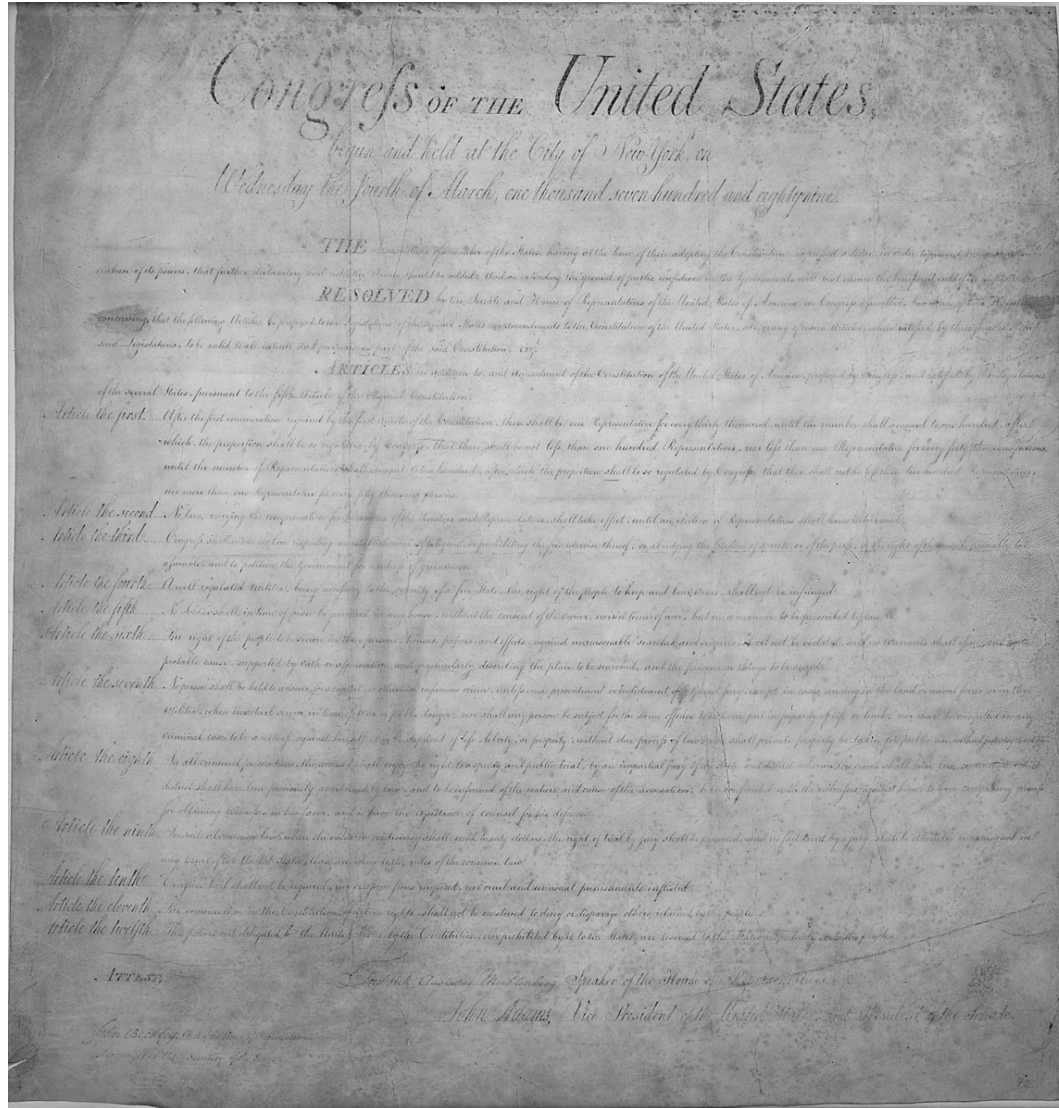
*Carol Napolitano is Project Team Leader for the Omaha World-Herald and also oversees computer-assisted reporting. During the last months of the CAT scores project, she returned to school to earn a master's degree in communication with a speciality in research and applied statistics.*



*Photos on this page by Bill Batson, The Omaha World-Herald.*



# First Amendment



The Bill of Rights, as this parchment copy is now known, is on permanent display in the Rotunda of the National Archives. Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration.

*Spring 1980*

# The New Reality

BY ANTHONY LEWIS

**M**artin Chuzzlewit, the hero of Dickens's novel of that name, sails to the United States on a packet boat. As the boat reaches New York harbor, it is boarded by a gang of newsboys who shout out the latest in their papers—the New York Stabber, the Plunderer, the Peeper, the Family Spy, and so on. “Here’s the Sewer!” cries one of them, “The New York Sewer.... A full account of the Ball at Mrs. White’s last night...with the Sewer’s own particulars of the private lives of all the ladies that was there!... Here’s the Sewer’s exposure of the Wall Street Gang, and the Sewer’s exposure of the Washington Gang, and the Sewer’s exclusive account of a flagrant act of dishonesty committed by the Secretary of State when he was eight years old; now communicated, at a great expense, by his own nurse.”

Well, Dickens could be extravagant, and in Martin Chuzzlewit he vented some extremely unhappy feelings about the United States. But just a few years earlier, in 1835, a most judicious foreign observer who deeply admired this country indicated similar doubts about the uninhibited character of the American press. In “Democracy in America,” Alexis de Tocqueville quoted a rancid newspaper attack on President Jackson as, among other things, corrupt, ambitious, intriguing and shameless. De Tocqueville said:

“I admit that I do not feel toward freedom of the press the complete and instantaneous love which one affords to things by their nature supremely good. I love it more from considering the evils it prevents than on account of the good it does.”

Nowadays the American press feels unloved, especially by judges. Cases decided in the last few years have left many editors and reporters with an acute sense of living under threat from the law. One of those cases involved

Myron Farber, a New York Times reporter who was jailed for contempt when he refused to produce his notes for possible use by the defendant in a murder trial. After that, a Wall Street Journal reporter wrote:

“The judiciary—certainly not all of it, but enough of it to lay down the law—has for all practical purposes declared war against the press.”

Another case involved the Stanford Daily, Palo Alto, California. The undergraduate paper covered a violent demonstration at Stanford University in which a number of people were badly hurt. The police, with no other clues to the identity of the assailants, got a warrant and searched the paper’s offices for photographs of the event—and the Supreme Court upheld that search. Carl T. Rowan, the newspaper columnist, called it “an atrociously un-American ruling” and said:

“History will probably judge this to be one of the worst Supreme Courts in our history.”

Just the other day Jack Anderson, the investigative columnist, commented:

“Crazy as it may seem, the current Supreme Court is systematically working to repeal the United States Constitution.”

Strong words. Can they be true? Have our courts forgotten the First Amendment? Or why is there this feeling of embattlement, of hostility between the law and the press?

American courts cannot fairly be charged with any general insensitivity to freedom of expression. Over the last two decades judges, especially those on the Supreme Court of the United States, have interpreted the First Amendment generously, even imaginatively, to protect freedom of speech and press. They have given editors what I think is beyond doubt the widest measure of legally enforceable inde-

pendence that exists, perhaps that ever has existed, in any country.

Consider libel as an example. Before 1964 there were no constitutional limits of any kind on libel actions. That is, no award of damages for a defamatory publication—however large, however outlandish—was then thought to infringe on the freedom to publish under the First Amendment. Since then the Supreme Court has read the Constitution to put sophisticated limits on a libel action. It has transformed the American law of libel. There are still serious burdens in its application, notably the cost of defending lawsuits. But compared with, say, Britain, the threat of libel actions to freedom of expression is minimal.

In recent years, the press has acquired significant new legal protections in other areas, too. The Supreme Court decided, in the Pentagon Papers case, that a newspaper could not under existing law be restrained from publishing top-secret documents that the government insisted might compromise the national security. The Court has similarly said no to what the press calls gag orders—injunctions prohibiting publication of a defendant’s confession and other such material before or during the trial of a criminal case.

Those are among many recent legal victories for the press. Why, then, the feeling of anxiety, almost of persecution by judges? It stems primarily, I believe, from concern over the protection of confidential sources. The fear that the names of sources may be discovered in unannounced police searches of newspaper offices explains the very critical reaction to the Supreme Court’s decision in the Stanford Daily case. And the need to protect the identity of sources was the main legal argument made by Myron Farber and his employer in resisting the demand for his notes.

The argument is straightforward. Information about wrongdoing in our society can often come only from people who fear retaliation if their names become known. So reporters may have to promise confidentiality if

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they are to get the story—and their effectiveness in the future depends on keeping their promises. The Constitution must protect this essential aspect of journalism.

In newspaper terms, that is a strong argument. There is no alternative to some use of confidential sources—Watergate shows that. But it does not follow that the Constitution protects journalists in this professional mechanism. Even less, in my opinion, does it follow that the interest of the journalist is the only one involved.

Another interest, for example, is law enforcement. In 1972 the interest of the press and of law enforcement clashed. In several cases grand juries were investigating crimes or possible crimes that reporters had witnessed. The reporters were called to testify. When they refused, they were held in

contempt—and by a vote of five to four the Supreme Court upheld the contempt findings. The opinion, by Justice White, emphasized the ancient right of the grand jury to “every man’s evidence.”

A curious sidelight to that case was decided on June 29, 1972, just 12 days after an event at the Watergate in Washington, little noticed at the time. I think Justice White has to be credited with prescience for putting into his opinion a footnote about the importance of every man’s evidence:

“Chief Justice Marshall,” he noted, “opined that in proper circumstances a subpoena could be issued to the President of the United States.”

Not too long afterwards a subpoena was issued to the President of the United States. He resisted, saying that he had a privilege to keep the intimate conversations in his office private. The Supreme Court agreed that there was such a presidential privilege, but said that it could be overridden in the interest of law enforcement.

Are we to say, then, that law enforcement is so important that the constitutional privileges of Presidents must bow

to it—but that the interest of the press always comes first? I would not say that.

Or consider the Farber case. This time it was not the prosecution that wanted the reporter’s evidence but the defendant—a doctor who had been implicated in some hospital deaths by Farber’s stories and who had then been indicted for five murders. Myron Farber says that his notes were irrelevant to the doctor’s defense, and I believe him; he is a fine reporter who respects the demands of the law. But the press is

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**Is there...a way to protect the vital public interest in a free press without a distorting constitutional favoritism for one institution? I think there may be.**

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not always the good guy. In McCarthy days the press sometimes treated individuals cruelly. Shouldn’t someone named as a Communist in a redbaiting paper be able to find out the paper’s evidence?

A defendant has some specific constitutional rights. One of them, secured by the Sixth Amendment, is the right “to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor.” If anyone doubts the importance of that right, or its part in a civilized system of criminal justice, think of the dissenters who at their trials in the Soviet Union are often prevented from calling witnesses in their favor.

When the press talks as if no rights other than its own were involved in these cases, its premise must be that the Constitution gives the press a unique status: an immunity from rules that bind others in our society. That view was given considerable standing when it was expressed five years ago, in a speech at Yale, by Mr. Justice Stewart of the Supreme Court.

His speech dealt with the press clause of the First Amendment, the last four words in the famous command: “Con-

gress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.” Justice Stewart said the authors of those words intended to give special protection to “the organized press”—newspapers, magazines, broadcasting—because it provided “organized, expert scrutiny of government.”

As a matter of history, I do not think Justice Stewart’s view is very convincing. He said the framers were conscious of Tudor and Stuart repression in England, where the press was “licensed, censored and bedeviled by prosecutions for seditious libel.” True enough. But that repression was not aimed solely, or especially, at newspapers. The censors were just as severe toward books and pamphlets—“ofttimes huge volumes,” as John Milton said in protest of the censorship.

There are also practical problems with Justice Stewart’s thesis. One is definitional: Who would be included in “the organized press” and get special treatment? Would the concept be limited to established publications and broadcast stations, or would it include underground newspapers, journals of sexual exploitation, Wall Street tip sheets? In these days of the Xerox, what about the person suddenly inspired to circulate among the neighbors an angry attack on real estate speculators? Such questions would force the courts to go into the business of defining “the press,” a form of judicial licensing that I think would not really please the press.

In today’s world some people who are not editors or reporters may play important roles as communicators. There is the former CIA man who published a book on the final days in Vietnam without having it cleared first; when the government tries to punish him by lawsuit, should his rights—or the interest of the First Amendment—be any less than in the case of a reporter? Or consider the Harvard professor who was subpoenaed by a federal grand jury looking into the Pentagon Papers case and asked to reveal his



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sources for a scholarly study he had made of Vietnam; should he have to reply while Mr. Farber is exempt? When I put such cases to students, I find that they always want to define the professor and the CIA man as “the press,” too; the cases are simply too compelling to be treated less sympathetically. But when you make the definition that broad, Justice Stewart’s concept of press exceptionalism loses its meaning.

In dissent from the Stanford Daily decision, Justice Stewart expounded his view in these words:

“Perhaps as a matter of abstract policy a newspaper office should receive no more protection from unannounced police searches than, say, the office of a doctor or the office of a bank. But we are here to uphold a Constitution. And our Constitution does not explicitly protect the practice of medicine or the business of banking from all abridgment by government. It does explicitly protect the freedom of the press.”

So in Justice Stewart’s view the Constitution did not allow the police to get a warrant to search the offices of an undergraduate daily for photographs of a felony, a vicious mass assault. But the Constitution would allow an unannounced search through a lawyer’s files, or the files of Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist, Dr. Fielding. To state the proposition is to refute it, I think. Such a mechanical concept of the Constitution would be utterly unacceptable to most Americans. The Constitution protects values, not particular classes of people. And there are values other than “the right to know.” One is the right of an accused to defend himself effectively. Another is reputation, which Justice Stewart has convincingly said reflects “our basic concept of the essential dignity and worth of every human being.” That is why the Supreme Court has not held all libel actions unconstitutional and why I think it will continue to allow some means, whether by damage suits or some other corrective process, for those who are defamed to vindicate their good names.

Finally, Justice Stewart has disappointed the press in one important

respect. He said the press should have special protection for its sources because the Constitution protected “newsgathering.” But he then vigorously rejected claims by the press that it had a right of access to institutions closed by government action. When reporters wanted to see prisons which had been closed to them, Justice Stewart said they had no constitutional right to do so. And in July 1979, in perhaps the most important of all these cases, he wrote for a five to four majority of the Court in allowing New York State to hold an important pretrial hearing in a criminal case in a closed courtroom. That decision, in the *Gannett* case, aroused some more angry words from the editorial writers and columnists: this time, I think, with more justification.

Is there any way out of the conflict—a way to protect the vital public interest in a free press without a distorting constitutional favoritism for one institution? I think there may be.

Justice William J. Brennan, Jr. made an important contribution in a recent speech at Rutgers University. He chided the press for making exaggerated attacks on the Supreme Court, for overdoing the gloom and doom. He had dissented from the decisions that so outraged editors, he noted, but he did not think they were the end of the world—or of our amazingly free press. Then he made an interesting suggestion. He said the press was confusing two different aspects of the First Amendment in its blanket criticism of the press decisions.

One thing the First Amendment protects, Justice Brennan said, is speech as such: “the right of self-expression,” “the right to speak out.” That is the right that was involved in some of the classic free speech opinions by Justices Holmes and Brandeis: the right of the street corner orator, the pacifist, the socialist newspaper—“freedom for the thought that we hate,” as Holmes said.

But the First Amendment does more than that, Justice Brennan said. It “forbids the government from interfering with the communicative processes through which we citizens exercise our

rights of self-government.... Another way of saying this is that the First Amendment protects the structure of communications necessary for the existence of our democracy.”

That same thought about the two functions of the First Amendment was expressed 25 years ago in more moving words by Professor Zechariah Chafee of Harvard. “There is an individual interest,” he said, “the need of many men to express their opinions on matters vital to them if life is to be worth living, and a social interest in the attainment of truth, so that the country may not only adopt the wisest course of action but carry it out in the wisest way.”

What is at stake in that second category is, in short, the ability of the American public to scrutinize its government—to scrutinize and criticize. Justice Brennan takes a broad view of what is necessarily involved in that public ability: wisely so, I think, in light of the way society has developed.

In the 18th Century, newspapers did not usually provide the “organized, expert scrutiny of government” that Justice Stewart kindly attributed to them; they were political sheets, amazingly propagandistic in tone to our eyes. Democracy was simpler in that small country. But today the issues have become so complex and the public so remote from the political actors that it depends for its democratic role on what it gets from the political communications system. And that system has itself become much more complex. The soapbox orator is no longer the paradigm. We are in an age of giant media corporations: Time Inc., The Washington Post, the networks—and of large lobbying organizations, from the oil companies to the NAACP.

Justice Brennan’s formulation takes account of the new reality. It recognizes that communication about government today is a complex process, and that the process must be protected in all its aspects if the central meaning of the First Amendment—the public’s ability to hold the government accountable—is to work. It is a formulation that avoids any narrow definition of

“the press” and protects whatever plays a part in the informational process. I think Justice Brennan’s view would assure the public and its representative, the press, some access to official business—the right denied in the closed courtroom case—because there can be no accountability in secret.

But the price of that broad view is that it cannot give anyone absolute protection. The interests of the press, Justice Brennan said, have always to be weighed heavily—but weighed against other public interests: reputation, privacy, law enforcement, and the like. For example, the rule would be that courtrooms are presumptively open—but the presumption could be overturned if a pretrial hearing involved material gravely prejudicial to a fair trial.

Justice Brennan told the press that it would be more effective in its criticism of the court “if bitterness does not cloud its vision, nor self-righteousness its judgment.” He suggested that we reporters and editors might have to accept “a certain loss of innocence, a certain recognition that the press, like other institutions, must accommodate a variety of important social interests.”

That seems to me to be good advice. I hope the press listens to the message, and I hope Justice Brennan’s colleagues take up his suggestion that the First Amendment assures the accountability of government by protecting the informing function in its whole contemporary complexity.

I happen to have a deep affection for both the press and the courts. I think both institutions are vital to American freedom, and I worry when they are at war—even a war of words. I think the two of them owe it to the country, and to themselves, to begin learning more about each other. ■

*Anthony Lewis, a 1957 Nieman Fellow, columnist for The New York Times, and lecturer on law, Harvard Law School, gave this address at the annual Christmas dinner of the Signet Society in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

*Spring 1990*

## A Supreme Court Decision Fosters Litigation

A private citizen raises high the standard  
for justice—but pays a price.

BY EUGENE ROBERTS

It’s a great honor to receive an award named for Elijah Parish Lovejoy—a man who was harassed by a mob and shot to death for exercising his Constitutional Rights of Freedom of the Press.

Lovejoy, mercifully, is on a very short list of American newspaper editors who have been silenced by murder.

Murder, of course, is now out of date. The modern way to silence criticism is to price it out of existence with protracted libel or defamation litigation. If you are a public official or corporate executive whose plans are being thwarted by robust debate, there’s no need for violence. You simply sue. And sue. And sue.

It is, to be sure, a more civilized method than stoning or shooting, but just as deadly to freedom of speech. Faced with the prospect of tens of

was spawned by a Supreme Court decision—*Times vs. Sullivan*—that was meant to strengthen the rights of citizens and the press in public debate. In this case, more than 25 years ago, the Court ruled that civil rights leaders in Alabama were not guilty of libel against public officials in Montgomery even if they had made at least seven errors of fact in an advertisement published in *The New York Times*. The Court said errors were inevitable in vigorous public discussion and were to be permitted except in the presence of “actual malice,” which the Court said had two tests: one, if the error was made with actual knowledge of its falsity, or, two, if it were made “in reckless disregard of the truth.”

Much of the press rejoiced, but three of the nine Justices—Douglas, Black and Goldberg—knew better. They

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**...there is never a time to breathe easy  
when the First Amendment, and all it  
protects, is at stake.**

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thousands or even hundreds of thousands of dollars—perhaps millions—in legal costs, critics become too fearful to speak out. Their anxiety is not for the loss of their lives, but for the loss of their homes or for the nest eggs they have put away for retirement or for the education of their children.

Ironically, this new era of litigation

warned their colleagues that they were committing a grave error—putting qualifications on free speech involving public issues. And this, in the end, they said, could undermine freedom of expression and threaten democracy itself, which, of course, is predicated upon free and open debate. The other Justices were not persuaded and for

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about a decade it appeared that Justices Black, Douglas and Goldberg had overreacted.

Then came the late 1970's and early 1980's, the worst years in the history of the American media for libel and defamation suits. Such cases as General William Westmoreland against CBS, Defense Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel vs. Time magazine, and the president of Mobil Oil vs. The Washington Post burst upon the courts. Each case cited "knowledge of falsity" or "reckless disregard" or both, and each case inspired other public officials and other corporate executives to sue. Only in the last two or three years has the flood of cases against the media begun to recede. Much of the press and television are girded by libel insurance and the wealth of large communications companies. And large papers and networks have been able, when lower courts rule against them, to fight through the appeals courts to jurists who are better equipped than juries to gauge the intentions of the Supreme Court in *Times vs. Sullivan*.

Noting this trend, and watching huge jury verdicts melt away in the appeals courts, some law firms now seem less interested in taking on libel cases against large newspapers, newspaper groups, and television.

But there is never a time to breathe easy when the First Amendment, and all it protects, is at stake. Law firms have now discovered a new and fertile field: non-media defamation cases—that is, cases pitting business against private individuals, or public officials against private citizens, or private citizens against private citizens.

More private individuals are being sued for speaking their mind publicly than ever before, and they are being intimidated into silence in a way that large newspapers and broadcast companies never were. Small wonder. Private citizens generally do not have the financial underpinning or the insurance protection necessary to withstand a determined legal assault by a corpo-

ration or by a public official who is backed by a governmental or political apparatus.

The very worst fears of Justices Black, Douglas and Goldberg are being realized. They understood that most public officials themselves are immune from libel and defamation litigation from anything they do or say while engaged in the conduct of their official duties. They recognized that if public officials cannot be sued during public debate, and private citizens can be, then there will be a dreadful imbalance in the conduct of the public's business.

How far have we as a society come along this perilous road? Far enough that two academics, without enough

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**It is disquieting, to say the least, to learn that so many American citizens who voice a grievance are getting sued for their pains.**

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resources to do a complete survey of America's courts, nevertheless could find 200 recent cases in which libel or defamation law has been used as an instrument of political power.

The professors, both with the University of Denver, are George W. Pring of the College of Law, and Penelope Canan, of the Department of Sociology. They concluded that "Every year hundreds, perhaps thousands, of civil law suits are filed in the United States whose sole purpose is to prevent citizens from exercising their political rights or to punish those who have done so."

Consider the plight of Alan La Pointe, a design consultant from Richmond, California. He opposed a trash incinerator plant that was planned by the West Contra Costa Sanitary District. La Pointe's campaign against the plant uncovered some questionable expenditures that resulted in two grand jury investigations.

La Pointe filed a taxpayer lawsuit in 1987 after the California Attorney General ruled that funds for construction of the plant had been improperly spent. A year later, the sanitary district countersued—not against the Attorney General but against La Pointe himself for \$42 million, charging that he had killed the plant project by speaking out against it.

Eventually, the sanitary district lost its \$42 million lawsuit and was ordered to pay La Pointe's legal fees. Now, La Pointe is preparing to file another suit against the sanitary district for malicious prosecution and violating his civil rights.

Though he is winning the battle, Alan La Pointe today is a much more cautious civic activist. La Pointe told California magazine recently that he was having second thoughts about being a public crusader. He says, "You think, why should it be you? You wonder, is it worth the toll?"

Another example can be found in upstate New York, where yet another proposed trash burning plant was opposed by 328 residents in Washington and Warren counties. The protesters signed petitions, wrote letters to the editor of the local newspaper, conducted public demonstrations and, when all else failed, went to court to block construction of the plant.

The boards of supervisors in both counties grew impatient with the protests and the delays. In April of this year, the governments of Washington and Warren counties sued their own citizens by filing a \$1.5 million lawsuit against the protesters.

Or consider, for a moment, two cases in Pennsylvania, the home state of my newspaper, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. In one case, Raymond Henderson, a local leader of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, went before the Township Council in Braddock, a suburb of Pittsburgh, and complained that the firing of a black township secretary had

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been “racially motivated.” The council sued Mr. Henderson.

In Towamencin Township, a suburb of Philadelphia, the Township attorney sued a private citizen, Robert C. Smith, for complaining at a township board meeting that an order by the state Environmental Protection Agency had been subverted by the township.

Ultimately the cases were dropped, but not before Mr. Smith had spent \$10,000 in his defense and not before Mr. Henderson decided that fighting for what he perceived to be racial injustice could carry a price beyond his means.

Both men were left pondering an interesting question: If you cannot press a grievance before your township board, where then might you press it?

It is disquieting, to say the least, to learn that so many American citizens who voice a grievance are getting sued for their pains.

In California, a Squaw Valley millionaire by the name of Rick Sylvester led a citizen fight against a proposed luxury resort and golf course planned for his mountain community. The developers responded with a \$75 million lawsuit.

Sylvester’s case is about to go to court, and he estimates his legal expenses thus far have been several hundred thousand dollars. Sylvester calls the lawsuit “a monster that has moved in with the family.”

The developer’s lawsuit against Sylvester, and against others opposing the project, quickly stifled what had been robust public criticism of the project. The Army Corps of Engineers, seeking comment on the proposed development, couldn’t get any Squaw Valley residents to come forth. The Army Engineers then issued a public notice soliciting anonymous comments from concerned and frightened citizens.

You may have heard the story of Bob Barker, the television game show host and former beauty pageant emcee who has become an animal rights activist.

Barker’s fierce defense of animals has made him some enemies including, oddly enough, The National Humane Association. In September, the Humane Association filed a \$10 million libel suit against Barker, charging that he has been too critical of the organization’s West Coast Regional Director.

Bob Barker is presumably wealthier, and probably more committed to his cause, than many of his fellow citizens.

But how many of us have heard of Cathy Blight, former president of The Humane Society in rural Livingston

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**As an editor, I wonder how secure freedom of the press ultimately will be if private citizens don’t feel free to speak out.**

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County, Michigan?

A few years ago, she learned that 22 municipal dog pounds in the area were giving their unclaimed strays to a kennel operator, who then sold some of the animals for medical research experiments.

Cathy Blight wrote an outraged letter to the editor of the weekly Livingston County Press. In her letter, she demanded that the township and county governments cancel their contract with the animal broker.

Several townships and Monroe County eventually did cancel their contracts. The kennel operator responded with three lawsuits—one against Monroe County, one against the newspaper, and one against Cathy Blight for writing the letter to the editor.

The County settled its case out of court. The newspaper—which was financially backed by libel insurance—eventually settled. But Cathy Blight, private citizen, had no safety net. She suffered one setback after another in the Michigan court system. Two months ago, the Michigan Supreme Court let stand a lower court verdict that awarded

the kennel operators \$125,000 from Ms. Blight.

Today, Cathy Blight is running out of options. She left her job with The Humane Society. She must cash in her retirement savings to cover the legal costs. There is a lien against her house because of the libel award. A San Francisco law firm has volunteered to argue her case before the U.S. Supreme Court free of charge. But as of today, it is not at all certain that the case will get that far. Cathy Blight is thinking about cutting her losses and settling the case.

As an editor, I care deeply about freedom of the press, just as I know you at Colby College must to honor an Elijah Lovejoy year after year who died in the pursuit of it. As an editor, I wonder how secure freedom of the press ultimately will be if private citizens don’t feel free to speak out.

Freedom of the press has not survived and thrived this long in America because it is a right reserved exclusively for the powerful press. It has survived, and thrived, because citizens rightly see press freedom as merely an extension of their own freedom. They are free to question, challenge and accuse the lawmakers they elect, so they are comfortable when the press is extended that same freedom.

But if they lose that freedom—and in place after place, and case after case, they are—then they will, rightly, be less interested in seeing it extended to the press. Then, the silence will extend from the public meeting, to the editorial offices of my newspaper and others, to the giant presses themselves.

It is a silence Elijah Lovejoy refused to permit—and he died for that. Now, more than 150 years later, the silence approaches again. ■

*Eugene Roberts, a 1962 Nieman Fellow, is President and Executive Editor of The Philadelphia Inquirer. In November, he gave this talk at Colby College, Waterville, Maine, where he was presented with the Annual Elijah Parish Lovejoy Award.*

*Winter 1991*

# The Bill of Rights in Pictures

By Nieman Photographers

This year the United States has been observing the 200th anniversary of the Bill of Rights. While these rights, incorporated in the first 10 Amendments to the Constitution in 1791, provide many basic freedoms—notably freedom of speech and the press, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, the right to petition government for the redress of grievances, and the right to a fair and speedy trial—other liberties have subsequently been brought under constitutional protection, especially racial and sexual equality. With a keen sense that the constitutional protections for life, liberty and pursuit of happiness sometimes fail, Nieman photographers offer the following pictures in celebration of all forms of individual freedom symbolized in the Bill of Rights.



Theodore Landsmark, a black Boston attorney, was attacked and threatened with a steel-shafted flagpole by a gang of white youths protesting integration of Boston schools in 1976. *Photo by 1980 Nieman Fellow Stanley Forman for the Boston Herald American.*



Appalachian woman invokes right to bear arms as she stands in defense of her home. *Photo by Stan Grossfeld, a 1992 Nieman Fellow, for The Boston Globe.*



A child, 2 1/2, who has cerebral palsy, working with his therapist at the Crippled Children's Society center in Inglewood, California. *Photo by Lester Sloan of Newsweek, a 1976 Nieman Fellow.*

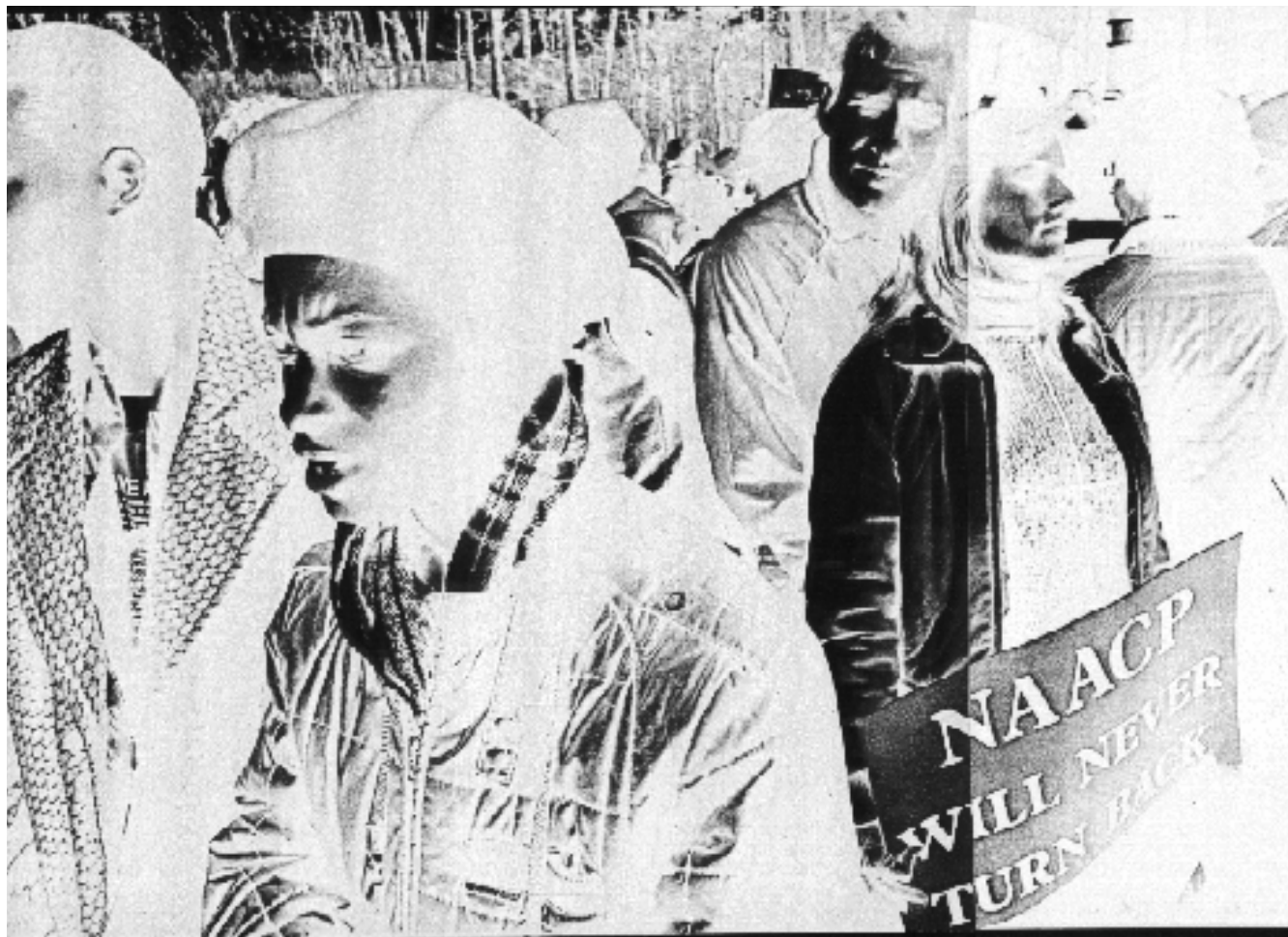


Mary Farrell, a waitress for 17 years at the Chief's Club at the Norfolk (VA) Naval Air Station, shows the new uniform miniskirt that she thinks cost her her job. A new manager at the club replaced two older waitresses with younger women who could dress more skimpily. Mary Farrell filed an age discrimination suit, which she eventually lost. *Photo by Michele McDonald, a 1988 Nieman Fellow, for The Boston Globe.*





Indians, during march on Washington in 1972, speaking at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which they took over briefly. *Photo by Steve Northrup, Nieman Fellow 1974, of The Santa Fe New Mexican.*



Anti-discrimination marchers in Forsyth County, Georgia, after a resurgence of Ku Klux Klan activity in 1976. *Photo by 1983 Nieman Fellow Eli Reed/Magnum.*



Graffiti on tunnel wall in San Francisco in 1976. *Photo by 1986 Nieman Fellow Micha Bar-Am/Magnum.*

# Objectivity

Nothing about journalism so engages—and enrages—the public and practitioners as do discussions about whether reporters can be and are objective observers of events they describe. Innumerable studies have set out to chart bias and gather evidence to support or debunk a perceived assumption about leanings one way or another. Yet when the concept of journalistic objectivity came into being in the early 20th Century, it did not imply that journalists are free of bias. Instead, the term was applied to the method journalists use to test information and provide their audiences with a transparent look at evidence they gathered. This method of reporting was developed precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work.

Discussions about objectivity have frequently occurred in the pages of Nieman Reports. **John L. Hulteng** (NF'50) wrote during his Nieman Fellowship about his concern that reporters, by interpreting events rather than strictly reporting them, were crossing the line into what he believed was the purview of editorial writers. “If we make it official policy to spice our whole news report with gobbets of opinion in the guise of background facts, we can’t expect reader trust to hold up,” he cautioned.

By 1952, **David Manning White** was worrying aloud about how public figures such as Senator Joseph McCarthy were relying on “objective” reporting—typically reporting that included charges and countercharges without the imposition of journalistic judgment—to put forth accusations. And in 1955, **Wallace Carroll** labeled “objectivity” as “Deadly Virtue No. 1.” “Too often our objectivity is simply the objectivity of half-truth,” Carroll wrote.

**Wes Gallagher** observed in 1968 that “to the true newsman partisanship is the original sin, the apple in the journalistic Eden.” And **Eric Sevareid** in 1970 noted that “Militant young men and women” journalists were arguing that “even the *quest* for objectivity is a myth, that the prime purpose of the press is not to report the world but to reform it, and in the direction of their ideas.” Sevareid argued strenuously against this: “They believe this will give a true integrity to news columns and news broadcasts. I believe it will ruin them.”

A heated dialogue among white newsmen and black grassroots advocates in 1971 about how news events involving minority groups are portrayed pointed out how difficult it is to figure out what objective reporting might look like when perspectives on the same event diverge.

By the mid-1990’s, when the civic journalism movement was emerging, **Lou Ureneck** (NF’95) explained how and why the Portland (Maine) Press Herald employed a new technique in which reporters included their independent conclusions as a part of the story. At the decade’s end, journalists at the second Watchdog Journalism Conference were ruminating on whether there is any such thing as a truly “independent source” and what role reporters’ judgment plays in covering news. ■

January 1950

## Backdoor Editorializing

What are the sound limits of 'background' reporting?

BY JOHN L. HULTENG

Are the interpretative reporters usurping on a wholesale scale one of the functions of the editorial page in American newspapers? And if they are, is that encroachment a good thing for our press and its readers?

In my book, the answers to the above are, respectively, yes and no....

But I submit that neither the spot reporter nor the background reporter has any business dealing in opinions originating with himself. Without having made a thorough study of it, I contend on the basis of personal observation that many reporters in this field are failing to observe that distinction. It is that failure that threatens a further and broader breakdown of the traditional dividing line between news and editorial columns in American newspapers.

It is quite true that such a breakdown took place long ago, with the rise of the syndicated columnists and the development of the "informed sources" gimmick. But columnists are set apart and identified as part-time opinion peddlers. They speak for themselves and not for the paper. Background reporting now appears more and more frequently throughout the news columns, from page one, column eight to the business and finance sections way in back. It appears under standard heads, with or without staff bylines. It is represented as news reporting and should continue to be just that.

If Mr. Vishinsky makes a new statement about atomic energy, it is the proper function of the spot news reporter to get out the facts of his comment quickly and accurately. It is the

proper function of the background reporter to fill in Vishinsky's earlier stands on the same subject, and the stands of British and American spokesmen, to describe the circumstances under which the new Russian comment was made, and the current status of atomic control proposals at Lake Success. And—if the editors see no occasion for a policy piece on the subject—it is the proper function of the expository editorial writer to suggest what may have led to the Vishinsky statement, what purpose it may be intended to serve in

current discussions, and what rejoinders it may bring from the Western powers. In such a presentation in depth each component should be in its place. It should never be necessary for the reader to filter fact from speculation in the "news" report....

And I don't believe I am blowing up a trivial technicality. Public confidence is a commodity too many papers are short on as it is—largely as a result of reader confusion in differentiating among news, columnists and "informed sources." If we make it official policy to spice our whole news report with gobbets of opinion in the guise of background facts, we can't expect reader trust to hold up. Certainly maintenance of that trust ought still to be a primary objective of the American press. ■

*This is an editorial writer worrying about the tendency for "gobbets of opinion" to creep into interpretative reporting. John Hulteng is on a Nieman Fellowship from the editorial page of the Providence Journal.*

April 1952

## The Cult of Incredibility

BY DAVID MANNING WHITE

Thomas Jefferson, in a famous letter to Edward Carrington, wrote his much-quoted line, "were it left to me to decide whether we should have government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." Yet few of the Fourth of July orators and self-styled champions of press freedom will recall that Jefferson also wrote another letter some seven years later, this time to James Madison, in which he said: "I have never seen a Philadelphia paper since I left it till those you enclosed me; and I feel myself so thoroughly weaned from the interest I took in the proceedings there, while there, that I have never

had a wish to see one, and believe that I shall never take another newspaper of any sort."

It was regrettable that so truly a believer in the great potentiality of the press in the United States should have been brought to such a conclusion. But the unrelenting calumny of the opposition press soured Mr. Jefferson on the practical workability of the press as a rational tool of democracy.

If Jefferson were to come back to his America today, I think he would find much in the press that would encourage him to regain new high hopes for it. On the other hand, he would find some of the corrosive evils of his own time tied up in a new package, speeded

## OBJECTIVITY

and magnified by the miracle of modern day communications, but nevertheless evil to the republic and the press alike.

Jefferson would be pleased by what we call "objective" reporting, at least he would be the first few hours of his visit.

But the thing that would disturb Jefferson, I believe, is what I term the cult of incredibility which has permeated the American press, exploiting its honest aim of objective reporting, and just as deadly in its effect of character assassination as the vilest mudslinging of Jefferson's time.

Here is the way the cult of incredibility operates. A figure of potential national prominence makes a speech or holds a press conference; or utilizing congressional immunity if he is a member of that body, he levels a shotgun blast at his latest target. This figure may be a virtual unknown on the national scene until his first such blast, but it catches the attention of the press in such a way that he is soon a mighty newsworthy figure. The press may unwittingly create a Frankenstein's monster and has on more than one occasion. But once they have built up this figure he is the master of the press and not its servant, because he is a creator of news in himself. And after that, whether the press likes it or not, they have to listen and report what he says. Some listen and report because they like what the demagogue says, because in their intense partisanship they welcome the aid of any man who will discredit their "foes." But these are in the minority, and most members of the press soon feel distaste for the demagogue and are intensely dubious of his motives. Yet they must continue to cover his every utterance lest their competitor give the public the coverage. And this large majority of sincere members of the press can always rationalize their continued coverage of the demagogue by the familiar label of "objective" reporting.

The tool of the demagogue is to use language in a way that suggests that the target of his remarks has committed the most perfidious of acts. He knows that the newspapers which will cover

his speeches, press conferences or obiter dicta (and he always calculates when his remarks will get maximum coverage), can write their stories in many different ways. He is aware that credibility and incredibility can be one and the same thing if you can razzle-dazzle enough smear words, rumors, conjectures into print often enough and in large enough type.

On February 11, 1952, the Associated Press dispatched a story from Washington on its national wire which illustrates the cult of incredibility operating at full power. The lead of the story said that Leon H. Keyserling states that a story by Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin is "utter nonsense" and "entirely false." After identifying Leon Keyserling as Chairman of President Truman's Council of Economic Advisers, the story has a paragraph which I quote in full, so well does it illustrate how the "objective" reporter of the Associated Press has presented conjectures, half-facts and innuendoes in the same "objective" way that he would report the price of wheat on the Chicago grain exchange.

"At Wheeling, W. Va., Senator McCarthy told a Republican Women's Club that secret and previously undisclosed congressional testimony by an unidentified witness showed Mr. Keyserling had once talked with a Communist Party organizer. Senator McCarthy quoted the witness as saying they discussed Communist philosophy but Mr. Keyserling was not asked to join because he did not agree with all its principles."

Let's break down one part of this paragraph, and let x equal fact, y equal irrelevancies, and z equal unsubstantiated, unproved allegations.

The facts would read: Senator McCarthy told that Mr. Keyserling had talked.

With irrelevancies added: Senator McCarthy told a Republican Women's Club (at Wheeling, W. Va.) that Mr. Keyserling had talked.

Had the above statement been written as follows it would have been factual as the AP version: "At Alibozo, N. Da., Senator McCarthy told a Republi-

can Kennel Club that vociferous and unknown ecclesiastical heresy by an egotistical onlooker showed Mr. Keyserling had once talked with an imaginary pink elephant which had Communist printed on its tail."

In fairness to the Associated Press story, 85 percent of the story is devoted to a rebuttal of Senator McCarthy's speech by Mr. Keyserling. Yet what is there to refute? McCarthy has not called Keyserling a Communist, but merely strung together a series of conjectures which if true would make Keyserling appear a sinister figure. It makes no difference to McCarthy if Keyserling protests with vigor, because each time Keyserling does this, the newspaper with its "objective" reporting will have to recapitulate what McCarthy said originally. Perhaps some people who didn't hear the speech or read about it in the paper the first day will now read it. And if the target of McCarthy's blast has the temerity to protest his innocence and proceeds plausibly to do so, McCarthy has his ace in the hole rejoinder, which goes along these lines: "Oh yes, my enemies scoffed at me when I pointed out that Alger Hiss was a Communist, too." (The fact that McCarthy had nothing to do with the conviction of Alger Hiss is conveniently forgotten.) Ergo, anybody who doubts what McCarthy says about Keyserling or Philip Jessup or Dean Acheson or General Marshall should remember that Alger Hiss protested his innocence, too.

There is no appeal to logic in stopping the pattern of incredibility, for it is patently and calculatedly an enemy of logic. Jefferson knew at first hand that there was no easy solution to this problem. Goaded beyond even his patient endurance when the Federalist press circulated the libel that he (Jefferson) had paid James Callender for calling Washington a traitor, a robber and a perjurer, Jefferson brought one of the small fry Federalist editors to trial and saw him convicted. Yet even this conviction of Harry Crosswell brought no practical relief of any consequence to Mr. Jefferson, and what it cost him in peace of mind history does not record. But it is an ironic footnote to the story

## OBJECTIVITY

of freedom of the press in America that its great champion should have been convinced that a trial for seditious libel would correct a campaign of vilification.

Today, with the news function of the press carefully divorced from the editorial page, the demagogue knows that he is safe in pursuing his techniques. He knows that if the American press were to hold a general meeting and decide that they would not give space to any more of his speeches they would be establishing a dangerous precedent. He knows inherently that the American press will not initiate any action to punish his flagrant misuses of “objective” reporting, because the precedent is a dangerous one. And yet as Mr. Justice Holmes pointed out in his famous decision in *Schenck vs. United States*, “The question in every case is whether the words used are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that will bring about the substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent.” To which we might amend, or that an aroused American public opinion has a right to prevent.

The facts are clear that the American press in its attempt to report “objectively” Senator McCarthy or any other public figure who makes “news” becomes an unwitting or unwilling accomplice in the cult of incredibility. To prove what I am saying I asked the Minnesota Poll of Public Opinion, which is maintained by the Minneapolis Tribune as a public service, to poll the people of that state on the following question:

One of the men on this list is a leading Communist in the United States. Which one is he? John Foster Dulles, William Z. Foster, Philip C. Jessup, Owen Lattimore, George Sokolsky.

The results of the poll showed that Jessup and Lattimore received more votes as a leading Communist than William Z. Foster, who is actually Chairman of the Communist Party in the United States and was indicted on charges of conspiracy to overthrow the government. A socioeconomic breakdown of the poll showed that respon-

dents with college education named Jessup as often as they did William Z. Foster, so the technique of incredibility works with the well educated as well as those with less formal training. Less than one in five respondents knew that William Z. Foster was the only man on the list who might factually and legitimately be called a Communist. The demagogue might indeed be proud of his work....

The job of the American press is to inform; not to create an atmosphere in which prejudice, half-truths and misinformation bloom with a noisome stench. The few attempts that have been made by the American press to debunk the cult of incredibility, as practiced by Senator McCarthy, have met with strong opposition from him. His appeal to advertisers to boycott Time magazine and now the Milwaukee Journal in turn has drawn fire in the editorial columns of the leading newspapers and even Editor & Publisher. Although I have not read all of these editorials I am sure that one of them must have pointed out the following

sylogism:

- a. Vishinsky, Malik and Co. have consistently smeared the “decadent, capitalistic” American press, using as their main argument that it is controlled by advertisers.
- b. Senator McCarthy asks American advertisers to boycott publications which disagree or dare to contradict his point of view.
- c. Therefore, Senator McCarthy is asking the advertisers of America to prove what Vishinsky, Malik and Co. have charged all these years.

That the American press is becoming increasingly aware that there is a calculated pattern utilized by the practitioners of incredibility is a positive sign. Out of the alerted press will come, it is fervently hoped, the method by which this type of communications cancer can be checked. ■

*David Manning White is research professor of journalism at Boston University.*

July 1955

## The Seven Deadly Virtues

BY WALLACE CARROLL

...So revolutionary a change in the role of the American citizen was bound to have its effect on American newspapers. For many years we newspapermen had given the American reader the kind of newspaper he wanted—a newspaper for the spectator. That kind of paper is no longer good enough. Today we must produce a newspaper for the citizen. We must produce a newspaper which will help the reader work out the answer to the question, “What must I do to be saved?”

The American press has many fine qualities, and if any layman should take what I am saying out of context, I will give him those qualities between the eyes.

But as a newspaperman who believes that the men and women who

gather and edit the news will have much to do with the survival of our society, I fear that the transition to the newspaper of the future is being made too slowly, much too slowly.

Every branch of newsgathering and dissemination is still the prisoner of our spectator past. Both the ink and the vacuum tube branches are the victims of taboos and fetishes which they themselves have created. And some of the very virtues of American journalism have, I am afraid, become deadly virtues—almost as deadly as sin itself.

### Deadly Virtue No. 1—“Objectivity”

What is “objectivity”? It is a discipline which reporters, editors and publishers impose upon themselves to keep

## OBJECTIVITY

their own feelings from affecting the presentation of the news. Objectivity is therefore a fine ideal.

For more than 100 years American newspapers have been progressing toward this ideal. If you would examine the intensely partisan and sometimes venal newspapers of a century ago, you would see how far our newspapers have come. And if you went across the country and talked to newspapermen everywhere and analyzed their writings, you would find very few who were not striving to live up to the ideal of objectivity as they understand it.

Then what is my objection to “objectivity”?

I have no objection to the ideal itself but only to our rigid and almost doctrinaire interpretation of objectivity. It seems to me that this narrow concept of objectivity sometimes brings us pretty close to the borders of irresponsibility. Too often our objectivity is simply the objectivity of the half-truth.

Among the American newspapermen who have been debating this subject there seem to be two divisions. The first might be called the fundamentalists, or the apostles of the literal word; the second, the liberal interpreters.

The fundamentalists believe that bias is inseparable from human nature and that reporters are at least as human as the rest of men. So reporters, they say, should simply get the facts and present them with as much detachment as they can, but should not try to fill in the background, interpret or analyze, especially when they are handling an explosive subject. The reader can be left to figure out the meaning of the facts for himself, or the editorial writers can help him out in a day or two.

The liberal interpreters believe that this strict interpretation of objectivity leads to serious abuses. They argue that, especially in times like these, a newspaper is not doing its job if it merely gives a reader “one- or two-dimensional reporting;” it must add a third dimension—*meaning*. Consequently, newspapers should encourage reporters to dig down through the

surface facts and fill in the background, interpret and analyze.

To the liberal interpreters it seems that the fundamentalists would permit the reporter to report the spiel of the gold brick salesman but not to point out that the clay is showing through a crack in the gilt.

Why, they ask, should newspapermen refrain from putting a twist on the ball and then permit someone else to pitch the reader a curve?

Eric Sevareid put it this way:

“Our rigid formulae of so-called objectivity, beginning with the wire agency bulletins and reports—the warp

and woof of what the papers print and the broadcasters voice—our flat, one-dimensional handling of the news, have given the lie the same prominence and impact that truth is given; they have elevated the influence of fools to that of wise men; the ignorant to the level of the learned; the evil to the level of the good.”

These comments of Mr. Sevareid, like much of the recent debate on objectivity, were inspired in part by the tactics of Senator McCarthy. The debate, as you might expect, has been heated and confused.

But now that McCarthyism, as some-

June 1970

## Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thou Shouldst Be Living at This Hour

BY WALLACE CARROLL

...One day when I was with the Washington bureau of The New York Times, our Supreme Court reporter, Anthony Lewis, came in with a story that he thought would require an unusual touch. The “story,” as he saw it, lay not in the majority opinion but in an unusual dissent by Justice Black. So after we talked it over, he wrote a story which, after recording the majority opinion in the first paragraph, went on something like this:

“In a passionate and despairing dissent, Justice Hugo Black rejected the majority opinion.”

Somehow or other this sentence escaped the copy desk gnomes in New York but it did not escape a reader in Seattle, and he wrote to the editors of the Times.

“I worked for the A.P. in the 1930’s and I know that ‘passionate’ and ‘despairing’ are editorial words

and you can’t use them in a news story. Shame on the Times for letting adjectives like these get into its news columns.”

This letter was forwarded to me with a succinct note from two of my betters in New York saying: “We agree.”

It never pays to argue with your masters, but in this case I wrote back:

“It is possible that this alumnus of the A.P. in Seattle has a better ‘feel’ for the story than we had in Washington. But before I cleared the offending passage, I read Justice Black’s dissent—all 16,000 words of it. And what impressed me from beginning to end was the passionate and despairing tone. And because passion and despair are seldom encountered in a judicial opinion, I thought this was news and worthy of noting in the Times.”... ■



## OBJECTIVITY

one has said, has ceased to be an *ism* and become a *wasm*, we may be able to make more progress.

I am sure that if a scholarly study were made of the part played by American newspapers in the rise of Senator McCarthy, it would show that the Senator understood the deadly virtues of the American press much more clearly than we do ourselves.

Such a study would show, I am sure, that Senator McCarthy was able to exploit our rigid “objectivity” ... in such a way as to make the newspapers his accomplices.

That is why I say that objectivity interpreted too literally can approach the borders of irresponsibility.

But we may be able to comprehend this problem of journalism a little more clearly if we keep it away from McCarthyism. Let me take an example of misguided objectivity—an imperfect example but one which came within my recent experience.

Several months ago our county held a referendum to decide whether voting machines should be acquired and used in future elections. On the day before the referendum, and shortly before the deadline for our afternoon paper, two of the county commissioners released a statement that if the vote were in favor of voting machines the county tax rate would have to be raised. We printed the story in the afternoon paper under a headline about the possible increase in the tax rate.

In the referendum the next day, voting machines were rejected by a margin of about 100 votes. The people who had favored the machines said that our story had swung the election. I think they were right.

Now what was wrong with that? We had merely reported the statement of the commissioners and we had reported it “objectively.”

The trouble was that the commissioners had raised a new issue on the

very eve of the election, and as you know, not even atom bombs will scare voters so thoroughly as an increase in the county tax rate.

So I think there were two things we might have done if we had wanted to be truly objective. The first would have been to get together as quickly as possible some information on the other

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**The times are serious enough and American newspapermen are mature enough for us to apply to ourselves a stricter discipline than that required for the old objectivity.**

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side of the case; this could have been used in a balanced story under a balanced headline. If time did not permit this, we might have held the story for the morning paper and presented a balanced roundup of the arguments on both sides, including the tax rate issue together with what people on the other side would have said about it. Actually, we did print such a story in the morning paper, but the afternoon story did the damage.

Now this, as I said, is not a perfect example of misguided objectivity, but it does show you that not only Senator McCarthy but much less sinister people can use the press for their purposes if we apply our rules without a sense of responsibility.

And surely fundamentalists and liberals ought to be able to agree on this one point of principle: that any practice or any part of our code which permits newspapers to be “used” should be carefully reconsidered.

Now, let’s look at one more example of “objective reporting”—this time a story by a master reporter who has done more than any other newspaperman to free us from some of our archaic practices.

In the 1948 presidential campaign, Governor Dewey, the Republican candidate, made a speech in which he

claimed that he was the author of the bipartisan foreign policy.

James B. Reston of The New York Times covered the speech and reported Mr. Dewey’s claim. But Reston went further. He dug into the memoirs of Cordell Hull and reported in a sidebar story what Mr. Hull had said about the origins of the bipartisan foreign policy.

From Mr. Hull’s account it appeared that Mr. Dewey had been guilty of some highly slanted reporting.

Mr. Reston’s story must have shocked some of the fundamentalists. In their book, he was probably guilty of “editorializing.” But when a reporter has solid evidence that a statement is misleading, should

he merely report the statement or should he give the reader the benefit of his additional knowledge?

The times are serious enough and American newspapermen are mature enough for us to apply to ourselves a stricter discipline than that required for the old objectivity.

And as we make the transition, let us lay down certain safeguards. First, we must resolve that in bringing a third dimension to reporting, we shall subject everyone—Republican or Democrat, industrialist or labor leader, legislator, businessman or football coach—to the same treatment. Secondly, we must find, train and pay the kind of reporters who can do three-dimensional reporting. Thirdly, we must back them up, not with the routine editing of the copy desk, but with the best editing skill of which we are capable... ■

*Wallace Carroll is Executive Editor of the Winston-Salem Journal and Sentinel.*

March 1968

# The Newsman— Society's Lonesome End

BY WES GALLAGHER

I would like to address my remarks to the younger journalists—those who will soon be leaving school. You will be the ones who will bear the responsibility of this profession in years to come.

I would like to touch on some of the broader aspects of our profession—namely, what can you expect when you leave school to become an editor or reporter.

Several years ago the Army football coach devised a new offense where one end stayed at an extreme side of the field and sometimes didn't even come to the huddle between plays. Sports writers dubbed him "the lonesome end." He was part of the team but remote from it. He was part of the action but divorced from it.

The first lonesome end was Cadet Bill Carpenter. He played his position perfectly and followed through in real life because he was decorated with the nation's second highest award for bravery. In Vietnam as a captain, he called down fire on his own position when it looked as though it would be overrun by the Vietcong.

The image of the lonesome end in football was criticized—particularly in the middle of the week when the sports writers don't have anything else to write about. But Carpenter didn't worry about his image at West Point or in Vietnam.

I would like to draw some parallels between the lonesome end and the journalist.

Today, it is the newsman, the reporter, the editor who stands alone, separated from society but a vital part of it—divorced from the action but a recorder of it.

If the reporter writes about drug

addiction he is charged with making it attractive to non-users. If he doesn't he is suppressing the news; if he writes about Negro nationalists he is accused of writing about a tiny minority; if he doesn't he is told he is not reporting the true militancy of the Negro; if he writes of a military victory in Vietnam he is attacked by the doves; if he writes

of the failure of the Vietnamese to clear their house of corruption he is attacked by the hawks; if he reports that the rapist was a six-foot four-inch Negro he is charged with stirring racial hatred; if he doesn't he is accused of misrepresenting the crime; if he reports that the Mets are strictly a dismal bunch of stumblebums he is against the new team in town; if he doesn't he is a publicity agent. And so it goes.

The newsman is the lonely end of society. From his position he looks at a strife-torn, controversial world which seems bent on its own destruction. He is in constant danger of losing his reportorial cool....

We are beset today with the problem of rioting in our cities, multiple

September 1971

## A Case for the Professional

BY WES GALLAGHER

...at no time in history has the world needed the professional journalist more.

The strident, partisan voices of today's society contribute heat but no light to a society drowning in a torrent of problems.

It is the journalist's task to be a clear, cool and objective voice bringing some reason to our time.

I said "objective," not "official" voice as desired by the politicians. The world's dictatorships have plenty of official voices.

Objective—not activist as desired by some. There are enough activist voices now without journalists adding theirs and destroying public confidence in the profession.

Quibbling, equivocating, caviling critics claim it is impossible for a journalist to be objective.

...[I]t isn't all that difficult to be impartial.

First, the journalist's job is to gather all the facts—I repeat—all the facts, not just those on one side. He then must present them fairly to both sides. He lets the reader decide which side he feels is correct. This may be a very unpopular thing to do, but it is not technically or intellectually difficult. Certainly, no more difficult than the task of a judge in weighing evidence.

A word of caution for a reporter seeking the facts. The areas in which he knows little and searches for information will not cause him the most difficulties.

In the words of Jack Knight of the Knight Newspapers, one of the real professionals of our time:

"It's not the things we know but the things we think we know and don't that cause us all the trouble."

The moral—take nothing for granted. ■

crises growing out of segregation and integration, or Black Nationalism, or the never-ending war in Vietnam, or the lightning war in the Middle East. But it is well for the journalist to remember that civilizations of the past faced similar problems which they felt were fully as important. It is also well to remember some of these ancient problems were never settled in any black and white way, but simply lapsed into a state of tolerability.

Many of our problems today will never be solved but simply will be accepted by generations in the future as undesirable but tolerable.

The difference between this age and others is that instant communications have spread the effect of problems over vast multitudes of people. And these people differ in color, history and civilizations. These differences in turn multiply the effect of common problems making their solution difficult and sometimes impossible.

It is the journalist—the newsman—who is the master of these new communications. It is his responsibility to see these scientific miracles serve mankind to bridge gaps, not create them. This is a tremendous responsibility.

The concept of objectivity in the news and the reporter being a non-combatant and an observer rather than a partisan is relatively new in journalism. It is this striving for objectivity that places the journalist apart from society today. It is this struggle for objectivity that keeps him awake at night as he wrestles with the facts. It is this concept of nonpartisanship that makes him fair game for the partisans.

There is a simple solution for some journalists. It is a guaranteed tranquilizer. If he wants to, he can become a partisan spokesman in one of the controversies of the day—for or against the war in Vietnam, for or against integration, for or against Israel or the Arabs. In one of these secure positions

he will at least have some friends, and he can flail away at his enemies with gusto. He can fit the facts to his prejudices. He can be a professional liberal or a professional conservative.

But...to the true newsman partisan-

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**It is this striving for objectivity that places the journalist apart from society today. It is this struggle for objectivity that keeps him awake at night as he wrestles with the facts.**

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ship is the original sin, the apple in the journalistic Eden.

It is easy to eat but hard to digest, because a journalist deals in facts in his work and they continually come back to haunt him because facts are often contradictory. And the journalist, knowing this, cannot seize the easy partisan solution without a crisis of conscience.

Therefore, a true newsman of today must be aloof to controversy, a part of society but not an acting participant in its disputes.

This lonely end position makes the journalist fair game for critics, but we should not worry about this. The louder the critic, the less founded his criticism is likely to be....

Of course, the same feeling exists in the public about Vietnam. Despite the millions of words printed and spoken. There is a credibility problem not only on the part of the government. The newsman must establish his credibility. He must convince the public he is truly detached from the causes of the day. He must convince them by his skills as a reporter that he has no cause to serve except to get the truth. He must convince them by his honesty he is truly the public's eyes and ears, their trusted representative at complex or distant events.

He must convince them he will not succumb to the red dogs of the lobbyists.

He must convince them that he is

motivated alone by pride in his profession.

And he must convince the public he is willing to call down the fire of the partisans on his own head, as Captain Carpenter did, if it becomes necessary—and it will become necessary.

If he does these things he will be believed, not loved but respected, which is all he can ask. His constant difficult task will be to put the news in perspective.

In perspective—when he writes about the draft protests to point out that this phenomenon is not new. In

fact, during the Civil War draft riots in New York City between four and five hundred rioters were killed. In addition, the rioters killed 98 federal registrars in the North. These figures make the rioting even in Detroit look small.

In perspective—when writing about Vietnam to constantly put before the reader that no one, hawk or dove, has proposed a viable solution.

In perspective—to point out the black community is divided among the Black Nationalists who want to establish their own black society and those who want an integrated society with the whites. That the white society is also divided between those who favor integration as the solution and those who would keep an all-black society separate. Despite this, there is no common ground even for a sensible dialogue.

Perspective is the indispensable key in this age for the reporter....

I emphasize again the difference between this age and others is that instant communications have given the journalist an immense audience which in turn means his work can have a tremendous impact on our civilization.... ■

*Wes Gallagher, General Manager of The Associated Press, delivered this speech at the national convention of Sigma Delta Chi in Minneapolis.*

December 1970

# The Quest for Objectivity

BY ERIC SEVAREID

...Those who would improve our practices in questionable ways come not only from the outside in the form of powerful politicians. Some come from the inside. Militant young men and women, in both newspapers and broadcasting who argue that even the *quest* for objectivity is a myth, that the prime purpose of the press is not to report the world but to reform it, and in the direction of their ideas. We have all read the learned articles that tell us objective news accounts in the hard news columns or broadcasts tend merely to deceive the reader or hearer,

obscure inner truths that the reporter perceives. He must therefore personalize the news, infuse it with his own truth. They would not leave this to the editorial writer, columnist and commentator, whose work is clearly marked away from the hard news. They believe this will give a true integrity to news columns and news broadcasts. I believe it will ruin them. There is nothing new about this idea. In fact, this is the way it was done in the days of the yellow press and the screamers of radio's first faltering years. This is the way it is still done in many countries.

The result there is that one must read many papers, hear many broadcasts, then try to piece together what really happened in any given occurrence. Inevitably, this becomes the journalism of polemics.

What Yale's Kingman Brewster said is true for a university is true for the press. "Cynical disparagement of objectivity as a myth," he said, "seems to me both naive and irresponsible. Any claim of novelty to the observation that men are fallible at best, corruptible at worst, is naive. Its irresponsibility lies in the conclusion that, since the ideal is unattainable, it should not be held up as a standard to both practitioners and critics."... ■

*The above text is from the Fourth Annual Elmer Davis Memorial Lecture at Columbia University, given by CBS correspondent Eric Sevareid.*

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## White Newsmen and Black Critics

*Can white reporters accurately report events that involve blacks and other minority groups? This question—and the related topic of whether reporting can or should be “objective”—was the focus of a two-day symposium held at the University of Washington, Seattle. This symposium, “The Newsmen and the Race Story,” involved 30 white editors and reporters (all men) and 27 black men who were active in civil rights and grassroots community activities.*

*Lawrence Schneider, Assistant Professor of Communications at the university, details some of the conversation between these two groups, the white newsmen and their black critics. To elicit their differing views about news coverage, the participants were shown an 11-minute news film of a Poor People's Campaign demonstration in front of the U.S. Supreme Court Building early in 1968. The film, shot by an NBC crew, had no narration, so the actual sound and actions were the record of what happened.*

*On the film, Reverend Ralph Abernathy speaks about the demonstration that has been organized to protest a Supreme Court decision denying fishing rights to Indians in Washington state. Abernathy notes that windows at the Supreme Court had been smashed but denies that anyone affiliated with the nonviolent movement was involved. There is also an interview with an old Indian woman who blames white people for taking away the Indians' food, and there are pictures of youths jumping into a fountain's pool. Police wearing helmets remove some demonstrators into buses and a flag that had been lowered to half-staff is raised again by a security guard. At the end of the 11-minute segment, Abernathy is heard describing white America's treatment of the Indians as “genocide.”*

*After viewing this film, participants were asked to decide how they would make decisions about turning the events seen on this film into a story for a newscast. Their dialogue follows, with concluding observations by Professor Schneider.*

September 1971

# White Newsmen and Black Critics

BY LAWRENCE SCHNEIDER

## ...The Dialogue

Moderator [Lawrence Schneider, Assistant Professor of Communications, University of Washington]: What did you see? Let's get right to it.

Black Activist: I saw that newsmen have no perspective. They film without

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**'Reporting needs balance. Violence makes news. It's too bad, but that's how it is.'**  
—white newsman

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understanding. They show the sensational with no understanding or sympathy. How can whites be coldly objective and separate themselves from the black problems they are reporting? There is a lack of empathy.

White Newsmen: How would you approach the problem of "empathy"?

Black: I would approach all groups fairly.

White Newsmen: Please remember that this film is only a rough product.

Black: What would TV use in the finished product? The pond scene and the window breaking because these tell suburbia that the demonstrators are hoods.

Moderator: How should this be reported? What would you highlight?

Black: Some articulate, positive statement made by those involved. When Abernathy said, "Today we have made history because we have presented our grievances," he was both articulate and positive.

White Newsmen: That's a reason.

Presenting the demonstration without the reasons is as bad as presenting the reasons and not reporting the demonstration. Reporting needs balance. Violence makes news. It's too bad, but that's how it is.

Moderator: But what should be emphasized? Different newspapers report the same event differently. If you were in charge of your respective medium, what would you run?

White TV: It would be great to be able to do a special on this sort of thing. That part that showed the doors closing could be a great thing about the deaf ears of the Supreme Court.

If I just had the evening news, I'd begin with the marchers, mark the size of the crowd, and tell why the march was held and what the grievances were. For human interest, I'd use the old lady and reinforce her with Abernathy. I'd most likely mention "minor disturbances"—the pool incident—and tell the exact number of arrests.

Moderator: What about the flag incident?

White TV: I'd use it if there was an explanation.

White Radio: I have to be careful to avoid boredom, so I'd try to start out with a hard hit at background—about 15 seconds—then use the leader with Abernathy and the two arrests at the end. The background here is important so I'd use it as a lead, and I'd use the voices of the Indian leader and Abernathy.

White Newsmen: As city editor I'd ask within the context: How many people? Who were they? Under our policy, I'd say "white" in the arrests. Our paper doesn't identify race unless it is pertinent to the situation.

White TV: I might possibly use Abernathy and his reply about the windows.

Black: Why even mention it?

White TV: The windows were important because they were part of the Supreme Court Building.

Black: They were trying to show an unruly mob. The difference in wording was important. They did not use the word "broken"—but "smashed."

Black: I agree on the unwise use of the word "smashed." When college kids do it, the media call it a demonstration. When the blacks enter the picture, it becomes a riot.

Moderator: If I'm not mistaken, the use of the word "smashed" was by Abernathy, not the media.

White: Let me ask two questions: 1) Would you have used Abernathy's sound on film? [There is a general consensus of "Yes."] 2) Would you have used his statement on genocide? [Blacks all answer "Yes."]

White: No. "Genocide" is too loaded a word and is misleading. It would turn off the white audience.

White: Yes. Whether or not the word

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**'When college kids do it, the media call it a demonstration. When the blacks enter the picture, it becomes a riot.'**  
—black activist

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is used correctly I always ask myself if the speaker actually believes what he says, whether it is true or not. I must use his words, although I would leave out the parts about the fishing because Abernathy doesn't know why they were fishing.

Black: Aren't you dealing with manifestations rather than causes? The poor people are attempting to help them-

selves, but it doesn't work. So the net gain of Resurrection City is negative. I ask, what is the story behind this? We are beginning to learn that we had better merge together as a group to press for relief—that we must transform the struggle between us into the troubles of those common to all. And I say that this should have been the story.

Black: Yes. Didn't you see togetherness? The poor people, no matter what color, are forming an alliance and working together. There was a togetherness never seen before. Why couldn't you see this rather than what one black man or one Indian said?

Black: Why don't you really write some good stories about us? What is the real story about the Black Panthers? About the concentration camps they want in the South? About the tortures some of us go through?

White Newsmen: We don't know about it.

Black: A white reporter can't give you that story. When you say "black" say "black man." When you say "Negro" you don't say "man," but when you say "black" you have to say "man." That's why we like "black man."

White: One of the things we've been saying today is that no one is really telling it like it is. You [meaning the black man] tell it differently than we do.

Black: Yes!

White [same one as above]: But I'd hope to be more objective. [Several blacks protest this statement. They say there has been too much objectivity. Everyone begins talking at once.]

Black: Maybe it is true that newsmen are objective, but everyone sees everything from his own point of view. Objectivity has failed. One reporter may strive to be objective yet still slant it because of his own failure to recognize more subtle biases in himself. If we get a right-wing reporter who sees this film he lays it out. But take a nice white, well scrubbed reporter, and he wants to be objective. You're hanging us with your damned "objectivity."

White: What you're saying is that we have to be objective and partisan?

Black: Yes. Newsmen have got to take a side and tell their audiences they are taking a side on the news story. The newsmen must challenge the audience. We've been sunk by "objectivity." This type of film cannot just deal with the facts. It must take a point of view and show how changes can be made. This type of approach doesn't "tell it like it is." The people involved have got to tell their own story. You've still got a picture and commentary, but even if it is good, you still don't see it as if the guy was out telling it like it is.

Black: [Agrees.] Tell it like it is.

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**'You're hanging us with your damned "objectivity."... Newsmen have got to take a side and tell their audiences they are taking a side on the news story.... We've been sunk by "objectivity." —black activist**

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Black: Here is one thing that I would like to know. Why is "alleged" used on TV?

White TV: We don't use it.

White Newsmen: We don't use it anymore. We cut it out.

Moderator: What is your objection to the word?

Black: It is always used in connection with colored situations. It implies that what is said is a damn lie! They probably would have said that Abernathy was alleged to have said....

White: I am here to learn. My religion is the Truth. I came here to try to learn more on how to do a better job. But I have only heard the same things over and over. You only tell me that I have a prejudice. Give us a chance. How do we stop it?

Black: If you want to know how, come off your high horse! You are so educated that you don't know how to

talk to us...learn how to talk to us...learn how to talk to us! Be conscious of who you are talking to. Come in with plain cars. Get some editors who are real reporters, not worried about the budget. If you are going to tell a lie—tell it on both sides.

White: I think we should understand that we have limitations on the media. The media can't tell everything and some of the stuff has to be left for more in-depth reports.

Black: But many people watch only news. They don't come back later to see the in-depth report.

Black: Who decides which news story is the top in terms of priority?

White: That's a professional judgment. I don't think anyone can be objective, but I would hope they can be fair and present the story on its merits and within the time restrictions.

White: I feel as though I started all this earlier when I mentioned objectivity and was called to task for it, I think, because my remarks were taken in the wrong way. I didn't really say I was objective and you [indicating a black man] weren't—only that I would be more objective than you. And

I decide what stories are going to be covered. No one else makes that decision for me, and no one else better try. That's my choice, and only mine.

Black: [To above white] What system of values are you using to set news priorities? I come from a culture where I use an equally valid set of values and make equally valid value judgments for me, but we can often end up making opposite decisions on the same issues. So how do I then get equal time?

White: The news media should offer equal time, but the news is geared to large numbers of people, and the largest group of people in this country is WASP. There is a need to let non-white people speak through the media.

Black: I'm concerned that people are changing faster than the media can keep up with. So the media must move now and take a position of leadership. Social injustice cannot be treated as a

collection of facts, such as who broke what window where and was arrested when.

The media often mislead because they don't search out the "why" of the story. Most blacks agreed that Abernathy said the United States was committing genocide against the Indians, but most newsmen felt this was overstated and that they wouldn't use it. News media have completely separated themselves from the community and have worked so hard to become objective that they have become subjective in becoming objective.

News is aimed at white middle class America, which is the most isolated and least progressive class in the world. If they only get to read and see what they want to read and see, then they are going to become even more isolated and egocentric, since the vast majority of the world is nonwhite and poor.

White Newsmen: I hope, if nothing else, that we can realize that there are some newsmen who don't fit into this bag. Maybe there are only a few, but at least their existence must be realized.

[Following the end of the workshops, many people stayed on for a few minutes and engaged in heated conversations.]

Clearly, despite the occasional attempts at reconciliation, there existed considerable disagreement between white newsmen and black critics during the workshop discussions. Equally clear, however, should be the recognition that among the participants there were no villains, but instead two groups of individuals whose conclusions regarding the roles of journalists and the pressures of the times differed to the point that their "reports" of the identical event bear little relationship to one another.

Newsmen, if they are going to communicate well with individuals in the black community who believe that blacks are being "hung" by journalistic

objectivity, are going to have to meet and respond to the charge of the black participant that news media "have worked so hard to become objective that they have become subjective in becoming objective."

This suggestion that white newsmen have become victims of serious faults as they innocently go about attempting to do their jobs in an honorable manner has been made still more strongly by Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint, black psychiatrist who was formerly the Southern Field Director of the Medical Committee for Human Rights in Jackson, Mississippi.

Dr. Poussaint has written that the

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**'I didn't really say I was objective and you [indicating a black man] weren't—only that I would be more objective than you. And I decide what stories are going to be covered. No one else makes that decision for me, and no one else better try.'**  
**—white newsmen**

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media are directed primarily at a white audience which "ranges from avowed racial bigots to white liberals, many of whom are plagued with unconscious, latent racism."

White newsmen, charges Dr. Poussaint, "with these same interests, often unconsciously slant and deliver news in such a way as to appeal to the sentiments of their readers...."

"If America is to change the hearts of men and undo racial prejudice in white citizens, then white reporters (including newspaper publishers and editors) of news about black people and racial problems have to take a deep and honest look into themselves. They must investigate their own feelings of white superiority and unconscious racism."

And there we have it. No amount of

speeches, arguments, reports or articles detailing the merits of objectivity in American journalism, no amount of historical or contemporary reasoning, will convince many blacks that objectivity is a journalistic virtue, and not instead a manifestation of conscious or unconscious white racism—of avoidance of the very problem of fighting racial injustice.

The very instrument—objective reporting—through which many newsmen seek to convince blacks of their honest intentions is instead seen as a distortion of the "tell it like it is" goal.

For the blacks will keep insisting that an incident such as the march to the Supreme Court building must be seen from the perspective of a people struggling to overcome inequities and injustices, and that any other kind of reporting is inaccurate at best and racism at its worst.

A newsmen who will argue to blacks that "presenting the demonstrations without reasons is as bad as presenting the reasons and not reporting the demonstration" may be correct (the author believes so), but he will not convince black critics of his honest intentions until the main thrust of his article is responsive to the overriding concern of the

black who is seeking to overcome the problem of being black in America today.

It is unlikely that black critics and white newsmen will perceive events similarly, that blacks will trust the media, until the media respond to the existence and effects of racism with the same bold, crusading reporting which in the past marked their coverage of the existence and effects of corruption in government. ■

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Winter 1994

## Expert Journalism

Portland (Maine) newspaper reframes the idea of objectivity to bring readers more forceful interpretive reporting.

BY LOU URENECK

What if the crisis of confidence in the media grows not out of a paranoia about whether the media leans left or right but rather out of a rejection by the public of the detachment with which the press regards the problems of society and the concerns of ordinary people?

As the discussion over the place of reporters' viewpoints in the coverage of news heats up again, it is worth considering that what the press needs today is more context and insight, not less, and that context and insight inevitably bring with them the exercise of subjectivity. Serious and successful attempts at finding the right way to bring the perspectives of reporters into the news columns are producing an exciting and useful journalism in newspapers around the country. It is taking many forms, from the expression of studied judgments by reporters about issues to franker, more pointed sketches of public figures. There have been problems, to be sure, and they need to be understood. The challenge to the public-minded press today is to find ways to accommodate the ever present need for fair and dispassionate inquiry and the new and growing need to generate energy, meaning and solutions for the benefit of a society that has grown apathetic to civic participation.

The likelihood that the press more often fails readers through timidity than bias has led us at the Portland (Maine) Press Herald to experiment with another level of coverage in our news report, one that encourages reporters to explore wider latitudes of analysis, interpretation and judgment in the news columns. This new layer repre-

sents only a fraction of the stories we publish, and we continue to build the news report from the fundamental day-to-day coverage of events with straightforward, hard news reporting. Yet, the response from our readers to the new work has been strong and positive. Often it is where they see the value of the newspaper. It has helped us develop a newfound sense of our ability to make a difference for the better in the life of our state.

Our most recent foray into this new style of reporting sought to understand the plight of Maine fishermen who have seen their catches decline dramatically in recent years. The project, in its methods and its results, offers a good illustration of the work we are trying to achieve. The project began when a team of reporters and editors brought to the newspaper office about a dozen people who have a stake in Maine's fishing industry: fishermen, wholesalers, federal regulators, marine scientists, and environmental activists. They were asked to talk among themselves about the state of the resource in the Gulf of Maine, once one of the richest fishing grounds in the world and now an exhausted corner of the North Atlantic. How bad was the fishery and what had caused the decline?

In minutes, the conference room where they were gathered burned with disagreement. Fishermen blamed scientists for exaggerating the depletion of fish stocks and destroying their livelihoods and communities; environmentalists blamed fishermen for taking unsustainable amounts of fish from the ocean; scientists blamed regulators for

making decisions without good data, regulators blamed the government for lack of support for fisheries management.

And so it went for six hours.

But for the journalists in the room the conflict they were witnessing was not the story. What use would it be to readers? The conflict was a stalemate and its only product was acrimony. For this project, conflict became a starting point, not a destination. It was the first step in an arduous process of research and understanding that culminated three months later in a five-part series that reported these conclusions:

The Gulf of Maine is commercially depleted of its most valuable fish species, and the federal government is largely to blame. Through favorable tax changes and credit incentives, the government had encouraged investors out of the region (doctors, lawyers) to form companies that built big boats that took big profits from the sea.

The depletion is so complete, and the regulatory system so stymied, that the offshore fishing industry is being wiped from the coast of Maine. To stem the disaster, the government is likely to get stuck buying back the boats it had enticed the wealthy investors to build.

Now what was remarkable about the newspaper series, beyond what it had to say about the fisheries and how the government operates, is that the reporters who were writing it refused to settle on a story about conflict and disagreement among opposition groups. They were not going to write a story that said scientists and regulators say this while fishermen and environmentalists say that. Instead, they were empowered by their editors to immerse themselves in the topic and draw their own conclusions about what had gone wrong and to share those conclusions with readers.

Like other newspapers around the country, some large and some small, the Portland Press Herald has been publishing stories in recent years that challenge traditional notions of objectivity in which fairness is achieved by quoting all parties that have standing within the circle of the issue and by



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keeping the text free of assessment or evaluation by the reporter. The new stories, generally in-depth pieces that go well beyond the basic enterprise story, call on reporters to submerge themselves for months in the topic and form judgments that can be expressed emphatically as conclusions about the performance of public figures, policies or institutions. These pieces state their conclusions up top without attribution from officials or authorities and rely on the body of the story to develop the evidence behind the conclusions. Often the evidence to support the conclusions comes from original research into database records and can not be attributed to an official because officials are not necessarily aware of the information.

In Portland, we usually reserve this technique for mature stories, issue-oriented stories that have had a long run in the paper, where the push and pull of debate in the daily coverage has not clarified matters for the public, and an independent and in-depth look at the topic is needed to help readers evaluate information and touch bottom on the validity of competing claims and charges. We have looked at the state's business climate and found it to be healthy, certainly much better than described by the Maine Chamber of Commerce, which was mounting a heavy lobbying effort to roll back environmental laws. We examined a development moratorium approved by city residents to protect the Portland waterfront and found that it, instead, had hastened the disintegration of that part of the city by discouraging private investment. We looked at the decline of civic leadership in Portland and found that it was due in part to large corporations buying up local banks and businesses and replacing them with carpetbagger management.

Perhaps our greatest success came

two years ago when we examined the state's workers' compensation system. Workers' compensation in Maine, as in other states, was conceived as progressive legislation to protect workers against serious injury or pay them if they were injured and to protect employers against lawsuits when injuries occurred. In Maine, the law had evolved to pad the pockets of lawyers and others who could exploit the system. The law failed to protect workers from injury and death and punished businesses with huge premium costs. Attempts to reform the system repeatedly bogged

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**The new stories, generally in-depth pieces that go well beyond the basic enterprise story, call on reporters to submerge themselves for months in the topic and form judgments that can be expressed emphatically as conclusions about the performance of public figures, policies or institutions.**

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down in disagreements over the extent of fraud, generosity of benefits, and statistics that described the danger of Maine's workplaces. In 1991, state government in Maine actually came to a halt as Republicans and Democrats, surrogates for business and labor, held up the state's budget over a workers' comp reform effort.

In this climate of confusion and anger, a reporter for the Press Herald, Eric Blom, undertook an in-depth look at the system and wrote a powerful series of stories that contained his own conclusions, carefully reached and painstakingly tested by editors over four months. It was our first major project of this sort, and we called it expert reporting because we had asked our reporter to become an expert on the topic and draw independent conclusions based on his research. We asked him to report to readers in simple and direct language.

The series began this way:

"The Maine workers' compensation

system is a disaster. It wastes millions of dollars each year. It destroys employer-employee relationships. It distracts the state's attention from other vital issues."

The series went on to show Maine's shameful rate of workplace injuries and death, the practice of blackballing injured workers, and the unreasonable costs that saddled businesses, even safe ones. It showed how expert witnesses and lawyers, some of whom were involved in writing the law, made millions of dollars from employer-employee legal battles.

The reaction from readers was quick and gratifying. They found the material understandable in its directness. The reporting created a picture of greed and confusion that rose above the contending he-said, she-said quotes of earlier stories. The series began a process that ultimately led to reform of the system, and today worker injury rates are down in Maine and costs

to business are declining.

We have also made mistakes as well. We learned early on that a project that dismisses the contentions of some sources because research has shown them to be weak or irrelevant needs to explain the reasoning process that led to that judgment in the published story. Otherwise, it appears as a hole in the work, or as arrogance. It also opens the possibility that the story, rather than the topic, will become the issue.

Without question, this technique of reporting raises difficult questions for newspapers. What qualifies a reporter to undertake a project of this sort? How much time and research is needed to develop the expertise that underpins the authority of the stories? What is the role of the editor who directs the project? And perhaps most important of all, what effect will this type of work have on the credibility of the newspaper among its readers? All of these questions need thoughtful consideration and discussion, and no newspa-

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per that wants to do this kind of work should rush them.

In Portland, we have developed guidelines to help editors and reporters through the process of reporting, testing and writing the material. We see six prerequisites: (1) the impartiality of the reporter at the start of the project; (2) adequate time to master the story; (3) thorough research; (4) strong editing to test the fact selection and reasoning; (5) continual evaluation for a sense of proportion and judgment; (6) a note to readers explaining the nature of the project. We follow each project with extra space for letters and guest columns that are packaged as a response to the stories.

When we undertake a project, we are especially attentive to researching

and reporting dimensions of the topic that often get short shrift in typical enterprise stories: the validity of assertions by various sources; the relevance or significance of what they are saying to the issue; the relationship of disparate events or pieces of information; what is not being said but is important, and the resonances of people and events that can not be reduced to empirical data. Clearly, all of this requires degrees of interpretation that are not found in most news features. However, it is the final dimension, the one I call “resonance,” that is the most difficult for reporters to handle successfully and certainly the most difficult for editors to manage. Often it is the flash point in discussion of the new reporting. It generally goes by the name

of Maureen Dowd of The New York Times.

Dowd’s ability to see personal idiosyncrasy and turn a phrase is a delight to those who follow her work from Washington. Dowd’s skill derives from her sensibility, her knowledge of her beat, and an acute sense of observation. Of course, the Maureen Dowds come along rarely. Only a few reporters can legitimately enter this territory. Dowd is not the only member of the staff who has more liberty to express her views and her style. The New York Times, with its depth of talent, regularly displays its willingness to give reporters room to connect and characterize events. Its readers get a rich and textured report as a result. Other newspapers show an openness to reporters’ viewpoints as well. The Wall Street Journal encourages reporting that has a perspective on the news. This lead, for example, appeared on a page one story in mid-September 1993 and previewed the content of the Clinton health care program: “President Clinton’s ambitious health care proposal promises to rely on the unseen hand of the marketplace, but its real power stems from the strong arm of the government.” No shyness about interpretation in that news story. The Christian Science Monitor, long a proponent of solution journalism, trusts its reporters to suffuse its news columns with interpretive judgments, and The Miami Herald often ends its investigative series with prescriptions for solving public problems. Perhaps no newspaper is more closely associated with this technique than The Philadelphia Inquirer through the investigative team of Donald Barlett and James Steele. Their work in the series, “America: What Went Wrong,” which strung together the economic events of the 1980’s into a narrative that explained the loss of manufacturing jobs in the United States through mergers, acquisitions and plant closures, is a classic piece of point-of-view reporting supported by extensive research.

An informal survey among my Nieman colleagues also found a will-

## The Deadliest Drug: Maine’s Addiction to Alcohol

*The accompanying photos, taken by David A. Rodgers, were published in a 1997 week-long series on alcohol. Reporters spent six months tabulating and profiling the cost of Maine’s alcohol abuse.*



A son sits by his father’s grave. The family couldn’t afford a gravestone for the 39-year-old father of three who was killed by a drunk driver. *Photo courtesy of the Maine Sunday Telegram and Portland Press Herald.*

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ingness among the news organizations represented at Lippmann House this year to draw the viewpoints and judgments of reporters into in-depth news articles. The response from Chris Bowman, a 1995 Nieman fellow who covers the environment for *The Sacramento Bee*, can stand for many of the thoughtful comments from the Niemans: “The rapidly escalating bombardment of information from television news and magazines shows, from cable, from radio, from the on-line personal computer services, presents a growth opportunity for newspapers. It may not show up on the readership surveys, but I believe the dizzying array of sound bites and megabytes has created a large, unsatisfied need for journalism that makes sense of it all. But it takes courage and an adjustment of newsroom values.” Bowman, like other Niemans who responded to my survey, was cautious about the use of interpretive writing in daily hard news stories. “But there comes a time,” Bowman added, “as with the owls vs. jobs story in the Pacific Northwest, when the story becomes a Ping-Pong match. Newspapers can actually perform a public disservice by limiting the reporting to opinions from opposing camps or offering the only-time-will-tell analyses. The reporter should stop and ask, what about this industry argument that protections for the spotted owl are leading to the demise of the sawmill workers?”

All of this interpretation has not gone unnoticed by press watchers, of course. Doubtful voices are being raised. This is healthy. A press that seeks to interpret needs scrutiny and benefits from it. “The shift to greater subjectivity on the news pages,” the magazine *Media Critic* complained, “is one of the most significant developments in the news media. It may help explain recent survey data indicating that more and more Americans think media organizations slant the news and cannot be relied upon to provide factual accounts.” Not all reporters accept the new approach, either. In Portland, some reporters are uncomfortable with a forward role on an issue and others

lack the confidence to assert judgments. They prefer letting “experts” on the outside draw the conclusions—and the fire.

Clearly, the new reporting touches a nerve of orthodoxy—objectivity. The debate over objectivity is an old one and stretches back, if not to the penny press of the 19th Century, certainly to the philosophical father of the objective-scientific model, Walter Lippmann. But it is important to recall in this regard that Lippmann’s view of the public was that it was incapable of governance and that management of society belonged to an intelligent elite who would be kept in line through fear of the publicity spotlight of the press. “The purpose of news,” Lippmann wrote, “is to signalize an event.”

Dissatisfaction with Lippmann’s vision in one form or another has been a recurrent theme since he articulated it. In an article in the *Kettering Review*, James Carey, Dean of the College of Communications at the University of Illinois, put the matter succinctly:

“We have inherited and institutionalized Lippmann’s conception of journalism, and the dilemmas of journalism flow, in part, from that conception. We have our new order of samurai but they turn out to be what David Halberstam acidly described as the best and the brightest. We have a scientific journalism devoted to the sanctity of the fact and objectivity but it is one in which the hot light of publicity invades every domain of privacy. We have a journalism that is an early-warning system but it is one that keeps the public in a constant state of agitation or boredom. We have a journalism that reports the continuing stream of expert opinion but because there is no agreement among experts, it is more like observing talk show gossip and petty manipulation than bearing witness to the truth.”

Perhaps the greatest reaction to the press as the signalizer of events came following the excesses of Joseph McCarthy, which were dutifully and uncritically recorded by the press.

It was after the exposure of

McCarthy, writes J. Herbert Altschull, that a powerful demand arose for interpretive reporting. “The idea of social responsibility promoted by the Hutchins Commission joined forces with the idealism of the postwar generation of journalists and scholars, led by Curtis MacDougall of Northwestern University, in a campaign to end the practice of blind objectivity and turn instead to more explanatory writing.”

In the aftermath of McCarthy, and into the 1960’s and 1970’s, several reactions to news coverage as a flat stenographic report emerged. Altschull has inventoried nine of them: enterprise journalism, interpretive journalism, new journalism, underground journalism, advocacy journalism, investigative journalism, adversary journalism, precision journalism and celebrity journalism.

The type of journalism that I have been describing represents an eclectic mix of existing forms with elements that are new. It often rings with the mission of investigative reporting and develops the depth and detail of enterprise reporting, but it opens new ground by making judgments, as Don Barlett of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* puts it, based on the “weight of the evidence.” It applies the search for answers, which in investigative reporting tends to focus tightly on law breaking or blatant malfeasance, to broad questions of the performance of public officials, policies and institutions. It also breaks the bonds of enterprise reporting by getting beyond the whipsaw of competing quotes that are so often put in stories to create the perception of balance. The new reporting, which actually counts the early muckrakers as its predecessors, works harder at making a point that the reader can grab than giving all parties to the dispute equal space in the story.

What to call it remains a problem. Our newsroom has not been entirely comfortable with the label “expert journalism” (perhaps for reasons that Professor Carey would have anticipated). One editor suggested we call it “immersion journalism.” Some have in-

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cluded it under the tent of “public journalism.” But whatever its name, it clearly fits with Altschull’s description of the new forms as a reaction against the commonplace press standard of the journalist as mirror.

Behind this more subjective, or activist, approach is the power of information put into a framework of perspective and context. In a sense, it represents a strain of reasoned and informed argument and therein lies its appeal as a kind of provocation to act to solve, or at least debate, problems. Beyond informing readers it can serve a dialectical purpose: It puts forward a

the circle of debate as widely as possible and thus forces all citizens to articulate their views, to put their views at risk, and to cultivate the virtues of eloquence, clarity of thought and expression and sound judgment. From this point of view, the press has the potential to serve as the equivalent of the town meeting.”

Its shortcomings notwithstanding, the concept of objectivity keeps a powerful hold on the public imagination and the conventions of news writing. Any idea with as much staying power as objectivity deserves not to be understood too quickly—let alone disposed

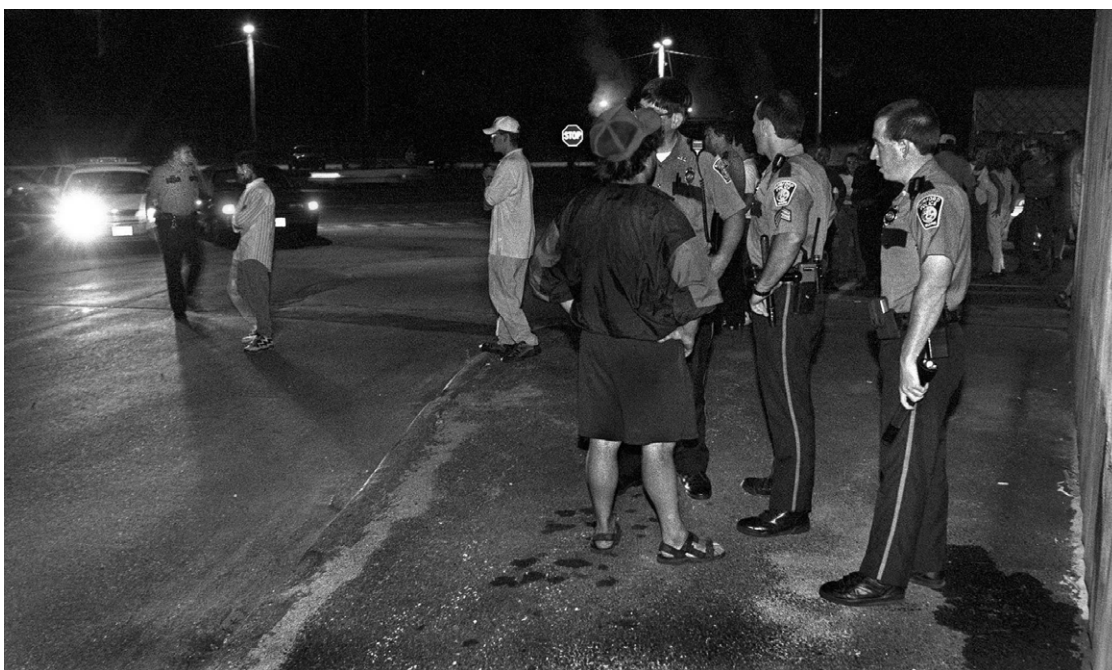
tic objectivity is indistinct and undefined, is the degree to which Americans evaluate the performance of the media based on adherence to certain newsroom protocols of objectivity and the enforcement of emotional and intellectual distance from the subjects that they cover. So while it is no great risk to assert that Americans want newspapers that are fair and impartial in their coverage, the data on media perception may be telling us something other than what the critics of a new subjectivity have inferred.

Take the enigmatic results of the poll by the Times Mirror Center for the

People and the Press released in September 1994. It found that 71 percent of Americans felt the news media got in the way of solving society’s problems. Yet a strong majority had a favorable view of daily newspapers (79 percent) and network TV news (68 percent). The poll respondents put daily newspapers third from the top of a long list of political figures, public institutions and social movements, behind only the military and the Supreme Court. To me, this suggests that the public maintains a reservoir of goodwill for the concept of a free press in the life of the nation but simultaneously harbors deep disappointment about the

way the press applies itself and its influence to move the society forward to solve its problems.

This, to me, is the point that is missed so frequently by those who look to marketing solutions to revive newspaper readership. The marketing people intuitively, and correctly, sense some disconnection between readers and newspapers, some lack of synchronization on what readers want and what appears in the newspaper. So they design surveys that bring answers to their



Tensions are high following a fight at closing time outside a Rumford (Maine) bar. *Photo courtesy of the Maine Sunday Telegram and Portland Press Herald.*

set of conclusions that can spark alternatives. Christopher Lasch, the historian and social critic who died earlier this year, made the important point that the public needs argument to develop an appetite for information.

Information, Lasch said, is the byproduct rather than the precondition of debate. “If we insist on argument as the essence of education, we will defend democracy not as the most efficient but as the most educational form of government, one that extends

of. At a minimum, it is an important reminder that reporters should not begin stories with preconceived judgments about the material. Objectivity can be properly reframed as a call to rigor and integrity in the processes of reporting and reasoning. Clearly, in the public mind, factuality is an element of objectivity and ultimately its judgment of the media. The first test of what is read or seen must be whether it is accurate and sound. But what is less clear, because the concept of journalis-

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questions, not the questions of readers. The results are better television books, more color, and zippier entertainment sections. These are all good things for newspapers, and they can be circulation builders, but lost in the process is the recognition of the power

puts institutional caution or parsimony ahead of the courage and skill it takes to find new ways to bring clarity, force and reader appeal to the tough stories, the ones that need to get written.

If indeed readers would prefer a press that is more actively engaged in

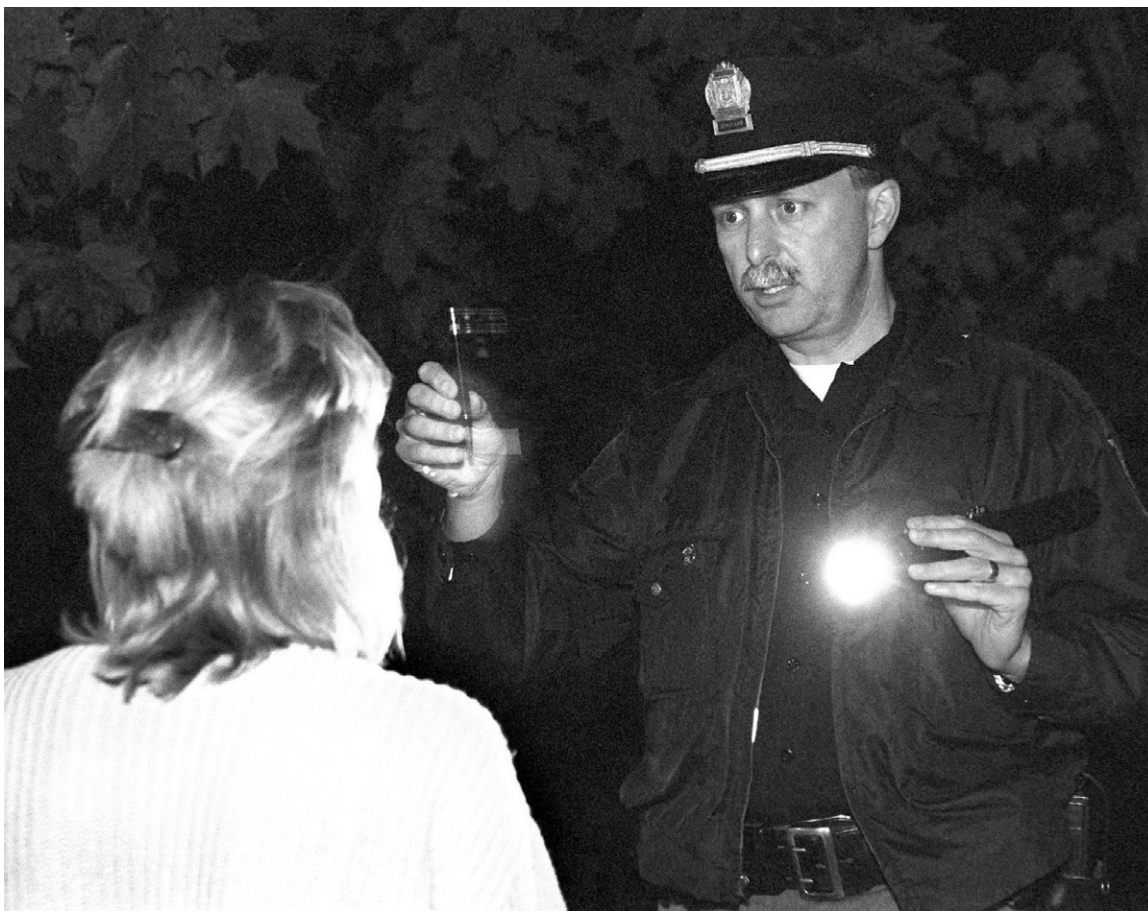
reporters.

The debate needs to shift away from whether Americans need more or less objectivity in their newspapers to a better understanding of what it means to provide readers with accuracy, relevance and utility. Let's posit fairness and impartiality as the platform on which all parties to the debate can stand and move ahead to figure out how the press can better create understanding about why many schools fail to educate children, what is wrong and what is right with the nation's health care system and what that suggests about reform, and how to account for the bulging population of our prisons.

As Seymour Topping, former Director of Editorial Development for The New York Times Co. Regional Newspapers, wrote while he was President of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, "There is agreement in our profession that the press has furnished enough facts. The question at issue is whether the press has provided the understanding of what

those facts mean to enable the citizenry to cope with the problems confronting them." ■

*Lou Ureneck, on leave from his position as Editor and Vice President of the Portland (Maine) Newspapers, is the 1995 editor in residence at the Nieman Foundation. Ureneck also is the incoming Chair of the New Media and Values Committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.*



A Portland police sergeant performs an initial field sobriety test on a Portland woman after she was involved in a single-car accident. She was charged with operating under the influence. *Photo courtesy of the Maine Sunday Telegram and Portland Press Herald.*

of lining up resources and energy behind what the public sees as the core and defining purpose of newspapers, which is to inform the public so that it can function in a democratic society. The best marketing plan is quality content in a newspaper that engages the mind and imagination of its community.

All of which is to suggest that flat or declining newspaper circulation around the nation may be a sign of the public's rejection of a press ethos that

problem solving, or in explaining events and issues in terms that allow readers as citizens to understand and solve problems, then newspapers need to craft news reports that convey meaning as well as fact, insight as well as events. And the one figure who is key to this kind of journalism is the well informed reporter. A newspaper's decision to adopt a more interpretive approach to the news must be followed by a commitment to developing the research and analytical skills of

Fall 1999

## The Role of Reporters' Judgment

Here are excerpts from the Watchdog Journalism Conference, May 15, 1999, at Harvard University.

*A question from the audience elicited discussion about whether there can ever be truly independent sources. The whole notion of independent sources, this questioner posed to the journalists, "is an oxymoron like jumbo shrimp or educational TV." "Is there," he wanted to know, "such a thing as an independent source?"*

*What follows was either said in direct reply to this question or emerged out of other related discussions.*

**William Rashbaum** [crime reporter, the New York Daily News]: "There's no way to maintain complete independence from your sources and still be really effective as a watchdog. But I think that we have to continually work to limit our dependence. We have to do that in obvious ways, such as having many, many sources over as wide a range of areas and disciplines as possible, sources at the top of institutions as well as at the bottom in the trenches. Read absolutely everything you can get your hands on so you become as expert and knowledgeable about the area that you are covering, and just use your eyes, ears and mind, rather than relying on what you've been told."

**Murrey Marder** [former Diplomatic Correspondent, The Washington Post]: "No, there is no such thing as an independent source, and the first thing a reporter should ask himself when he is talking to anyone whom he thinks may be a source is, 'Why is this source talking to me? What is in it for him?' First, I have to find out what is in it for him before I find what is in it for me...."

"Now, some source may be discovered one day in Washington who comes in virginal robes and with a halo. But I

certainly have never encountered him and I would never assume that any source is telling me the whole truth, because I don't think the source knows the whole truth...."

"I work from a premise which may be old-fashioned, and I hope it will become new-fashioned: that the source I am talking to does not know everything about the subject he's talking about. Second, if he knows a great deal about it, why is he talking to me, and what is his point of view, and why is he selling it to me?..."

"With all the emphasis we have given to sources [at this conference], it may very well create the impression that the reporter functions best when he is collecting information from various people. I would say on the contrary, he's functioning best when he's collecting information from various people and thinking it through for himself. I know of no solid story that I've ever written that was simply drawn from either a single individual or even a group of individuals. It's something that I had to piece together in my own mind, with my own resources, essentially, and present in that way."

**Susanne M. Schafer** [Chief Military Correspondent, the Associated Press]: "This is the essence of journalism. The difference between the Internet and what we'd like to think of as solid journalism is judgment calls."

**Loretta Tofani** [reporter, The Philadelphia Inquirer. She won a Pulitzer for investigative reporting for her series on men gang-raped in jail.]: "No one really had an overview of the jail system, a system that didn't work. Everybody had a limited view, and some

people just had plain incorrect knowledge, and so it was really my task to try to make the view complete and make all these different parts see why the other parts weren't working."

**Roy Gutman** [correspondent, Newsday. His reporting on Serb atrocities in Bosnia won a Pulitzer for International Reporting.]: "The only way that a reporter could sort out what was really going on [with Serbian atrocities in Bosnia] and hope to be at all factual was to find real people who were real victims and ask them to speak. It's kind of anathema to a lot of us who cover governments, who are diplomatic reporters, to go to individuals who have suffered. And I think back to Loretta's story, going to victims and to criminals. Frankly, [going to talk with victims] gave me a sense of independence [because] I acquired enough of a database in my head or in my notebooks. I would talk to one person alone, fresh, for as long as it took to get the entire story. Then I would start checking it out with other people, independently. I would not go to anybody who had been interviewed by any other reporter. I was able to put together my own picture that way. Through that I was able to build up a record of what the crimes were, and there was nobody who could gainsay me at the end of the day because I was convinced it was true. And it just turned out that the facts were correct. Few reporters used that method. So I think there is a way that we can have our independence and do our stories and be confident of them...."

"It strikes me that we shouldn't be looking for independent sources but for independent judgment. It has to come from journalists. Look at Loretta's story: Who was the independent source there who gave her the full picture? She put together sources, going in fact finally to the perpetrators, the criminals themselves, and so her story became the independent source and her work became the independent facts. There was no single source who could put her in the picture.... The only independence has to come from us."

## OBJECTIVITY

**Lars-Erik Nelson** [Washington columnist for the New York Daily News]: “I don’t have to be independent of my sources. I am a columnist; I find people who will help me or people whose stories intrigue me, and I can advocate their cause for them. So I have less need to keep independent of somebody’s agenda than a straight news reporter....”

“[When I covered Prague in the early 1970’s], for all that they were wonderful democratic people fighting the good fight for freedom, they had their petty intrigues and their romances and their conspiracy theories and they would take things too far and would overdramatize them. You’d have to say [to them], ‘Look, I’m basically on your side. You don’t own me, but I’m basically on your side. However, I am not your mouthpiece.’ And you do have to keep that distance, even when you know they’re fighting the heroic struggle....”

“There’s certainly no pure independence, but there is relative independence of a source.... There are academics who don’t have a financial interest in the situation who have relatively greater independence on a story than, say, if it’s an arms control story, than an arms manufacturer or a diplomat or somebody whose livelihood depends upon the situation. You can find people who do have a distance and who do not have the financial stake and that gives them a relative independence.”

**David Barstow** [reporter, The New York Times. He investigated the National Baptist Convention for the St. Petersburg Times.]: “By gathering at every step as many stupid documents as we could possibly find—old agendas, old budgets, anything and everything under the sun—we wouldn’t become the dumb reporter scraping for the most basic information. Actually we would become an authority. We would become so knowledgeable about the inner workings of this entity [the National Baptist Convention] and the political jockeying among the various

players who were trying to wrestle control of this organization away from the president that we could come with our questions from a position of strength, not from a position of weakness with these folks.... This is an organization whose public relations director’s main purpose was to try to have us arrested at every turn and not give us any information whatsoever.”

**Byron Acohido** [aviation reporter, The Seattle Times. He won a Pulitzer for Beat Reporting.]: “We’re dealing in a complicated society, trying to cover complicated sources under deadline and competitive pressures, and what Murrey Marder said really rings true: The best thing we can do [in the midst of reporting on these stories] is to pause and think. I’m a believer in public service journalism, in serving the readers...and my belief is that what we can bring to bear on behalf of the readers is our intelligence, the ability to sift all this stuff and at the end of the day connect the dots and help the readers make sense of it.”...

*In reporting the TWA 800 story, Acohido began to suspect that politics were at work in how the FBI and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) acted as sources for this story. Each organization acted as a key source—and usually an unnamed source—for reporters at selected newspapers. As always happens with stories about airline crashes, the corporation that built the plane also wanted to provide reporters with its “spin.”*

“[The FBI and NTSB] had different agendas for different reasons and wanted to put out different spins. What happened was really amazing. These two leading publications, chasing these two competing spins, drove the coverage....it happens at every crash that you get red herrings and the only entity that benefits from these red herrings is the corporation. [On] July 27th, an unnamed source tells The Washington Post the center tank was 20 degrees too cool. That’s Boeing all the way. That’s their corporate product liability lawyers. That’s wrong, dead wrong.

They know that’s wrong, but they still plant it....”

“[As the story continued] it was bomb, bomb, bomb. Every story was about this bomb for months, which turned out wrong.”

**James McNair** [reporter, The Miami Herald]: “This is where I have a problem with the motives of sources. In 15 years on the business desk, I have to say that reporters’ independence is under attack constantly by corporations that aim to have news slanted in a certain way, if not ignored altogether.... Material gains await a reporter who’s going to go bad any day, but payoffs often arrive in more latent and unexpected ways. I remember once Volvo, out of the blue, I didn’t even cover Volvo or auto manufacturing, called me up and asked me if I wanted to test-drive some new car for a week.... I took a pass, but one of the sportswriters jumped on that one. It was a pretty good drive....”

“But business reporters give away their independence most often without accepting any forms of gratis or goodwill that shows in their stories. These are often nothing more than rewrites of a corporate press release, which is a carefully crafted, heavily lawyered statement, notorious for its omissions and distractions. Emphasis is often placed on so-called operating earnings that don’t take into account the cost for plant shutdowns or inventory write-offs that in my book have everything to do with operations. But many reporters who are thrust on the business desk without any financial training don’t know any better, and when corporations speak of ‘rationalization of operations,’ reporters don’t always know to ask, ‘How many workers are going to be laid off?’ When corporations hire investment bankers who examine options to enhance shareholder value, that item might be buried or omitted in the story when it’s probably the lead: The company is for sale.”

■

# Sources

In the spring of 1999, Nieman Curator **Bill Kovach** opened the second Watchdog Journalism Conference by voicing concern about the possible consequences of shifting relationships among sources and journalists. He said, “This year, the Clinton/Lewinsky story has highlighted the extraordinary degree to which American reporting, especially in Washington, has put itself in a position to be manipulated by those who have a vital interest in the outcome of the story. One impact of the new technology has been to shift the power relationship toward the sources of the information and away from the news organizations that cover them. Increasingly, sources usurp the gatekeeping role of the journalist to dictate the terms of the interaction, the conditions under which the information will be released, and the timing of publication. This is a power shift so dramatic that I believe it can destroy journalistic independence, and certainly it changes the whole notion of journalistic distance.”

How reporters work with sources and handle the information that sources relay to them has long been a topic of concern among journalists. In 1958, **Alfred Friendly**, Managing Editor of The Washington Post, wrote a memo to his staff about what many believed was the most vexing problem of the news. That problem: stories that could not be attributed to their source(s).

Less than a quarter century later, The Washington Post failed to adhere to Friendly’s advice and published “Jimmy’s World,” the story of a heroin-addicted boy who didn’t exist. In examining what happened, **Clark R. Mollenhoff** (NF’50) explored the myths about sources that developed in the wake of that newspaper’s Watergate reporting.

**Gene Foreman**, Managing Editor of The Philadelphia Inquirer, proposed guidelines to help reporters figure out when a source can remain anonymous *and* the story credible. “I am convinced,” he wrote in 1984, “that by needlessly resorting to unnamed sources, we undermine our cherished credibility and dilute our effectiveness as an institution.”

Nieman Curator **Howard Simons** visited in these pages the topic of government secrecy and the complex questions posed to reporters and editors when secrets are discovered or when officials ask that secrets be withheld.

At the spring 1999 Watchdog Journalism Conference, reporters devoted much attention to their relationships with sources. Among questions they addressed were: How are these relationships established? How can and should they be maintained during the course of reporting a story? Where should reporters draw the line in terms of their interactions with sources? Can reporters get too close to their sources? How can a story not be compromised by a source’s own agenda? New York Daily News reporter **William Rashbaum** acknowledged that “the best work I’ve ever done is when I’ve been completely shut out by the agency or institution I’m covering. . . . Because when you are shut out, you just have to work harder and you have to dig harder. . . .” ■



July 1958

# Attribution of News

## Memo to All Hands

BY ALFRED FRIENDLY

*One of the most vexing of all problems of the news is the story that, for one or another reason, cannot be attributed to its source. After long wrestling with this puzzler, the Managing Editor of The Washington Post gathered himself together one day and got off this policy statement to all his staff.*

Some questions have arisen recently about the various conventions about attribution of news and our policy on them. The following summary is in explanation.

Direct attribution is the best way of handling news and information about an event or conditions or situations of which we do not have direct, eyewitness knowledge ourselves. This is always the best way, inasmuch as it provides the reader with a knowledge of the source, enabling him to evaluate its credibility for himself. It involves no pretense of having direct knowledge which we do not have. It avoids the risk of having the newspapers used to disseminate material for which the author is unwilling to take public responsibility.

However, when sources will not allow attribution, or will not talk if there is attribution, we are driven, along with others, to move from the best way of presenting the news of which we are not the witness to second-best ways.

These methods, because they lack the virtue of complete candor and do not have the advantage of straightforward processes, get newspaper people into a great many misunderstandings. They are, in many cases, a means by which officials seek to evade responsibility for knowledge and information for which they should be willing to assume responsibility. In many cases, citizens have a right to know, not only

the information, but the source of it.

Still, we do not make the circumstances under which some information is available. They exist. We have to live with them. It is the purpose of this memorandum to make it more convenient to live with them and to minimize the possibilities of misunderstanding between the newspapers and our colleagues and our sources.

**1. Off-the-record.** In a small gathering, or an interview, if a news source asks to put the remarks he is about to make off-the-record, the reporter has the choice of agreeing or of asking the news source not to make the intended comments at all, in order to remain free to seek the story elsewhere.

If the reporter agrees to the off-the-record basis, he must then hold the disclosure in absolute confidence. He may not use it in anything he writes, even without attribution to the source, however guarded. A violation of a confidence of this kind is considered, and properly, a cardinal newspaper sin.

He may, unless forbidden by the original source, seek out the same information from another source, but without in any way indicating that he already has heard the news, or is in possession of it, from someone else.

If he accepts the off-the-record condition as to the information itself, he usually may use it upon its public disclosure somewhere else, but in all such cases where a question may arise about a breach of confidence, the reporter should act only after discussion of the matter with his editors and the appropriate desk.

An even more difficult problem arises with respect to disclosure of the source when that source has been publicly identified elsewhere. Again, the proper

course is to bring the matter to the attention of the desk and the editors, who will determine what can be published and whether prior clearance with the source is called for.

The reporter will choose the other course (asking the source not to mention the subject if he can do so only off-the-record) when he believes that he has an opportunity to find out about the matter in some other way and does not, therefore, wish any conditions hanging over him or limiting his future inquiry.

In a public meeting or gathering, open to all without specific invitation, any attempt by a speaker to put all or part of his remarks off-the-record may be firmly and blandly ignored as an absurdity.

In a large gathering—say 20 persons or more—but sponsored by a private organization, club, committee or the like, where the reporter is present in his role as a reporter but also as an invited guest, he must protest vigorously any attempt by a speaker to go off-the-record. He should point out that the meeting was scheduled as open to the press, that any attempt at secrecy with a group that large is manifestly meaningless, ineffective, nonsensical, etc. If the speaker persists, and insists that his remarks be off-the-record, the reporter must leave the meeting at that point, complaining as loudly as he can, and report the matter to the editors of the appropriate desk. They will decide whether and how the event should be reported, and what sort of a protest should be made.

**1a. Phony off-the-record.** Many persons new to Washington or to contacts with the press may say they are speaking off-the-record, having heard the phrase but misunderstanding it, and intending only to mean “for background only” (see number two below). The reporter’s objection may then serve to clarify the situation and put the story on a usable basis. Make sure you and the source are clear on the meaning of his injunction and its limitations.

## SOURCES

**2. For background only.** This convention, also known as “Without attribution,” “The Lindley Rule,” “The Rule of Compulsory Plagiarism,” or simply as “Don’t quote me,” is a common one and is used—or should be—when a person of considerable importance or delicate position is discussing a matter in circumstances in which his name cannot be used for reasons of public policy or personal vulnerability. It is often abused by persons who want to sink a knife or do a job without risking their own position or facing the consequences to themselves.

Obviously, it is much better to obtain a story in circumstances which permit the identification of the source. In certain types of stories, particularly those arising on the police and court beats, it is often not possible to report the event at all without attribution. In some cases, attribution is needed as a matter of fair play to the other side of the controversy, or sometimes attribution may be needed to pin responsibility for potentially libelous statements where it belongs. In some cases, however, the “background only” procedure is legitimate and provides an honest, worthwhile story which could not be obtained in any other way.

In such cases the reporter may not, of course, identify the source and may not hint, imply or suggest his identity. In some cases, the source may insist that no attribution be given even to the agency or organization of the source, forbidding the reporter even to indulge in such vague attribution as “State Department sources,” or “Internal Revenue Service officials,” and the like.

In all such circumstances, the reporter is on dangerous ground. He must take pains to establish clearly and without any ambiguity in his own or the source’s mind exactly what the conditions are, and must tell the appropriate desk the circumstances of the story, following instructions from the desk, as if on his own cognizance, or with whatever kind of attribution has been allowed.

In all, the reporter must remember that a violation of confidence is accomplished just as surely by disclosure of

the news and/or the source to an authorized person as it is by printing it in the paper. He breaches the confidence he has undertaken by telling someone who was not included in the original session who the source was and what transpired.

He has the right to, and should, inform his desk and editors of the event and the source, but making clear what the conditions were; if he writes a memorandum to his editors on the session he must precede it by a clear and obvious caveat about the circumstances under which the information was obtained.

For a reporter to give the story and/or source to another person who was not invited to the session is not merely a breach of his commitment, it is often a sure way to guarantee that he himself will be scooped; the other person, not bound by the original conditions or not understanding them, may blithely proceed to publish the account. The reporter who disclosed the matter to another cannot console himself in the thought that the second man may have acted unethically; the fact remains that he committed the initial breach of confidence himself.

If a story obtained on an off-the-record or background-only basis is published elsewhere with a disclosure of the source, the reporter who agreed to the terms in the first place must seek guidance from his conscience, his editors and, if possible, from the original source.

The ugliest and most lasting quarrels between the press and the news sources in Washington over the last 30 years have come from deliberate or, most usually, unwitting misunderstandings of the ground rules in situations of this kind.

**3. Not for direct quotation.** This convention, fortunately now rare, is tailor-made for confusion. When someone speaks but asks, “Don’t quote me directly,” take infinite pains to make sure exactly what he means.

The custom came into being with press conferences of the President and the Secretary of State some years ago. It

meant that the speaker’s remarks could be fully and clearly attributed, but that his words must be paraphrased rather than used literally inside quotation marks. Thus a reporter could write, “The President said he felt fine and would go to New York next week,” but not, “The President said, ‘I feel fine and shall go to New York next week.’”

The purpose, if any, was to spare the speaker the cold printing of the solecisms common in conversational remarks.

Now, with televised White House press conferences and a transcript made of the Secretary of State’s conferences, the injunction is rarely used. Occasionally, a speaker whose native tongue is not English may ask to be spared the risible consequences of direct quotation. In such cases, common politeness indicates compliance with the request.

But make abundantly clear whenever someone says “Don’t quote me directly” that he means what he appears to say. Ninety-nine times out of 100 he means, in reality, “background only.”

**4. Hold for release.** Statements, speeches, handouts, reports, etc. are often embargoed for publication until a certain time, with the provision expressed on the document. Ordinarily, there is no room for ambiguity; if there is, check with the appropriate desk, or the issuing agency.

Occasionally, in an interview in which several reporters participate, they may agree by common consent among themselves and the news source not to use the information until a certain time. Such bargains must be kept. Make sure that you understand the terms exactly and that all of those present do, too, lest you be double-crossed inadvertently or otherwise. The reporter who sees brewing a proposal to embargo the information after a news session and ducks out deliberately in order to steal a march and contend that he knew nothing of the latter agreement, will not last long or do his paper and himself any credit. If he does not like the terms of the em-

bargo, he can object and his sole objection prevents the deal, for this is a case where reporters are morally bound only by unanimous consent.

If a release is broken, accidentally or by design, it is customarily a sign for general release by all. But in all cases, check first with the appropriate desk.

**5. Private gatherings.** Reporters, if they are worth their salt, will pick up much information from conversations at parties, private visits, and social gatherings. There is a real problem on what use may be made of the information so received. No flat and general rules about procedure can be made to take care of all cases of this kind.

Basically, however, the reporter's own sense of what is fit and morally proper will be the best guide. If the reporter is at a private gathering because of his person and not because of his position and profession, politeness and decent social relations indicate that he must specifically ask the person who discloses the information whether it may be published and under what conditions. He may choose to do it on the spot, or to call on the source at a later time, operating without ambiguity as a reporter, and not as a social contact.

If the reporter has been invited to the gathering in his role of a reporter, and if he is told something by someone who knows he is a reporter and is working at it at the moment, he may ordinarily write what he learns.

In all circumstances, and whatever the conventions, stated or implied, remember that a cheap beat, won by cutting a corner, by a technicality, or by violating the spirit if not the letter of the understanding of the news source and of other newsmen, is empty, usually worthless, and is followed by penalties and regrets far heavier and longer enduring than any momentary gains that are obtained.

Conduct yourself so that you can look your source in the eye the next day. ■

*Alfred Friendly is Managing Editor of The Washington Post.*

Summer 1981

## Weighing Sources— Anonymous and Otherwise

### The Fiction of Janet Cooke and the Pulitzer Prize Surprise

BY CLARK R. MOLLENHOFF

**T**he most distressing aspect of the whole "Jimmy's World" scandal has been the reaction of a number of editors that it could have happened to any newspaper. If this false story could get through the safety nets of any large number of newspapers, then the newspapers have been involved in much worse laxity than I had imagined. I hope this is not true.

In the first place, I believe that most editors are too cautious to permit a reporter, particularly a young, totally inexperienced and untested reporter, to write this kind of story where there was no way to corroborate any aspect of the fanciful yarn about the eight-year-old heroin addict. A large number of editors would properly balk at publishing such a story from an experienced and tested reporter unless the material from the anonymous source was only one aspect of a story that

could be otherwise documented and attributed to specific credible sources.

Janet Cooke's Jimmy story used one device that should have caused questioning immediately. Public officials were quoted on the general drug problem in the District of Columbia to give an authoritative base to the story, but their statements had no specific comment on an eight-year-old heroin addict. This meant the story was devoid of any specific corroboration of the Jimmy incident.

The fiction of Janet Cooke is the natural and inevitable consequence of one of the myths of Watergate—that a Deep Throat source was such corroboration, was in fact a credible and sound "second source." Woodward moved smoothly from Deep Throat to second, third and fourth hand hearsay in "The Final Days," and then to the questionable use of 227 anonymous Supreme

#### JIMMY'S WORLD

##### 8-Year-Old Heroin Addict Lives for a Fix

By Janet Cooke

Washington Post Staff Writer

"Jimmy is 8 years old and a third-generation heroin addict, a precocious little boy with sandy hair, velvety brown eyes and needle marks freckling the baby-smooth skin of his thin brown arms.

He nestles in a large, beige reclining chair in the living room of his comfortably furnished home in Southeast Washington. There is an almost cherubic expression on his small, round face as he talks about life—clothes, money, the Baltimore Orioles and heroin. He has been an addict since the age of 5.

His hands are clasped behind his head, fancy running shoes adorn his feet and a striped lead T-shirt hangs over his thin frame. "Bad, ain't it," he boasts to a reporter visiting recently. "I got me six of these."

Jimmy's is a world of hard drugs, fast money and the good life he believes both can bring. Every day, junkies casually buy heroin from Ron, his mother's live-in lover, in the dining room of Jimmy's home. They "cook" it in the kitchen and "fire up" in the bedrooms. And every day, Ron or someone else fires up Jimmy, plunging a needle into his bony arm, sending the fourth grader into a hypnotic nod.

Jimmy prefers this atmosphere to school, where only one subject seems relevant to fulfilling his dreams: "I want to have me a bad car and dress good and also have me a good place to live," he says. "So, I pretty much pay attention in math because I know I got to keep up when I finally get me something to sell."

Jimmy wants to sell drugs, maybe even on the District's meanest street, Condon Terrace SE, and some day deal heroin, he says, "just like my man Ron."

Ron, 27, and recently up from the South, was the one who first turned Jimmy on. "He'd be buggin' me all the time about what the shots were and what people was doin' and one day he said, 'When can I get off?'" Ron says, leaning against a wall in a narcotic haze, his eyes half closed, yet piercing. "I said, 'Well, s---, you can have some now. I let him snort a little and, damn, the little dude really did get off.'"

Six months later, Jimmy was hooked. "I felt like I was part of what was goin' down," he says. "I can't really tell you how it feel. You never done any? Sort of like them rides at King's Dominion . . . like if you was to go on all of them in one day."

"It be real different from herb (marijuana). That's baby s---. Don't nobody here hardly ever smoke no herb. You can't hardly get none right now, anyway."

Jimmy's mother Andrea accepts her son's habit as a fact of life, although she will not inject the child herself and does not like to see others do it.

"I don't really like to see him fire up," she says. "But, you know, I think he would have got into it one day, anyway. Everybody does. When you live in the ghetto, it's all a matter of survival. If he wants to get away from it when he's older, then that's his thing. But right now, things are better for us than they've ever been. . . . Drugs and black folk been together for a very long time."

See ADDICT, A9, Col. 1



By Michael Ondaatje Jr. for The Washington Post

## SOURCES

Court clerks and others as his authority in “The Brethren.”

Even if there was a Deep Throat (and I believe it is only sensible to be skeptical until he is named), that mysterious figure did not represent a sound corroboration. It is said that he did not purport to tell Bob Woodward anything that Woodward did not know already from some credible source. Deep Throat, according to what we have been told, simply volunteered that he would listen to what Bob Woodward told him and give Woodward some indication as to whether he was “right” or “wrong” or “hot” or “cold” on the facts.

Any rookie cop would be fired for any reliance upon the techniques that Woodward says he used to get the second source (Deep Throat) that he was required to produce to meet Executive Editor Ben Bradlee’s standard. Police rarely tell an informant witness what they know, but test his credibility constantly by insisting that he relate what took place with the kind of physical detail that can be established by other evidence.

The great contribution that Woodward and Carl Bernstein made to the Watergate story was their tireless checking of records and interviewing and reinterviewing of dozens of witnesses to spot contradictions and to obtain elaborations to bring the role of the Nixon White House into focus. That was fine reporting, and they were energetic and imaginative in the manner in which they did it. However, the injection of Deep Throat was without independent value except as it filled Ben Bradlee’s demand for a second source.

The resignation of President Richard M. Nixon and the conviction of dozens of Watergate defendants is irrelevant to any discussion of the value of the Deep Throat source.

Washington Post reporters could just as well have developed a “third source,” a “fourth source,” and more by repeating the Watergate developments to other persons until such time as they found others who would assure them that the facts as recited were “about

right.” With four, five or more so-called “sources” developed in this manner there would still be no true independent corroboration.

If Woodward and Bernstein or any of their editors truly believed that Deep Throat was an independent and credible second source, it says a great deal about the superficiality of their own analysis and the lack of discrimination between firm corroboration and what can well be a contrived “second source.”

It is well to remember that one good solid source, a direct witness with no axe to grind and with a record of high credibility, is better than two, three, four, or five sources who are relating second- or third-hand hearsay. The source who does not volunteer new information without prompting may be one of the horde of people in and out of government who like to pretend that they know more than they do to build their own reputation or simply want to be accommodating to a newsman who is seeking assurance that he is on the right track.

Any type of “two-source” or “three-source” rule is nonsense unless there is a sound standard for weighing the credibility of the source. It is also necessary that the editors establish uniform policy for administering and enforcing the “source” standards in a way that genuinely weighs the evidence and is not a mere seeking of a minimal justification for printing a sensational story from a questionable source.

All effective investigative reporters rely to some degree upon confidential sources that must remain anonymous for varying times, depending upon the nature of the threat to the source’s life or livelihood. However, every really experienced investigative reporter knows that few informants are totally reliable even though they may believe they are telling the reporter the full truth.

Frequently these informants will expand on what they know from direct conversations and observations because they believe it is probably true—and they know it is what the reporter wants to hear. A witness who is totally

reliable on one subject may be deceptive and misleading where his own interests or those of family members are involved or where he has reason to dislike the person involved in the alleged mismanagement or corruption.

Any really experienced investigative reporter knows that many public officials who are quite reliable when speaking on the record will peddle a large amount of malicious misinformation when talking on a confidential basis. The investigative reporter must constantly be on guard against being used by clever informants who may make unjustified accusations against those whom the informants wish to damage.

The only real protection a reporter can give a good informant is to avoid mentioning his existence in a story and to have every paragraph fully supported by documents or independent witnesses or both. In such cases, the information taken from the confidential source is used only as leads to public records, other documents, and direct witnesses who can be quoted to establish the soundness of the informant’s allegations. While this is not always possible, it is well to keep in mind that every mention made of an anonymous source is waving a red flag in the face of lawyers for defendants or other critics. On this point, it is well to remember that even the broadest shield laws that have been enacted in some states are of little value when balanced against the Sixth Amendment rights of a defendant to have access to all of the witnesses and documents that may be of use in his defense. Myron Farber learned that sad lesson, and all of the financial resources and clout of The New York Times couldn’t save him from jail.

While I am not ruling out the possibility that there are occasions when it might be essential to quote an anonymous source in a controversial news story, it should be done sparingly. It must not be done impetuously, but must be done with careful consideration of all questions of ethics and news policy.

In pointing to the need for uniformly

## SOURCES

sound standards in the corroboration of news sources, it is not necessary to accept or reject the arguments that “Jimmy’s World” got through because The Washington Post editors and the Pulitzer Committee had undefined “pressures” to demonstrate some symbolism. Adoption and enforcement of sound operational standards for all reporters—male or female, black or white, liberal or conservative—is possible. While only a few publishers, editors, or reporters have taken the time to think their policies through completely, a sense of fairness combined with caution has served as an effective check on many newspapers. This is not enough.

The burden of proof should be upon the reporters and editors to explore thoughtfully all of the pros and cons of ethics, news policy, and general public policy. While errors can creep into any newspaper, there should be a genuine interest in making a full correction of those errors at the earliest point possible. From this standpoint the “Jimmy’s World” story was a continuing fraud that ignored the challenges with a Watergate-like attitude that called for drawing the wagons in a circle to defend against the critics. This precluded any real internal investigation. That attitude continued through the arrogant submission of the story for the Pulitzer award and the proud reprinting of the story in a full-page promotional advertisement on April 14, 1981.

The continuing fraud of a “Jimmy’s World” story would not escape the editors of any responsible newspaper who are interested in sound reporting and are not seeking bare justification for publishing a colorful yarn. There are times when sticking by a reporter and a story takes courage, but there are other times when it is foolhardy. Mature judgment in weighing corroboration for informants is the difference. ■

*Clark R. Mollenhoff, Nieman Fellow 1950, is Professor of Journalism at Washington and Lee University. His latest book is “Investigative Reporting—From Courthouse to White House.”*

Summer 1984

## Confidential Sources: Testing the Readers’ Confidence

BY GENE FOREMAN

...With all the fretting about believability, I think we ought to take a close look at the number of times our news stories attribute information not to people with names and titles, but to “sources”—and to their redundant cousins, “informed sources.”...

Last fall our staff at The Philadelphia Inquirer had a series of discussions on fairness and accuracy. One of the subjects we spent considerable time on was the need to limit unnamed sources to those giving information truly essential to our readers and not obtainable in any other way. In the ensuing months I noted with satisfaction that we did seem to be cutting down on “sources” stories. It took a routine piece two weeks ago to make me realize I was being complacent. The story was about actor Harrison Ford spending some time with Philadelphia police detectives to prepare himself for a role in a new movie. In the five-inch story, one of our police reporters, who happens to be an exceptional digger of facts, got carried away in quoting a “source” and a “police source.” To these anonymous observers he attributed such hardly crucial bits of information as the plot of the forthcoming film and the fact that Ford had the police commissioner’s approval for his field work, as if he could have done it otherwise. Once again, we’re trying to get the word out on our concern about the “sources” problem....

Tonight I have...a set of guidelines to offer for your consideration....

The first guideline I offer in evaluating confidential sources is this: The use of unnamed sources in a news story should be a last resort, not just an easy alternative to documenting the infor-

mation from the public record or quoting someone willing to be named. In short, there is no substitute for digging. In the brief story about the actor who rode along with detectives as they went about their homicide investigations, there was no indication that the reporter had even tried to interview the actor himself or his agent or the movie company. Any of these would have been more knowledgeable about details of the movie than the secret police source. As I noted earlier, the University of Iowa researchers [See accompanying box] found repeatedly that the reporters could have gotten

*Researchers from The University of Iowa journalism school conducted a study in 1982 for the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Analyzing stories from a half-dozen large papers scattered around the country, the researchers found upon interviewing the reporters that in about one-third of the stories the anonymous quotes could easily have been avoided. In some cases the reporters did not know why their sources needed protection. In others, the reporters conceded that they could have persuaded the sources to go on-the-record. In still others, the information attributed to blind sources was not crucial and indeed was duplicated elsewhere in the stories.*

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people to talk for the record if they had tried. The competitive rush for Watergate disclosures induced many reporters to let slide the traditional standards for attribution, as David Shaw [the media critic of the Los Angeles Times] noted. He said, “Getting into print first, with a story from an unnamed source, was often thought to be

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better than being second, with a story from a named source.” Shaw also noted that Watergate spawned a whole generation of young “investigative reporters” who felt that their editors and readers would be impressed by their savvy in referring to “informed sources” even though they were perfectly willing to be quoted by name.

The second guideline: It should be clear that the source’s physical or economic well-being might be jeopardized if his or her name is revealed. Thus we apply another test, one that must take place before the information is accepted with the stipulation of confidentiality. The writer should not simply assume that a source would be “more comfortable” not to be quoted by name; there should be evidence of real jeopardy.

The third guideline: The information provided by the unnamed source must be very important. The story should be one that helps a newspaper’s readers make informed decisions about their government or community. The information from the source should be crucial to the story, not tangential to the theme. Again, this is a sort of “needs” test that we should apply along with

the first two before allowing a veiled source to be quoted in the paper. It is intended to separate the truly significant, essential story or passage within a story from the nice-to-have-but-not-really-necessary. At the Inquirer, we learned the hard way to apply this rule. In a piece about why major motion pictures were slow in reaching Philadelphia theaters, we spent the first two-thirds of the story’s length expounding on what all the named sources agreed was the crux of the matter: The distributors control when and where a movie will be shown, and they allow films to spread out into the country only after making their splash

in the media centers of New York and Los Angeles. Near the bottom of the story, we mentioned that when it came to asking a favor to get a particular movie earlier than usual, Philadelphia exhibitors were not likely to be successful because they were such an irascible bunch. The story quoted an a n o n y m o u s source several times in alleging that a certain exhibitor paid bills late so as to earn interest on the money withheld, and used its market clout to violate its contract by cutting short the run of a film that turned out to be a poor draw. To our chagrin, we learned after publication that we could not substantiate the accusations made by the anonymous source. And we found out that the source was in fact a competing exhibitor, something the editors of the story hadn’t known or asked

about at the time. It was an object lesson for us. We realized that the information, even if it had been scrupulously true, was simply not essential to the story. For that matter, the story itself was not one that, to quote the guideline, “helps a newspaper’s readers make informed decisions about their government or community.”

The fourth guideline: To help readers evaluate the information, the unnamed source should be described as fully as possible without giving away the identity. So often we attribute statements simply to “sources” or “informed sources” or “reliable sources.” I would argue that semantically they are the same thing; we should not be quoting anyone who is not informed or reliable, and our readers should be astonished if we did. Using those terms amounts to nothing more than a plea to readers that we are not making the whole thing up. They impart no information. Of course, we should not risk giving away the identity of a person to whom we have promised confidentiality, but usually there is a way of characterizing that person that does not isolate him or her. Instead of a “source,” why not say “one of the participants in the negotiations” or “a police officer

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familiar with the department’s procedures in administering promotion tests”? Assuming that more than a handful of people fit those descriptions, the added information helps readers weigh the source’s credentials. The less we ask the readers to depend solely on our

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word that the source is qualified, the better off we are.

The fifth guideline: If an unnamed source is quoted making derogatory statements about someone, such a statement must be one that enhances the public's understanding of a crucial issue. Here, reporters and editors must apply additional safeguards: The statement should be corroborated by public record or by named sources, or the source should have an impeccable record of reliability as well as a direct knowledge of the facts. On this point I would probably encounter disagreement from many journalists, who

would argue that under no circumstances should a blind derogatory quote be permitted. I accept the principle but feel that there has to be flexibility to deal with the rare exceptional situation. The additional safeguards I mentioned were intended to reduce the possibility of unfairness. Of course, in any situation in which a person is mentioned in derogatory fashion, he or she should have an opportunity to respond.

Now, the sixth and final guideline: Reporters have to be free to use their judgment in granting confidentiality to sources while gathering the facts. However, it should be understood that the agreement of confidence is between the source and the newspaper, and that the reporter can be expected to identify the source to his or her editor. This is yet another area where honest men and women disagree. There are editors who insist that no one on the paper but the top editor can authorize confidentiality. Although recognizing that there are horrible abuses—which are, of course, the point of this lecture—I do not see how such a policy could help but inhibit a newspaper's ability to gather the news. Not to allow discretion would be to put our reporters in a straitjacket. The reporters, in my opinion, have to be relied upon to make judgments on the spot. The reporter's editor would naturally be

bound by the agreement of confidentiality granted by the reporter—that is, he or she could not attach the name to the quote—but nevertheless has the option of deciding whether to use the quote at all. On the other extreme, some journalists would argue that the agreement of confidentiality is between

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**I am convinced that by needlessly resorting to unnamed sources, we undermine our cherished credibility and dilute our effectiveness as an institution.**

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the source and the reporter as an individual and no one, not even the reporter's editor, can be given the identity. Although I would not insist that an editor has to know the identity of each and every source quoted, I do feel that the editor has the prerogative of asking—and getting—an answer. Reporters don't put stories into the paper, editors do.

What we have in the guidelines I have laid out is a series of tests to apply in the reporting and editing process. We methodically ask questions:

- Is there any way to get the statement on-the-record?
- Does the source seeking anonymity really stand in jeopardy if identified?
- Is the information really important?
- Can we give the readers some idea of how qualified the source is?
- Is the information derogatory to any individual and, if so, have we gone extra lengths to make sure we are being fair?

I am convinced that if every reporter and editor went through this checklist before publishing an anonymous quote, our papers would contain a lot fewer anonymous sources. And the flow of truly essential information to the public would not be diminished in any significant way.

In closing, I want to suggest one more test, this one devised by Richard Smyser, Editor of *The Oak Ridger* at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. In commenting for the National News Council study, Smyser said he divides people who give us information anonymously into two distinct groups: "sources" and "sourcers." He has a high regard for "sources," whom he describes as "good guys" who have information of importance to the public on things that are amiss but whose careers or jobs would be jeopardized if they were identified as the communicators of that information. He has revulsion for "sourcers," people whose goal is to use the press,

and ultimately the public, as a means to an end. One way he has to tell them apart is to go back periodically and look over all the information his paper has printed without attribution. "Give it the test of time," he says. "Read last year's non-attributed news this year and see how it stands up."

The on the spot tests I have spoken of—and Dick Smyser's test of time—have a mutual goal: to help us achieve a higher degree of reader confidence. I am convinced that by needlessly resorting to unnamed sources, we undermine our cherished credibility and dilute our effectiveness as an institution. For us as journalists, there can be no higher mission than to guard, and reinforce, our reputation for truth. ■

*Gene Foreman, Managing Editor of The Philadelphia Inquirer, gave the above lecture in March at the Journalism Ethics Institute, Washington and Lee University.*

Autumn 1986

# CIA Rarely Tells the Press What it Wants to Know

It only reluctantly tells Congress some of what it wants to know.

BY HOWARD SIMONS

What is it we are discussing here today? It is not just national security. It is the nation and what constitutes security. It is not just the press. It is the freedom of the press. It is not just government secrets. It is secret government. We are talking about an issue that is at the core of our democratic experiment.

For three decades, as reporter and as editor in this secrecy-marinated city, I or my fellow reporters and editors were asked by Presidents and Secretaries of State and Defense and by Directors of the Central Intelligence Agency to withhold stories in the name of national security.

Some stories were held. And still are being held. Many more were published. Many more will be published.

A while back, Michael I. Burch, the Defense Department's chief spokesman, had this to say:

"The fact remains that the Secretary of Defense and a few others in this government are charged by law to maintain national security. They would be remiss if they didn't try to maintain it. The protection of information, by law, belongs on our side of the fence."

I have absolutely no quarrel with this. It is the government's job to keep secrets. And, as I see it, it is the job of reporters and editors to learn those secrets and to determine whether they should be uncloaked before the public or kept hidden in the dark closets of secrecy.

Now, this is the very kind of notion that gets editors into trouble. When I

was a child and would get uppity at home, my mother would ask: "Who died and left you boss?" This was her way of asking the same question that editors in the United States face constantly—who and what gives you the right to decide what is a national secret? No one elected you. We all invoke the First Amendment and the Founding Fathers and the public's right to know and the courts which, over 200-plus years, have given this nation the world's freest press and not uncoincidentally its freest society.

If you live and work as a journalist in Washington long enough, several things about national security and the press become self-evident—and they are not always life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The first thing that you learn is that it is impossible, not just improbable, but impossible to do your daily job without bumping into a secret. By one estimate, 20 million federal documents are classified each year—20 million. Of these, 350,000 are stamped top-secret, a designation that means if the information in the document were disclosed, it would cause "exceptionally grave damage" to the security of the nation. The Defense Department alone, according to a recent story, has 1.5 million top-secret documents in its safes.

It is a constant wonder how many of the four million Americans who have access to classified information can remember what is secret and what is not secret.

In short, if you are to know anything

about government, you have to know secrets—there are so many of them.

The second and related thing to note is that reporters and editors do not invent secrets. Or, more jargonistically proper, secrets are leaked upon them.

Why would anyone, including perhaps even a director of the Central Intelligence Agency, tell a reporter a piece of classified information or breach national security? Well, the reasons are not very strange. Many secrecy labels are put on documents not to protect a true secret, but to avoid a true embarrassment or to cover up a cost overrun, or an abuse of power, or to stifle criticism, or to avoid public scrutiny, or out of habit.

Why are secrecy labels peeled off—the so-called deliberate leak? Often to benefit the politician or the political party. Often, too, to cause the other guy embarrassment. Sometimes to send a message to the enemy. Most times it is to put an internal enemy at a disadvantage. And only rarely to benefit the public....

One learns, too, in Washington, that many secrets stamped secret are in the public domain but the secret-keepers do not know that.

My friend and former colleague George Wilson tells the wonderful story of the day during the Pentagon Papers fight when he and several Washington Post lawyers arrived in Judge David Bazelon's chambers for an in camera meeting. Present, too, was a deputy sent to the court by Admiral Noel Gaylor, then head of the National Security Agency. He had with him a double-locked briefcase. The courier told Bazelon that the government did not want to reveal what it was about to reveal. He said the judge was to learn a secret the publication of which would jeopardize American lives in Vietnam and be inimical to the interests of the United States.

The judge looked up and said, "Open it." The man undid the double locks and took out a large manila envelope. Bazelon opened that and took out a white envelope. He then opened that



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and took out an even smaller white envelope sealed with wax and with a red ribbon. The judge broke the seal and ripped open the envelope. Inside was an intercept from a North Vietnamese radio transmitter on an island off the coast of Vietnam. It was a verbatim quote to their armed forces. The intercept was contained in the Pentagon Papers and the Admiral was making the point that if published it would result in the elimination of a valuable source and method of gathering intelligence.

The Post lawyers looked at it and were impressed. They passed it to Wilson, the newspaper's esteemed Pentagon correspondent. Wilson thought the quote sounded familiar. It came to him at that moment that he had read it before in an open hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee looking into the origins of the Vietnam War. It was in the public record and, moreover, by wonderful happenstance, Wilson had the hearing volume with him. He handed the page with the quote to the lawyers and then to Bazelon. That clinched it for the Post.

George had come to the meeting in a taxi. The chairman of the board of The Washington Post took him back to work in a limousine....

And now we arrive at deception.

What is disturbing about deception—whether practiced at home or away from the homeland—is that it robs one of the ability ever to know what is truly true. It sucks the marrow out of the bone of believability. As a reporter friend told me, “When you think you know something you have to ask, is that what they want me to know?”...

In my experience, the Central Intelligence Agency rarely tells the press what it wants to know. It only reluctantly tells the Congress some of what it wants to know, what it really wants to know. The U.S. Senate, for example, is still smarting over the mining of Nica-

raguan harbors because the Senate Intelligence Committee was not informed. And a CIA-financed manual that suggests assassination in Nicaragua while there exists a Presidential order precluding CIA involvement in any such activity has also upset the Congress.

Sometimes, this looks like deception.

These practices are antithetical to many editors' notions of democracy and how it should behave. Moreover they engender a suspicion that instead of protecting our freedoms and our way of life, a super-secret and super-

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**I have absolutely no quarrel with this. It is the government's job to keep secrets. And, as I see it, it is the job of reporters and editors to learn those secrets and to determine whether they should be unclocked before the public or kept hidden in the dark closets of secrecy.**

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powerful agency that can successfully flaunt oversight by Congress and the press ends up protecting itself.

Do I think editors ought to publish everything they learn? Of course not.

Do I think editors ought to ignore every argument by a responsible official to withhold information? Absolutely not.

Do I believe that every official has the public's best interests in mind? Of course not.

Do I believe everything the government tells me? Absolutely not.

Especially not when most leaks in Washington, D.C., are deliberate by government officials and support the government's position and are the most common form of security breach.

That seems to me all the more reason why it behooves larger newspa-

pers to be tough on secrecy. They have the money and the resources and the access to high-priced lawyers and the manpower to take on an overzealous and over-secretive bureaucracy. But every time the larger news organizations flinch or get lazy, the smaller, less affluent newspapers have that much tougher a job of taking on local government secrecy.

Sometimes newspapers are wrong in printing a story after being asked not to. But then, too, sometimes they are wrong in withholding stories.

Because if actions by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Department cannot stand Congressional scrutiny in the first instance and public scrutiny in the final analysis, this nation ought not be undertaking them.

Enough homilies. I would hope that forever the press in this country will go cloakless and daggerless into the battle for information and news and [use] truth against those who would deny it information, hide news from it, and distort the truth.

As Federal District Judge Murray Gurfein stated during the Pentagon Papers case:

“Security also lies in the value of our free institutions; a cantankerous press, an obstinate press, a ubiquitous press must be suffered by those in authority in order to preserve the even greater values of freedom of expression and the right of the people to know....”

To which I say amen, amen, amen. ■

*Howard Simons, Curator of the Nieman Foundation and former Managing Editor of The Washington Post, discussed the issues of national security and the press before the American Society of Newspaper Editors. These were his remarks.*

Fall 1999

# Reporters' Relationships With Sources

*No topic consumed as much of the conversation at the Watchdog Journalism Conference [May 15, 1999 at Harvard University] as that of reporters' relationships with sources. How are these relationships established? How can and should they be maintained during the course of reporting a story? Where should reporters draw the line in terms of their interactions with sources? Can reporters get too close to their sources? How can a story not be compromised by a source's own agenda? These and many other related questions were interwoven into each of the day's four panel discussions.*

**Doug Frantz** [national correspondent, The New York Times]: Frantz set forth three rules that he abides by in his relationship with sources.

1. "I never socialize with sources. I worked for five years in Washington and I never went to a party with sources.... Particularly for the five years I spent in Washington for the Los Angeles Times, it was vital to my independence that I not be on a first name basis with my sources, that I not go to parties with them. That was important.

2. "Transparency. We have to tell our readers where these sources are coming from. Even if you use their names, I think you need to provide some background.

3. "Don't give advice to sources. People often call up and ask you, 'What do I do now? Should I talk to the government? Should I talk to the prosecutor? Should I blow the whistle to the IRS?' I just have a flat rule not to tell them anything.... You can't be pure enough on that point."

**Loretta Tofani** [reporter, The Philadelphia Inquirer. She won a Pulitzer for investigative reporting for her se-

ries on men gang-raped in jail.]: "In the end this relationship I had with the rapists came back to haunt me because there was an implicit understanding. I told them I am a reporter. It's okay to talk with me, and they believed me. They talked. They admitted their crimes. So it was very chilling some months later when, after the series came out, the rapists were indicted for the rapes and I was given a subpoena to testify against them.... Maryland has a shield law, and reporters were protected from speaking against their sources only if the source was unnamed. But I had named them all, so I had to testify....

"I really had to think a lot about what was my relationship with them [the sources who were rapists]. I knew this much: I was not going to testify against them. There was no way. I felt I could not continue doing work as a reporter, or at least the kind of work I found meaningful as a reporter, if I were to testify against my sources. For me it was really a matter of conscience.... I had an implicit understanding with these sources, the rapists, that I was not acting as an arm of the government. It would hurt the view of myself as a reporter to start testifying for the government against people I interview. I'm not sure how I could keep going on being a reporter doing that. It's a role I don't envision myself having as a reporter. I feel like my job is, you get the story, you put it in the newspaper, and then the chips fall where they may. But then you don't keep sticking it to them. It didn't matter to me whether the victims were men or women. I wouldn't have testified....

"People at the newspaper felt differently: Ben Bradlee [the Post's Editor], surprisingly, was one of them. He felt I really should testify. At that time, he

said reporters had good citizen responsibilities. We argued about it, but it was clear his mind was made up.... Bradlee was forceful, and he had other editors in the newsroom calling me and telling me I really should go along with it. But in the end, I didn't testify. I stuck to my guns, and the paper really was forced to back me up.... So I ended up explaining in court why I wouldn't testify, and then I was cited for contempt of court. The jail rapists were all indicted, and I'm sure they feel quite badly about me today. But I still feel I have some sense of honor because I didn't testify against them."

**William Rashbaum** [crime reporter, the New York Daily News]: "The relationship between reporter and source is a delicate one.... The same can certainly be said for the relationships between management and ownership of the newspaper in the subjects of the stories that appear or, sometimes more importantly, don't appear in their publications. While many people argue that reporters have insufficient independent oversight, some might say there's less scrutiny of owners and publishers....

"New York City is a tough, incestuous town when it comes to reporting on police departments and law enforcement in general, and the beat reporters who write about the police department usually cover both crime in the city and the department as an agency. So one day you can be writing about management failures that preceded the recent [Amadou] Diallo shooting, corruption, or the Police Commissioner taking a freebie junket to the Oscars. The next day you are chasing desperately sought after details of a high-profile crime that's captivated your editors, if not the city.

"Some could argue you're not biting the hand that feeds but cannibalizing it. This is a town where one reporter at a major daily writes for the police union newsletter and sells T-shirts for a group that benefits the families of slain cops. Another was called 'Bratton's Boswell' in print because a columnist felt that his relationship with the former Police

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Commissioner was too close. Another columnist deftly killed a young reporter's story about a top police official's drug-addicted daughter. She was a regular in Lower East Side shooting galleries and roamed around there in his department car, complete with police radios, phones and lights and sirens. The columnist and the official, needless to say, were good friends. At the other end of the spectrum is a man who wrote a laudatory column about the priest who baptized his son and later turned the cleric into column fodder when he felt he kept black youngsters off a local Little League team.

"But there's a lot of room between, and that's where most of us work.... I think a lot of beat reporters do a very good job holding the department's feet to the fire.... We work in a highly competitive environment where we face the competing obligations to our readers on the one hand and our loyalties, professional and sometimes personal, to the people who provide us with information, sometimes very important information, on the other side."

**Alison Grant** [reporter, *The Plain Dealer*. She spent one year investigating corruption in the awarding of city contracts in a Cleveland suburb.]: "Perhaps this is a simple idea, but one way to get closely held information yet not compromise yourself is to demonstrate your usefulness to the people that you want to have as sources. My relationship with the two detectives [in Beachwood, a suburb of Cleveland] was symbiotic. Over the course of the year it became more and more the case that the detectives and I appeared to be working toward the same end. At times we did trade information. Some people would say that you should never deal with law enforcement officials in this way, but I think some exchange of information is all right.... It was only in retrospect that I realized I had provided a shield for the police, to an extent, at least to get their investigation launched, too.... I think you can happen to provide that function to a source and yet not compromise your-

self in dealing with that source. I also felt in Beachwood from the beginning that the cops were honest. So I didn't feel like if we happened to fill that need for the cops that it was any kind of compromise on the part of the *Plain Dealer*....

"I also had to be careful that the newspaper was not being used by my sources merely as a foil for their agenda.... Purists may not agree with this, but I think you sometimes have to deal with minor characters who did bad things in order to get to the people higher up who are orchestrating the corruption.... The prosecutor was also very talkative, and he was a friendly source, but the caveat with him was that he wanted to run for judge. He is a municipal judge now in Cleveland. That was one reason he sought publicity for the case, so it helped to be aware of his future ambitions. We traded some information. We gossiped about Cleveland politics and kept the relationship oiled....

"It does help to understand the subtext and agendas as much as possible, because there are naturally many agendas underfoot. It helps, too, to be as candid as possible with sources on how you expect the story to play. Despite sources' agendas, the reporter is writing for the reader and shaping a story that may not be what the sources expect, unless they are told....

"Despite the sources' agendas—the cops' need for cover, the prosecutor's political ambition, the city hall source's anger over losing out on a promotion, the anger of Dominic Calabrese [her initial source] over his brother's contract with the city—almost everything they told me was borne out by reporting.... [And] despite their individual grievances and aspirations, these sources were also interested in shedding light on the corruption.... This is one way for reporters to draw information from sources: by having a shared sense that an injustice is happening."

**Susan Kelleher** [reporter, *The Orange County (CA) Register*. Her work about a fertility treatment clinic's fraud

won a Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Reporting.]: "It was really telling their [patients who were inappropriately treated by infertility doctors] stories. I looked at them as sources as well, and yeah, I did get too close to those people. [And] I got very angry at the doctors.... I really did get attached to those people. I also felt a little too close to the whistle blowers, my initial sources. There were three of them, and they had settled a lawsuit for about a half-million dollars because they were fired, they said, for blowing the whistle on it before we had even written about it....

"[When the story was published] I felt conflicted when the editor would use the words 'hush money' to describe the settlement [that the whistleblowers had received]. I would have preferred writing that 'they signed a settlement with the confidentiality agreement.'... I did feel the need to argue [with my editor] that we should have used the longer explanation as opposed to the more sexy 'hush money.'" [And each time "hush money" ran, Kelleher's source would call and scream at her.] "I really felt for her, and I did feel bad because I think the words did mischaracterize [her actions]."

**David Barstow**: [reporter, *The New York Times*. He investigated the National Baptist Convention for the St. Petersburg Times.]: "We penetrated closed entities through the use of sources, which immediately threatens to put the source, who has access to that closed entity, in the driver's seat.... [But we focused on finding] ways of leveling the playing field when we dealt with these sources so that we were not constantly the supplicants to them and therefore susceptible to spin, to their agendas, and so forth....

"[As a reporter] you have to be clear, constantly, every day, about what your agenda is and make absolutely clear to these people that your agenda has nothing to do with their agenda. If interests overlap, great. So be it. But never, ever, ever give anybody [who is a source] a name of a lawyer. You don't give them advice. You don't tell them what your

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next story's going to be. You've just got to play it completely by the book, so that you are never in a position of feeling compromised.... You have to be willing to be beat on a story if it means that not getting beat is going to require you to make a decision with a source that could compromise that power relationship with them or, in other words, put you in debt to them in some way that is going to affect your subsequent coverage, and it's a painful thing to do. I did it a few times in this story but I'm glad I did it. I think I slept better for it....

"Sometimes we would call different members of the Convention and they would begin to ask our advice: 'Do you think we should have a press conference?' 'Do you think we should mount a protest of some sort?' 'Should we have a petition campaign of some sort to get rid of this guy?' I was, 'I don't care what you do. I just want to know, are you doing something?'.... Very early on I committed to myself [to the view of] I don't care what happens. I don't care if they don't do a thing. I don't care. The only thing I care about is telling this story. I do not have a horse in this race. Making that vow to myself very early on kind of relieved me of any expectation or pressure or anything of the sort. I think it's also just a clearer way to go about your business as a reporter, not to have a horse in the race."

**Byron Acohido:** [aviation reporter, *The Seattle Times*. He won a Pulitzer for Beat Reporting.] "[We had] to learn how to avoid getting sucked into this dynamic or this corporate force which is powerful and smart and very motivated to manipulate whatever it can. First of all, it manipulates the government agency that is supposed to be the public's watchdog and, along the way, if we're not vigilant, we get manipulated as well...."

**James McNair:** [reporter, *The Miami Herald*] "I'd love to have the dilemma of being chummy with sources. We business writers don't hear enough from sources other than corporate

spokespeople or what moves on the news wires. It's in part because corporations really have no obligation to reporters. You can't walk into a corporation.... We've got no right to set foot in a corporation. They have pretty much put out the word to their executives and their employees that they're not supposed to be talking to the press. CEOs have no obligation to talk to the press. How often do we get a CEO? Half of what you read from a CEO in the press, unless you're *The Wall Street Journal* or *The New York Times*, is a canned quote. You just can't get the CEO to come to the phone. You can't ask him tough questions. At annual meetings, the public relations people will head you off as you make your way to the CEO, so they play that little game....

"If anything, business reporters need to thrust themselves more frequently into situations where getting too close to sources is a possibility. I'd love to hear from employees, but they're so insulated; from the shareholders, but how do you find a shareholder? How do you find these people? At a time when many business sections have been dumbed down into how-to manuals for choosing a mutual fund, picking the right computer, and running a small business, American newspapers could stand business reporters who cover corporations to actually leave their offices and develop first name relationships with sources....

"Some corporations, weary of being at the mercy of a reporter's pen, try to steer reporters to analysts with favorable opinions. This is a new tactic. Not only that, they lean on analysts to return the phone call. They know that the reporters have a hard time getting the analyst to the phone.... [And] corporations browbeat reporters for calling analysts with negative points of view, and some reporters, eager to ensure their continuing access to the company, play along. This deprives readers of opposing viewpoints necessary to help people decide whether to invest in a company or not."

**Mark Thompson** [Defense Depart-

ment Correspondent, *Time*]: "It's important also to realize that there isn't a source. I've been doing this for 20 years, and every year it's like plowing a field: You've got to leave one field alone and let it grow back. It's an ever-changing constellation of sources. If you get too wedded to one, you'll run dry pretty soon."

**Lars-Erik Nelson** [Washington columnist for the *New York Daily News*]: "There's a way of making accusations now also using sources that troubles me, and I see this in the press frequently. A source will make an allegation, and the reporter takes it to the person who is being accused and he fumbles with it. Then a story is written saying, 'So-and-so has been slow to respond to charges that....' And now you've got a new scandal. It doesn't matter whether the charges are true or false. Look at the Whitewater coverage. The Clintons were accused of being slow to respond to allegations from sources that they were crooks in Whitewater. It turns out the charges were not true...but still it's a stain on the Clintons that they were slow to respond to these baseless charges....

"Now we [reporters] go with the allegation. We make the charge. We accuse the victim of being slow to respond or imply that there's a cover-up. To me, that's adopting an agenda from sources that we should be treating much more skeptically. I'm a columnist now. I'm out of the business [of reporting], and I'm watching it from afar. And I must say I'm watching it with great dismay." ■

*This was the second Watchdog Journalism Conference sponsored by Murrey Marder, a 1950 Nieman Fellow. His investigation of Sen. Joseph McCarthy's claims about Communist infiltration led to hearings which destroyed McCarthy's credibility; his reporting on the Johnson era manipulation of news regarding Vietnam led to accusations of the U.S. government's "credibility gap."*

Fall 1999

# When Reporters are Shut Out By Sources

*What happens when reporters are shut out by sources whom they believe are necessary to report a story? Several journalists at the Watchdog Conference argued that reporters often do their best work when the usual sources aren't available.*

**Murrey Marder** [former Diplomatic Correspondent, The Washington Post]: "When you are shut out, you have to work harder and dig harder. I think that could well serve as the emblem for watchdog reporting."

**William Rashbaum** [crime reporter, the New York Daily News]: "My experience is that the best work I've done is when I've been completely shut out by the agency or institution that I'm covering.... Because when you are shut out, you just have to work harder and you have to dig harder, and that's when you find, or in my experience that's when I've found, things I wouldn't have found otherwise or wouldn't have come out otherwise...."

"The New York City Police Department is, in effect, a closed institution. But it's huge. There are 40,000 cops and any number of civilian employees who work there. So when the department shuts you out, and under Mayor Giuliani they have pretty much shut everybody out—almost everybody—you've got to dig.

But that doesn't mean that you're not going to have people at the lower levels who are going to be pointing in the right direction, sharing inside information with you, sharing documents with you.... [To do that], first of all they have to trust you because they'll lose their jobs or they may find themselves someplace they don't want to be....

"On the Diallo shooting, we were trying to find out the outcome of some of the cases involving the street crime

unit cops, the cops that had been involved in the shooting. Their sort of claim to fame, their purpose, was to get guns off the street. We tried to get the police department to tell us how those cases worked out and they wouldn't. And we ended up finding out that 50 percent of the gun cases that they made were dismissed in court. Because those cases are sealed, it's hard to determine what the reasons for the dismissals were. There were a lot of potential

reasons. But we did find a number of published court decisions where the searches were bad or the stops were unconstitutional. And we found cases over and over again, in one case there was a supervisor who four times had cases dismissed because of his testimony and several cases with judges writing in decisions that his testimony was not credible. It's very rare for a judge in New York to actually put that on paper; they may dismiss a case, but to actually write down on paper that a cop's testimony is not credible, which is short of perjury, short of saying he is lying, but it's pretty harsh.

"If the police department had answered our question and said, 'This is how many cases were dismissed and this is what happened with these decisions,' we never would have gotten that far [in our reporting]." ■

SPORTS ★ ★ ★ FINAL

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**STORM'S DREAM DIES**

**Buckeyes slip past Johnnies into Final Four**

SEE PAGE 4 & SPORTS

**OSCAR MANIA**

By *Ann Hibel*

PAGES 2-3, 26-27 & SUNDAY EXTRA

**THE DIALLO MESS**

**Street crime unit blows half its gun cases**

**Inside Sharpton's protest machine**

**Dwyer: Cops had ID before ransacking room**

COVERAGE ON PAGES 5-8

From early in the magazine's history, America's dilemma—race relations and, in this case, how journalists report stories involving race—has been dissected and debated. Regarded initially in Nieman Reports from the perspective of two Southern newspaper editors, **Hodding Carter** (NF'40) and **Harry S. Ashmore** (NF'42), race and its intersection with journalism has since taken us from courtrooms to school-rooms from newsrooms to neighborhoods.

**Simeon Booker** (NF'51) described what it was like to be one of 12 black newsmen to go to rural Mississippi in the mid-1950's to report on a trial in which two white men were charged with murdering a black youth, Emmett Till. He told how white and black writers became embroiled in the trial they covered.

By 1962, the civil rights movement emerged as a significant news story. **John Herbers** (NF'61), based in Jackson, Mississippi, with UPI, provided the magazine's readers with an insider's look at obstacles to news reporting. "Everyone is emotionally involved," Herbers observed. "Persons who never before paid attention to news coverage have suddenly become experts on how the delicate subject should be handled."

**Philip E. Meyer** (NF'67) melded social science methods with journalistic speed and techniques to piece together newspaper coverage of problems that underlay the Detroit riot in 1967. As Meyer observed, "Reporters need to start going into the ghetto on a regular basis, and a social science-oriented survey can help map out the strange and unfamiliar terrain for them."

**J. Anthony Lukas** (NF'69) devoted years to reporting on the lives and decisions of three Boston families in the midst of the racial tensions brought on by court-ordered busing. In a 1978 seminar with Nieman Fellows, he explained his reasons for moving his journalism in this direction. "If we regard ourselves as covering the real politics of this country, the real politics of this country certainly include the politics of class and race in cities like Boston. . . . I've covered Watergate for The New York Times Magazine. I have covered some presidential politics and a good deal of domestic turmoil and the racial turmoil of the 1960's, and I can tell you that nothing in my professional life have I found as compelling as what I've been doing in these past few years."

**Robert Maynard** (NF'66) turned his reporter's eye on the newsroom to ask, what happens when the managerial ranks of newspapers remain "purer white than Ivory Snow"? The heart of the matter, he wrote, is "the 'unseen environment' of nonwhite America. It is the question of portrayal—rather nonportrayal or misportrayal." ■

April 1948

## The South's Problem

As Nieman Editors State It to Their Own Readers

*Almost every year of the Nieman Fellowships has brought a stout little band of able Southern newspapermen to Cambridge. Returning they have already made their mark on the journalism of the South. Former Nieman Fellows now include six editors of Southern papers, three Washington correspondents and several of the most effective writers of the region, including authors of novels on the race problem of the South.*

*The Southern Revolt against President Truman's pronouncement on civil rights occasioned significant editorials by two Nieman Fellows in the Deep South, Harry Ashmore, Editor of the Arkansas Gazette, and Hodding Carter, Editor-Publisher of the Delta Democrat Times in Greenville, Mississippi. With some cutting to fit our space, the two editorials are printed here.*

April 1948

## The Southern Revolt

BY HODDING CARTER

**A**s a personal preface to these comments, I would like to point out that they have been delayed because of my absence from Greenville on a speaking trip which was largely devoted to explaining and defending the Southern reaction to President Truman's civil rights proposals. For the benefit of those irresponsibles who continue to brand me as "Anti-Southern" and an "outsider" I might add that such defense isn't being made altogether to Southern audiences, which would be pretty easy; and that in making it, I have tried not to lose either a sense of balance or a sense of humor.

So much for a maverick's preface.

Four of the President's proposals have particularly aroused the majority of white Southerners. They are the recommendations for federal legislation to eliminate the poll tax in national elections, to create a Fair Employment Practices Commission, to end segregation in interstate public con-

veyances in the South, and to make lynchings a federal offense.

For the record, I'd like to restate my own convictions as to the four controversial points. I would like to see the remaining seven Southern states abolish the poll tax by state action as five have already done. But I am unalterably opposed to federal action. The states have the constitutional right to set their own suffrage qualifications as long as they do not specifically eliminate any racial or other group in the population. The poll tax in itself is no more of a bar to Negro voting than it is to a white man's voting, and is no longer a basic factor in the prevention of Negro suffrage. In both the poll tax and no-poll tax states in the South, Negroes are voting in increasing numbers. I have said before that this process is inevitable, and the South must concern itself with the education of the Negro for citizenship. Repeal of the poll tax by the federal government does

not contribute to such education. It must come on the state and local level if it is to come sanely.

The recommendation for Fair Employment Practices legislation is unreal and, as The New York Times puts it, an attempt to enforce tolerance with a policeman's billy.

As for federal anti-lynching legislation, I cannot see why there should be such great opposition to any law that might protect a man's life more fully. On the other hand, lynching is the only crime that has decreased in the past 20 years, despite the fact that it is also the crime for which it is apparently impossible to obtain a conviction in the South. The striking reduction of lynching has been accomplished by public sentiment in the South, and that sentiment may eventually result in the conviction of lynchers themselves. If a federal anti-lynch law would hasten the day of punishment for lynchers, we'd be for it. But Southern citizens would still

form the juries, and it is their hearts rather than the legal jurisdiction that must be changed. The law seems utterly useless.

The demand for an end to segregation in public interstate transportation is somewhat bewildering. I had thought that the Supreme Court had already held such segregation to be unlawful; and if this is true, the President seems to be gilding the political lily. The white South and certainly the majority of Southern Negroes are in agreement that any tampering with segregation is unreal and dangerous; but progressive Southerners are convinced also that there must be equality of facilities—as guaranteed in the constitutions of the Southern states and ignored in practice—if segregation itself is to be maintained. It is the South's refusal to provide equal but separate facilities for Negroes that has brought this issue to a head.

There are several general observations and conclusions that should be made.

The first is that President Truman's proposals are deliberately political. They are aimed at the possibly decisive Negro vote in the East and Midwest

and at the left-wingers who have deserted the Democratic Party for Wallace and who might be lured back. The President and his advisors are obviously assuming that he can retain the Southern vote, despite the threatened rebellion. That is now doubtful.

A second is that the rebellion itself can hardly do more than insure a Republican victory, without success of the Eastland plan to divert the South's electoral votes to a Southern candidate and thus throw the election into the House of Representatives.

A third observation is that President Truman's proposals are symptomatic of a widespread and unfortunate reliance upon federal authority as a cure-all.

A fourth observation concerns the South itself and its future. Our own contribution to our present political and social tragedy is that we have so largely ignored the corollary to state's rights, which is state responsibility. For example, the Southern states are committed in their several constitutions to equal, separate educational systems. Not until the South's back is against the wall are we embarking on the splendid and visionary plan of the Southern

Governors' Conference to create Negro regional centers of higher education, and otherwise to provide equal educational facilities for Negroes. That program is the South's best answer to its critics. Only by such action can we prove and continue to prove that the South itself can handle its own racial relations and live up to its responsibilities. I believe we can.

The greatest danger from President Truman's program is that an angry, frustrated and fearful South may forget that the South's 10 million Negroes had nothing to do with it. As in Reconstruction, they may again be the longest victims of a resentment that should be directed not against them but those outside the South who harry us. Our targets should be the political cynics and the unrealistic zealots above the Mason-Dixon line and the unyielding reactionaries below it, who have jointly brought us to this tragic pass. ■

*Delta Democrat Times, Greenville, Mississippi, February 10.*  
*Hodding Carter, Editor-Publisher of the Delta Democrat, Greenville, Mississippi, is a 1940 Nieman Fellow and Pulitzer Prize-winner in 1946.*

April 1948

## The South and the South's Problem

BY HARRY S. ASHMORE

There are valid objections to every one of the specific proposals the President has endorsed—constitutional objections, objections in principle, above all practical objections. The Gazette, as an exponent of gradualism, has opposed them and will continue to do so. Yet there is a great danger that the central point at issue will be obscured by legalisms and by the natural resentment inevitably aroused by the threat of federal action.

We can claim great relative progress in the South. Yet we must also recog-

nize that there are still great flaws in the relationship between the races, flaws which do not touch upon the question of social segregation, but upon simple justice. Laying aside all questions of politics and of method, we may properly consider the proposals of the President as a bill of indictment and measure our performance against it.

FEPC [Fair Employment Practices Commission], according to its proponents, represents an effort to obtain economic justice for the Negro. Can we answer that the Negro is being

granted an increasingly important place in the economy of the South? We cannot. In all honesty we must admit that, with a few exceptions, he is still denied employment except in the menial and the least rewarding fields of endeavor. And we must further concede that our denial is arbitrary, based not on demonstrated incapacity, but on prejudice.

The anti-lynching proposal embodies a charge that the Negro is denied full justice in Southern courts. As to lynching itself we can point to the record, the steady reduction in the frequency of the crime and the corresponding increase in the responsibility of local law enforcement officials. But what of those lesser "lynchings," those cases in which the Negro is subjected to "white man's justice" and denied the fair and impartial hearing that is his



## RACE

right? Can we say, in good conscience, that our courts, and our juries, make no distinction when a Negro faces a white man in a civil or criminal trial?

The poll tax bill implies that the Negro is being denied his proper place in Southern politics. Here again we can point to the record, which shows a steadily increasing Negro participation in elections in most Southern states. But can we truthfully argue that the selective standards we apply to the Negro apply with equal force to the whites? Are we, in fact, rendering that "protection and assistance" Ben Hill called for in the Negro's "free and unrestricted" enjoyment of his franchise?

Our failures in the field of education are being made increasingly clear by the controversy engendered by recent Supreme Court decisions. The contrast between white and Negro educational facilities reflects no credit upon the South and has seriously weakened our defense of segregation. The willingness of most Southern whites to give the Negro a fair share of our limited public funds is genuine, but it has not been matched by performance. We do not need to look far for an illustration. For more than 15 years the city of Little Rock has amicably discussed the establishment of a Negro park; Little Rock still has no Negro park.

The problems inherent in the relationship between the races in the South are enormously difficult, and Southerners are on solid ground when they argue that they are fully appreciated

only by those who have lived with them from birth. They will not yield to revolutionary legislation, whether the intent behind it be destructive or humanitarian. It is therefore inevitable and proper that the South should fight the program outlined by President

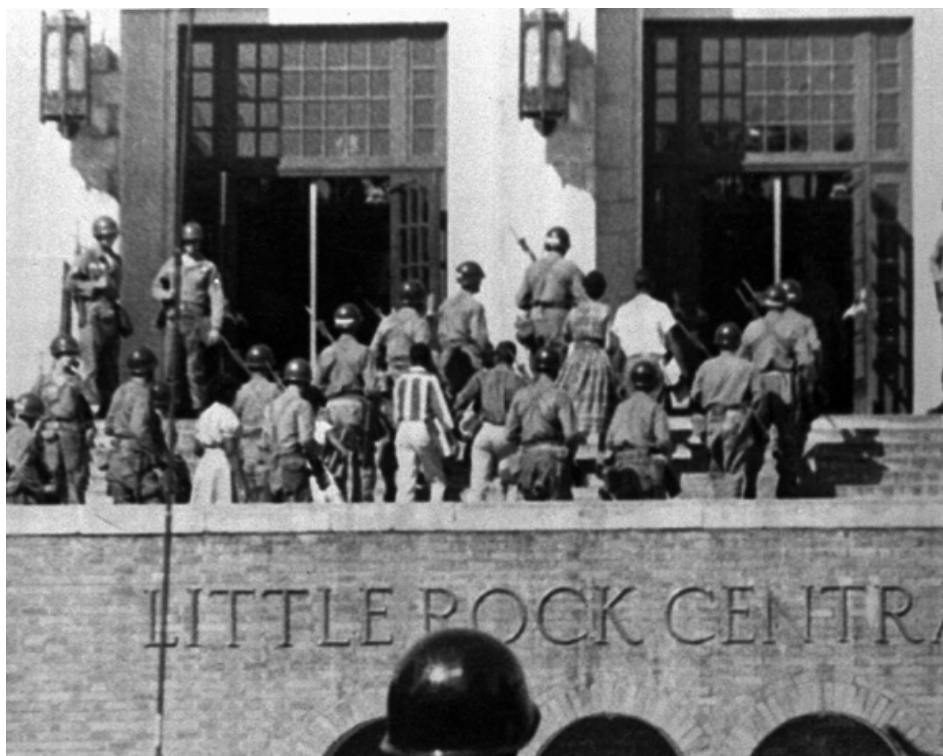
ing intelligent, concerted action for the lip service we have too frequently given our own ideals of fair treatment for the Negro race. We can accept, without reservation, the special responsibility that falls upon the dominant race and discharge it in good faith—giving the Negro educational, economic and political opportunities not because we are forced to but because we recognize his right to them....

Above all we must rid ourselves of the delusion that we are the victims of some monstrous plot conceived and executed by hostile "outsiders." The pressures now being exerted against our institutions are the product of history. They cannot be removed by a single political victory, or even a series of political victories. But they can be materially reduced by a sincere

demonstration that the Southern concept of gradualism envisions steady, orderly process for the Negro race, not a blind devotion to the racial status quo.

The solution to our dilemma lies in our own tradition. It is not easy. It calls now, as it did in 1865, for courage, complete devotion to our highest ideals, and self-sacrifice. But until we turn to it we will continue to be vulnerable to every zealot and every political opportunist—inside the South as well as out of it—who would use our weakness for his own ends. ■

*Arkansas Gazette, February 5.*  
*Harry S. Ashmore, Editor of the Arkansas Gazette, is a 1942 Nieman Fellow.*



Troops escort nine black students into Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September 1957. *Associated Press Photo, courtesy of The Associated Press.*

Truman and accepted, in principle at least, by the Republican Party.

Yet it must be recognized that the South's choice of weapons is limited. Political secession, as proposed by some of the more excitable Southern politicians, leads nowhere. This is a plan conceived in anger and blind reaction which would ultimately defeat its own purpose. The South today can no more stand alone as a political entity than it could in John C. Calhoun's time. The effort to break the political ties that bind us to the national political system can only result in the loss of our voice in national affairs.

There is still time, however, for the South to give an affirmative answer to its critics. We can do this by substitut-

January 1956

# A Negro Reporter at the Till Trial

BY SIMEON BOOKER

Millions of words were written about the recent Till murder trial, but the most dramatic and, by far, the most significant development during the hectic week in the backwoods Mississippi community remains untold. It was an incredible interracial manhunt which located three key Negro witnesses whose testimony almost changed the course of the trial. It involved the unique cooperation of Negro and white reporters, top Negro leaders, and Mississippi law enforcers working together in a hard-hitting team at a time most of the U.S. thought the Dixie state was doing nothing about gaining convictions in the case.

When I came away from the trial, I was somewhat downhearted by the acquittal verdict, but I was not embittered. I was proud of the law enforcers. I personally knew they had done what they could to produce the murder evidence. As a party to this manhunt—which even I as a Chicago newsman would describe as unbelievable—I had gained great respect for three white Southern newsmen, Clark Porteous of the Memphis Press-Scimitar and W. C. Shoemaker and Jim Featherstone of the Jackson Daily News. Porteous, a former Nieman Fellow, served as the main liaison agent for the operation and he did so unflinchingly in an atmosphere which was charged with tension and fear.

For the group of 12 Negro newsmen who covered the trial, it was a bitter, at times frustrating experience. As soon as we arrived in Sumner, Sheriff H. C. Strider laid down the law—there was to be no mixing with white reporters—and any violation meant ejection from the courtroom and town. The day before the trial opened, our Jet-Ebony crew ran into a truckload of gun-bearing whites on a truck near Money,

Mississippi, which brought it home to us that our assignment was no good neighbor get-together. The Sheriff's edict further restricted our movement. As a result, we stayed to ourselves in the far corner of the courtroom as the antagonistic Exhibit A of Northern Negro reporters who were capitalizing on low-rating the South.

On the first night of the trial, we had a pleasant surprise. Two white reporters (I better not mention names) defied the state's segregation laws to breeze into our town for a visit. They gave us the first report that the trial was "a fix," that the state had obtained only two witnesses (Rev. Mose Wright and his 12-year-old son, Simeon), both of whom were at the house when Till was kidnapped. Said our guests: "The trial won't last two days. The State doesn't even know where this boy was killed. They have no murder weapon. They have hardly circumstantial evidence of a killing."

The white reporters also gave us some tips on conduct in the courtroom. Said they: "Take it easy. Don't get excited. They're waiting for just one incident so they can pitch out all of you."

After the pair left, we got a spine-tingling phone call from Dr. T.R.M. Howard, Mound Bayou surgeon and perhaps Mississippi's foremost Negro civil rights leader. His information: Two Negro workers had vanished on a Milam-owned plantation. One was reported to have knowledge of the crime. What it was no one knew.

The next day we heard reports that other Negroes were being "jailed" or whisked away from area plantations. Why this sudden exit we still didn't know, but we had ideas. But it was not only difficult, it was dangerous to try to track down some of the stories, the

section being so hostile to intruders. We continued attending the trial and awaiting further word from Dr. Howard.

Finally, on the day that the state presented its first witness, aging Rev. Mose Wright, things began to happen. A Negro plantation worker, on the pretense of going to church, made his way to Dr. Howard and told him a hair-raising account. He knew of the whereabouts of a group of Negroes who not only had seen Till being carried on a truck into a barn, but later had heard someone beaten and cry for mercy.

Immediately, Dr. Howard met with the Negro reporters and NAACP officials to plot a course of action. This was the hottest story of the trial. It would give the state just the evidence it needed. But there were major problems. There was a vast wall between the races. There were the barriers of mistrust and lack of confidence. One group argued that in the event we continued to withhold this valuable information we would be obstructing justice. But others contended that hasty action would be dangerous. There were lives at stake. In any event, the Negroes had to be taken away from their homes for their safety.

After working out plans to evacuate these potential witnesses, we agreed to call in the most reliable and sympathetic daily paper reporters covering the trial. In return for sharing this headline story, the white reporters would be asked to make the first contact with the law enforcers and prosecution. They would notify them of the new evidence. As our part of the bargain, we would then produce the witnesses.

On our original list of newsmen to be summoned were several topnotch reporters covering the trial. But Dr. Howard refused to accept the full list. He had confidence in one man—Clark Porteous, a fair and square Southerner. When he called Porteous, however, Dr. Howard didn't make this clear and Porteous (probably for company) brought along two Jackson Daily News reporters, James Featherstone and W. C. Shoemaker. Thus, these newsmen became the only whites who actually knew of the behind-the-scenes activity,

## RACE

and since they were involved they modestly have refrained from disclosing their roles in later stories.

At the initial meeting, Dr. Howard, in his excitement at the turn of events, forgot to tell the white delegation that his uncovering of the “surprise witnesses” was to be kept secret until they were brought from the plantation. When notified of this, Featherstone balked and stated that he would run the story the next day. Porteous intervened and finally got Featherstone to hold up the story on condition that no other reporter would be tipped off. We agreed on these terms: The whites would have the law enforcers in the town at eight o’clock the next evening when we would produce the witnesses.

The tight ring of reporters also included Jimmy Hicks of the Afro-American, Clotye Murdock and David Jackson of the Jet-Ebony team, and L. Alex Wilson of the Defender.

While excitement increased, we could hardly believe the true impact of

our project until Judge Curtis Swango the next day allowed the state to delay its case for a half day. The reason: to find our new witnesses.

But our well laid plans for the eight p.m. meeting didn’t work out. The sheriffs of two counties showed up but not the witnesses. We discovered that “some white men” had visited the plantations in question in the morning and by the time our party reached there, the witnesses had vanished, frightened to death. Later, we learned that the visitors were law enforcers who somehow had been given advance information and had probably become restless. So we had new problems—and only some 12 hours to locate our people.

Sheriff George Smith of Leflore County, fair man that he is, promptly routed the pessimism. Said he: “These witnesses have a story to tell. We’ve got to find them if it takes all night. We’ll stop court until we find them.”

Some of the law enforcers got on the phone and began calling up plantation owners warning them to produce such witnesses or face legal action.

In this manner, Mississippi’s first major interracial manhunt began. Each sheriff agreed to take a Negro and go to a plantation home. All would be visited before morning. The Negro escort would plead with the potential witnesses to testify. There would be no warrants issued. No one would be carted out of his home. We agreed to round up our people and bring them to the State Enforcement Agent’s office in Drew.

Three of us (Por-

teous, Featherstone and myself) followed Sheriff Smith in a 70-mile-an-hour chase along dusty backwoods roads to get 18-year-old Willie Reed. This youth had actually seen Till on the truck and heard the beating. During the run, we got lost and headed back to Drew, where in about a half-hour business began to pick up.

The first Negro rounded up was middle-aged Frank Young. He refused to talk to anyone except Dr. Howard, who hadn’t yet arrived at the office. So Young was allowed to go home—to be summoned on call. An hour later, when sheriffs went after him again, he was missing. He didn’t turn up at his plantation home until two days after the trial.

Throughout the night, the search continued. Each person was brought in and asked to testify. All were frightened. Finally, Dr. Howard promised to take each of those who would testify to live in Chicago. This worked with three witnesses—Willie and his 74-year-old grandfather and Mandy Bradley, who later was forced to leave her cabin in the dead of night to get away from the plantation.

When the court opened in the morning, the new witnesses were on hand. Newspapers blared the story of the new witnesses—the fact that these people could give an account of seeing Till go into the barn and hearing the outcries; evidence which strengthened the state’s case. But none mentioned the all-night manhunt.

Later, special prosecutor Robert Smith praised the work of the reporters in gathering the new witnesses, one of whom, Willie Reed, became the trial’s star witness. But the reporter whose calmness and keen judgment was responsible for the smoothness of the operation was Clark Porteous. He was the reporter Mississippi’s Negro leaders had faith in because of his outstanding work in the section, and he proved it again at the Till murder trial. ■

*Simeon Booker, a 1951 Nieman Fellow, is on the staff of Jet Magazine.*



The defendants leave the courthouse in Greenwood, Mississippi, on September 30, 1955, after being freed on bond in the kidnapping and murder of Emmett Till. They eventually were acquitted of murdering the 14-year-old black youth. *Photo courtesy of The Associated Press.*

April 1962

# The Reporter in the Deep South

BY JOHN HERBERS

In “Absolom, Absolom!,” one of William Faulkner’s great Gothic novels of Yoknapatawpha county, Quinten Compson goes to Harvard and is questioned endlessly by his Canadian roommate and others: “Tell about the South. What’s it like there? Why do they live there? Why do they live at all?” Young Compson has some trouble describing the incredible state of affairs back home.

That was 1910. Today, Yoknapatawpha County, after being left alone for more than 80 years, is undergoing rather drastic, externally wrought changes. Telling about it can be fraught with difficulty, if not for the novelist, for the journalist who must live there.

I have found some curiosity among newspapermen about how racial news is covered in the Deep South. Implied in the questioning is this: What strange set of circumstances shapes news coming from the South, and how do we know some of it is not being suppressed?

It would be no overstatement to say the Deep South is a unique region and the reporter responsible for writing about it for both local and external consumption undergoes a unique experience. Circumstances do shape his copy but usually not in the way the uninitiated might suspect.

My purpose here is to explain some of the problems involved and the framework in which the reporter must function. To do so, I must confine myself to Mississippi, still the hard core of the Deep South, and to my point of view as a wire service reporter. In doing so, however, the problems—shared to some degree by all reporters in the region—can be presented in acute form.

It is necessary first to give a brief description of social and political conditions. There is running through the South what is commonly called the black belt. Its characteristics include

an agrarian economy, a large Negro population, and ultra-conservative opinion in economic and social matters on the part of its white leadership. Virtually the same climate of opinion exists in all black belt counties whether they be in North Carolina, Tennessee or Alabama.

The difference in Mississippi is that these counties cover almost the entire state and there is no large urban area or extensive coastline to mitigate the black belt influence such as exists in, say, Louisiana or Georgia. Black belt thinking has permeated all facets of public life, and it dominates the civic and business leadership of Jackson, the capital and largest city, as well as most other larger communities in the state.

Neither the federal government nor civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People chose to press for equal rights for Negroes in the hard-core areas of segregation until changes had been made in the border states. For six years following the Supreme Court’s 1954 desegregation decision, Mississippi was an anxious spectator while the federal courts slowly brought about integration in some areas of life in surrounding states. With each decision and with each racial incident white opposition to any change in the status of the Negro hardened. The moderates were neutralized.

Thus, in 1961, when the civil rights front moved into Mississippi in the form of freedom rides, Justice Department intervention in voting, numerous federal court lawsuits, and demonstrations by local Negroes, the resistance was something like dragging an angry tomcat by his tail across a thick carpet.

It would take several columns to describe adequately the climate of opinion existing in the white community at this time. It will do here to state that

news reporters are not the most popular people around. The least of the problems for the reporter, however, are the threat of being mauled in places like McComb and procedural difficulties. A few examples will suffice.

We cover Mississippi from Jackson with a five-man UPI bureau. It is customary to maintain part-time correspondents in most areas of the state to protect us on breaking news. Usually these people work for newspapers or radio stations and are an integral part of their community. The average community is engaged in an all-out drive for industry to stem population losses and bring in much needed prosperity. More than almost anything else its chamber of commerce does not want the name of the town associated with racial strife. As a result we are not likely to be tipped on a story with a racial angle by anyone in the community. (This is not true, generally, in counties where a daily newspaper is published, but they are few and far between.)

Instead, it is likely to come from a Negro leader, and usually it has come to him by a devious route. One day last summer an NAACP leader in Jackson called in a report that a plantation hand in a remote county had been lynched by his landlord and his sheriff. He said the report had come from Chicago from a relative of the victim. John Garcia, a staff reporter, spent several hours on the telephone trying to find out what had happened, but no one would claim any knowledge of the alleged incident. The sheriff went so far as to say he had seen the youth who was reported dead “hanging around town” that very morning. But when he was pressed for more information he spouted profanity and ungrammatical denials. Garcia moved a brief story on the basis of what the NAACP leader and the sheriff had said. In it, he cleaned up the sheriff’s speech except for one phrase with bad grammar, perhaps to retain some degree of realism. This prompted a call from a client editor who complained that he knew the sheriff to be a college graduate and we were slanting the news by making him appear illiterate.

It was not until later in the day that we found out what the story really was. We sent a staff reporter, Ted Smith, to the scene, 100 miles away. He found that the young man in question was in jail and had been there for three days charged with assault and battery on his landlord.

The defendant's mother told Smith she saw her son severely beaten, without provocation, by the sheriff and the landlord, and he had been taken to a hospital for treatment before being jailed. At the jail, Smith found the youth had been questioned by an FBI agent. But the sheriff would not let Smith interview him and sent Smith away from the jail. By this time people around town were beginning to grumble about UPI "stirring up trouble," and Smith left town under threat.

The FBI reported it found no ground for entering the case, and its findings were not disclosed. The story probably rated no more than two para-

graphs on the national wires, although we carried the details locally. One news bureau was spent and frustrated.

Southern police usually are cordial to newspapermen. Jackson police were during the freedom rides last summer. Recently, they used police dogs to break up a crowd of Negroes who were protesting segregation of the state fair. Several were chased for blocks, and one bystander, who had nothing to do with the demonstration, was bitten on the leg. A reporter went to the hospital to interview him. Everything was fine, it seemed. The city had bought him a new pair of pants and the mayor, Allen Thompson, had sent his apologies. This seemed nice of the mayor, and it was included in the story.

But it had no sooner appeared than the telephone started ringing. One call was from Chief Detective M.B. Pierce to Bureau Manager Cliff Sessions. He said the mayor was upset by the story. He had offered no apologies and owed none. The man should have moved if he did not want to be bitten. We stood

accused of irresponsible reporting.

When the Interstate Commerce Commission order against segregated travel facilities went into effect November 1, UPI checked several cities to see what they would do about it. Most planned to continue segregation, but the mayors of Winona and Grenada said they would comply with the ICC order. But they had not reckoned with Citizens' Council leaders who leaped into action as soon as the story appeared. The mayor of Winona explained he thought he had been talking to an ICC agent rather than to a reporter. The mayor of Grenada said in a formal statement he was misquoted, and the

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chamber of commerce and city council adopted resolutions condemning "false" news reports, all of which were carried in full in *The Grenada Sentinel-Star* without explanation. I wrote a personal letter to Publisher Joe Lee:

"It was perfectly clear that when the Citizens' Council people put the screws on your mayor, then came the statements of denial, resolutions, etc. It doesn't matter to us what they do about the bus stations in Grenada, but it is news that has to be covered. And I sure resent being used as a scapegoat for a public official who is forced to back down from his prearranged plan."

Lee agreed and printed the letter in full on page one. We never heard from the mayor.

Usually we don't come out smelling as sweet. In one city we were harassed by the newspaper and both radio stations for reporting some behind-the-scenes developments that did not fit the official version of what happened.

These are not isolated incidents. Everyone is emotionally involved. Per-

sons who never before paid attention to news coverage have suddenly become experts on how the delicate subject should be handled. For a long time we were told that the activities and statements of integration leaders were not news because they did not have enough following to give them substance. That is seldom heard now. Most complaints concern the way the news is worded. For example, when Memphis integrated three schools we relayed this abbreviated version on the state radio wire:

"(Memphis, Tennessee)—Thirteen children ended more than a century of school segregation in Memphis today.

They romped and played with their white classmates then left for home half an hour early.

The children were accompanied from the schools by their parents and whisked away in automobiles about 2:30 this afternoon. The white students were dismissed at the regular 3

o'clock time.

A policeman reported earlier that he saw two Negro girls skipping rope with some white youngsters at one of the three schools integrated. A Negro boy was seen running hand in hand with a new-found white friend at another school.

The whites and Negroes ate at the same tables in the cafeteria and put away their dirty dishes together.

There was none of the bloodshed and violence that erupted at Little Rock and New Orleans when schools were integrated."

This prompted an "official protest" from a subscriber. "Why can't you report the facts without romancing the Negro race?"

The reporter begins to feel he is in a straitjacket. While he may not acknowledge criticism as being justified, he may find himself writing without direction. He is inclined to turn out deadpan copy when interpretive reporting may be in order.

Newspapers, by and large, under-

stand the problems involved and the reporter's need for freedom. There is considerable sensitivity to the fact that newspapers outside the South frequently play down racial strife in their own cities and play it up under a Southern dateline. There is a feeling that every incident is played nationally. Actually, the great bulk of that reported never goes beyond the state wires. There simply is not room, and probably no demand, for all of it on the trunk wires.

This leads to another problem. We feel a responsibility to report this type of news in some detail. It is used by subscribers, and it is felt that justice is more apt to prevail in the light of publicity. In doing so, however, we load our wires with it, and the energy of the news staff is consumed in tracking it down. Taken in large doses it can be pretty dreary stuff. Some days more than half the stories on the wire pertain either directly or indirectly to the race issue.

Dealing with the subject day in and day out the reporter may acquire a strange sense of imbalance. He may become preoccupied by this one issue and find himself a stranger to the larger, more important events in the world today, a provincial fellow.

There is, I believe, a need for a new approach in reporting the kind of social change that is going on in the South today. Certainly deadpan rendering of facts is not helping to bridge the gap of misunderstanding that exists between races and groups involved. Why does the Main Street banker persist in thinking all integration leaders are wild-eyed Godless radicals saturated by Communism, when many of them are deeply religious and in many ways conservative? Why do some liberals always categorize all white segregationists as irresponsible, insensitive lawbreakers, when frequently they are acting in conviction out of a lifetime of conditioning to their "way of life"? Why, unless there has been some breakdown

in communications, whether through mass media or otherwise? It cannot all be attributed to blind prejudice.

Obviously, there is a limit to what wire services can do under the most favorable circumstances. Most newspapers seem content to continue under the old formulas. Last summer, during trial of a lawsuit for admission of a Negro to the University of Mississippi, an unusual opportunity pre-

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sented itself for conveying some of the deeper meaning involved. The trial was conducted in a federal courtroom under a giant mural painted in the 1930's by a WPA artist. It was meant to depict rebuilding of the South but within the stereotyped framework of the Old South—forward-looking whites working and planning in front of a large columned building with magnolia trees and a steamboat in the background, while Negroes, segregated, pick cotton or strum a banjo.

The scene below was different—a well-dressed Negro youth on the stand asking for admission to Ole Miss, an outrageous request if placed in juxtaposition with the mural, and vice versa; a dark-skinned woman lawyer with a Grecian profile demanding, and getting, a court instruction on the correct pronunciation of "Negro" for benefit of the white attorneys; a gesticulating state attorney with a Tidewater Virginia accent deploying an array of dilatory tactics.

Those two scenes told a lot about the way things are and the way people think they are, about the past and about the future. We moved a story on it. It wasn't a great piece but it was a fresh

approach, and it told more than any story of the trite testimony in the trial. It drew compliments from other journalists, but that was as far as it got. I had a hard time finding it in print.

Most newspapers from outside the region have played the Southern integration story from the point of view that it—the court-ordered change—is morally right, the law of the land, and inevitable. Obviously, the wire services cannot do this, and they should not be asked to any more than they should be asked to write from the point of view of the Main Street banker who looks on freedom riders as the lawbreakers, considers state segregation laws superior to U.S. Supreme Court rulings, and looks forward to the day when the courts will return to William Graham and *Plessy vs.*

Ferguson. Wire services can and should maintain a vigilant watch for any violation of individual or group freedoms guaranteed to all citizens of the United States and report the truth as nearly as it can be ascertained. Finding and reporting the truth has become a good deal more difficult than it used to be, and it probably will become worse before it's better. There is a need, as never before, for highly competent, skeptical reporters who can, if nothing else, keep the record straight. ■

*All of John Herbers' 13 years as a newspaperman have been in Mississippi, the last 10 with the UPI bureau in Jackson, the capital. He became Bureau Manager in 1953 and State Manager in 1959. Born in Memphis, his education was at Tampa University and Emory University, Georgia, and as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard last year.*

April 1962

# Prince Edward's 'Massive Resistance'

BY JOHN ALFRED HAMILTON

“Have you read the history of Prince Edward County?” belligerently demands the businessman in button-down collar. “Why, one of the bloodiest battles in the Civil War was fought right over here at Saylor’s Creek.” He motions over his shoulder with a pencil, but all the visitor can see is a modern wood-paneled wall. Then, in the sluggish way residents of Southside Virginia have of figuring the passage of time, he adds, “These people are only a couple generations away from it.”

Down the street, John C. Steck, Managing Editor of the semiweekly, segregationist *Farmville Herald*, checks some proofs brought to his desk. Steck represents Farmville on the Prince Edward County Board of Supervisors which, back in 1959, cut off all funds for public schools when the county faced the threat of court-ordered integration. One of the original defendants in the set of cases which produced the 1954 desegregation decision, Prince Edward County today is the only county in the United States without any public schools.

Why was this desperate, last-resort action taken?

Listen to Steck:

“We’re fighting for states’ rights,” he explains softly. “We’re opposing federal usurpation of power and an illegal court decree.”

Around the corner, in the shopping district of Farmville’s Main Street, E. Louis Dahl swivel-hips between crowded tables and counters in his Army Goods Store, eagerly showing customers the latest in sporting goods, hardware and long Johns for early morning plowing. A copy of *The Citizens’ Council*, the segregationist publication from Jackson, Mississippi, rests on a counter of sweatshirts near a pot-

bellied wood stove. Dahl serves as treasurer of the Prince Edward School Foundation, the group which has been providing private schooling for the white children since the shutdown of public schools.

From the start, the Foundation has been pressed for finances. Sometimes there have been enough pledges on hand—but hard coin?

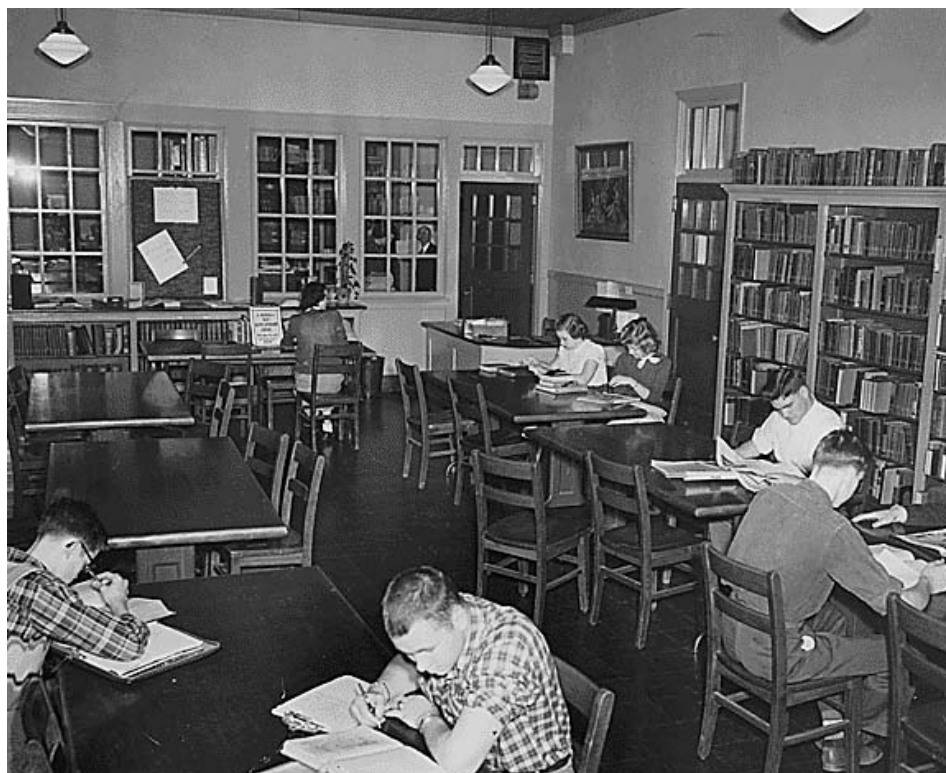
“What do you want to know how much cash we have collected for?” Dahl asks, his eyes narrowing. “What kind of a story are you going to write?” And then, “I don’t have to tell you how much money we have if I don’t want

to—and I don’t want to.” He turns quickly away and begins chatting with a customer.

This, tragically, is Prince Edward County, Virginia, a small, rural, pine and tobacco county 65 miles southwest of Richmond, 50 miles east of Lynchburg, in the “black belt,” with a population of about 18,000 divided roughly half white, half Negro.

Virginia’s “massive resistance” as a state program of last-ditch, close-the-schools opposition to integration died in 1959 after adverse court decrees and a bitter special session of the General Assembly. But “massive resistance” still lives today as a *local option* program and Prince Edward County has exercised this option.

My topic is “massive resistance,” and I am expected to tell the story of Prince Edward County. Should I tell you what you want to hear? Should I tell you what any national audience expects to hear? Should I don libertarian lace, pluck delicately at the Harvard harp,



A school library in Farmville, Virginia. From plaintiffs’ exhibits—photographs filed in *Dorothy E. Davis, et al. versus County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*, Civil Action No. 1333. *Photo courtesy National Archives and Records Administration’s Mid Atlantic Region, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.*

and chant about the inequities of a segregated society?

As a Nieman Fellow at Harvard, I have found too many others doing this sort of thing. The Lynchburg newspapers, with the Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, were the only Virginia newspapers to oppose from the first Virginia's plunge into "massive resistance." And from my desk at Lynchburg I have written critical editorials on the Prince Edward situation.

This approach, however, does not appeal to me here.

Nor will I attempt, as some sensitive Southerners have attempted, to foist on you a "true account," for most of what is said in condemnation of the South, of Ol' Virginny, is lamentably true.

But this brings me to my purpose, to my one complaint about Harvard, to the one tin slug that I have found amid a chestful of treasure. Let me examine it with you.

I do not object so much to what is said around the Old Yard as to what is

sometimes not said, not so much to what is charged as to how it is charged. More than this, I do not cringe so much at the criticism of the South which tumbles from some lecterns as at the response which this criticism invariably elicits. Progressive education seems to have replaced learning by rote with learning by reflex. Tell an anti-South joke and students automatically roll in the aisles; cite an uncomplimentary statistic and raise a chorus of condemning hisses.

Barry Goldwater asserts that he has found a groundswell of conservatism on the campuses. I have not. On the contrary, the gathering monolithic front of campus liberalism, threatening to become doctrinaire, blunting the sharp point of challenge, should concern us all. I fear that questions wilt in the mind when lips offer only an agreeing, supercilious snicker.

In a word, I think that Harvard's response to the deep problems of the South is wrong. And, for the purposes of this article, I think that this com-

plaint can probably be expanded. I think that the Northern response, when it consists only of snickers and hateful epithets, is also wrong.

So, my plea is for understanding. Let me address myself now to my subject, to "massive resistance" and Prince Edward County; also, let me suggest the sort of response, or approach, that I think this topic should receive.

I speak now of patriots, of Jefferson and Madison, Mason and Monroe, and of Patrick Henry, and of military heroes, of Washington and Jackson, Stuart and Robert E. Lee. I ask you to listen, as Prince Edward County has listened, to chilling Indian yelps, to British drums and Yankee bugles. I ask you to feel, as residents of Prince Edward have felt, the surge of defiance which freed a loose bundle of colonies from the oppressive grip of a powerful empire—and a later surge which set an incredible Confederacy, stubbornly disunited, athwart the path of a nationalistic juggernaut and the rising tide of worldwide humanitarian history. Join Prince Edward's Phileas Holcombe in the French and Indian War. March off with Captain John Morton from Prince Edward Courthouse to engage Lord Dunmore's forces at Portsmouth, then to turn northward to join Washington's army for Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, Germantown and Valley Forge.

Watch in horror as the Gray retreats; see the Blue come inexorably on. Realize that 14 miles from the Prince Edward County line, at Appomattox, the Confederacy crumbled. It was nearly a century ago, to be sure, but if you lived your life in Prince Edward County, you could climb to any hilltop, shut your eyes, and still feel the terrible rumble of Sheridan's cavalry and still smell the stench of gun smoke in the air.

I ask you to stand now, if you will, with Prince Edward County through a history both rich and grim, a history scarred by slavery, fired by a rebel spirit to a brave defense of a political anachronism, state sovereignty.

To understand Prince Edward's feeling on the race question, one must go back to 1755 when a list of "tithables"



Miss West's English 9 class in Moton, Virginia. Defendants' exhibits—photographs filed in *Dorothy E. Davis, et al. versus County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia, Civil Action No. 1333*. Photo courtesy National Archives and Records Administration's Mid Atlantic Region, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



(taxables) showed that Abraham Venable owned five slaves, Richard Wilson owned seven slaves, and Colonel Randolph owned 27 slaves, and to November of 1768 when “a parcel of choice slaves, house carpenters, sawyers, house wenches and ground slaves” was offered for sale at public auction.

To understand the county’s defiant spirit, one must listen to the most famous rebel in American history, Patrick Henry, who, as a resident of Prince Edward County, traveled to Richmond to oppose ratification of the federal Constitution by Virginia in 1788.

“Slavery,” he observed solemnly, “is detested. We deplore it with all the pity of humanity.”

But abolition? Henry made his prophetic stand clear:

“Emancipation is a local matter not to be left to Congress.”

To understand Prince Edward’s feeling about state sovereignty, one must attend the public rally held at the courthouse on March 9, 1861. As other communities were beginning reluctantly, almost timidly, to consider secession, this mass meeting voted overwhelmingly for it. Reports show that on a voice vote all shouted “aye” but one who voted “no,” and an embarrassed county has not recorded his name.

“So,” the Richmond Enquirer said of the meeting, “Prince Edward may be set down as perhaps the most unanimous county for immediate secession in the state.”

Also, one must go back to a warm evening in early April of 1865 and ride wearily to the crest of a Prince Edward hill with General Robert E. Lee. Here he looked down on the losses he had suffered in the Battle of Saylor’s Creek and said huskily: “My God! Has the army dissolved?” When his scattered troops saw him, astride his horse, carrying a battle flag, they came to him in what historians have called the last rally of the Army of Northern Virginia. Three days later, a few miles on, Lee surrendered.

To understand the temper of Prince Edward’s resistance to school integration, one must also understand recent history. In 1951, before the NAACP

filed its integration suit, the county went deeply in debt to begin construction of an ultra-modern \$900,000 school for Negroes which far surpasses any facility for whites. Negro students had spent a full year in it when the 1954 decree came down, discarding the separate-but-equal doctrine which had formed the foundation of the South’s social structure.

In May of 1954 the high court announced its decision. In July the Prince Edward Board of Supervisors adopted a resolution of “unalterable opposition” to integration.

At this point the story becomes a blur of legal battles, battles still being fought, of mass meetings, affirmations and appeals. What is vital now is to understand that all public schools were shut down in 1959 when court delays ran out, that since this date white students have been attending classes, first in makeshift quarters including an old, abandoned blacksmith’s shop, now in a newly constructed private school, that Negro students have been attending no schools in Prince Edward, but have only participated in irregularly scheduled “morale building” sessions.

For the first year, the private school for whites operated on voluntary contributions; for the second year, it managed by charging tuition and inviting parents to apply for both local and state-backed tuition grants; now, in the third year, a federal court has enjoined the use of public funds, and I have at hand a letter, dated December 2, 1961, which solicits contributions toward a goal of \$200,000 to keep the private school going until June. There is, moreover, a case now pending in federal courts to determine whether, under the state constitution, Virginia must maintain public schools in Prince Edward County.

Tie these developments together and this is Saylor’s Creek. Appomattox lies just over the hill.

And, briefly, this is the background for Virginia’s “massive resistance” and the story of Prince Edward County. If I have dwelt more on the past than the present, it is because Virginians involved in this story dwell more on the

past and because, if we read in the daily press of limbs and branches, the roots also lie in the past.

Make no mistake: I do not intend all this as a defense, simply as an explanation of a story unfolding in the old Southern, tragic tradition. In Prince Edward County, men today summon courage to defend false ramparts and hollow ideals; they swing swords for a parochial “sovereignty” which was surrendered with Lee’s sword long ago; they hoist battle flags emblazoned with cries of patriots of an earlier day who would, if they had breath today, denounce the blasphemy....

Despite jet flights and nuclear energy, Cape Canaveral and Redstone Arsenal, the rural South remains pretty much a legend of gray legions and silver trumpets, of crinoline and gracious living, of beauty and chivalry and lost causes. Its history is half romance, and its secret god is James Branch Cabell’s “demi-urge,” the myth-maker, the dream-weaver.

The Romantic poet Lord Byron once wrote of lovers parting:

If I should meet thee

After long years,

How should I greet thee?—

With silence and tears.

Who knows—we can all only surmise—but I suggest that the poet’s answer would guide the patriots. Let me suggest, further, that the South’s story today is more tragic than humorous, that it deserves serious, even sympathetic attention and—to my theme—that there is less historical justification for supercilious snickers than for poetic tears. As the South renews its struggle to enter the mainstream of American life, as men of good will grope for solutions to cataclysmic social problems, I would be less than true to my region if I did not urge, at least for occasional use, the poet’s answer on you. ■

*John A. Hamilton, a 1962 Nieman Fellow, is Associate Editor of The Lynchburg (VA) News, where his editorials have been vigorously critical of the Prince Edward County school situation.*

June 1968

# A Newspaper's Role Between the Riots

BY PHILIP E. MEYER

When the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders blamed white racism for the destructive environment of the ghettos, most of the immediate reaction was unfavorable. The charge evoked images of night riders and fiery crosses. Besides, most white Americans don't feel like racists. Most of us believe in the basic brotherhood of man, and therefore we can't be racists. Can we?

Closer inspection of the Riot Commission report shows that we can. The racism it talks about is a passive thing, a state of mind that has permitted the structure and institutions of our society to grow and adapt to the needs of the white middle class while bypassing the Negro. This is the heart of its argument: that good feeling and talk of brotherhood is not enough. There must be structural and institutional change.

For example, in most cities there is little or no communication between city hall and the people in the Negro ghetto. City government is organized to respond to the needs of more sophisticated people who know how and where to take their problems.

Many ghetto problems are the sort that should be handled by local government—housing code enforcement, sanitation, recreation, police-community relations—but they do not get handled because the structure for communication is not there. Nobody planned it this way. It just happened. And the attitudes that let it happen are, in a subtle way, racist.

In many ways, a metropolitan newspaper can have the same communication blocks as city hall. When a president of the local garden club wants the city to plant flowers along the freeway, she can visit the editor, whom she may

know personally, and enlist his support. She can find ways to get her campaign reported in the news columns. Her counterpart in the ghetto does not have this easy access.

Many editors have close personal ties to members of the black middle class, but this is not the same thing as establishing communication with the ghetto. Starting such communication takes a calculated effort; something akin to the practice of Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles who visits a family in Roxbury every week, just to hear “how things are going.”

There is another example of unconscious racism in the habit of many newspapers of treating crimes involving only Negroes as less important and therefore less newsworthy than incidents where whites are the criminals or the victims. Police departments have been known to follow a parallel policy—of being lax in their enforcement of law in the ghetto on the grounds that the crimes involve only Negroes and are therefore not so important.

To the extent that events in the ghetto do not effect the white middle class which pays for the police department and for whom newspapers are edited, both of these policies have a certain logic. But in the long run, it is racist logic, and it is dangerous.

A newspaper, therefore, has a double problem: prodding local government into paying some attention to the ghetto, and reshaping its news strategy so that it can itself pay more attention to the problem. In neither case is it simply a moral problem. If the riots have accomplished nothing else, they have shown that what happens in the ghettos is of importance and does have potential effect on the white majority

outside.

Most newspapers are much better equipped to cover riots than they are to cover the day-to-day events that underlie civil disturbance. During a riot, a city staff puts forth its best effort, morale is high, editors stay at their desks around the clock, and all the ambiguities and conflicts of everyday life are washed out in the urgent need to cover the spot news story. This is the kind of thing we do best.

But between riots, there is an equally important story, the sort of thing that James Reston was talking about when he said, “Things don't have to ‘happen’ to be news. They can just be going on quietly.” Getting at this kind of news requires an effort that parallels the intensity of riot coverage, except that it needs to be spread out over a long period of time.

During the Detroit riot, I heard a National Guard officer telling his men how to shoot a suspected sniper. “Don't stand back and shoot at him,” he said. “Get in that building and turn it upside down and find what's in there.” It may not have been the best anti-sniper strategy, but it suggests a journalistic analog for overcoming the long habits of neglecting the problems of the ghetto. The place to start is not by sending a reporter out to talk to Negroes in a barbershop or on street corners. What is needed is a systematic plan to turn the ghetto upside down and find out what's in there.

The Detroit Free Press, a member of the Knight group, experimented with such a plan in piecing together the problems that underlay the Detroit riot of July 1967. The methods were borrowed from the social sciences, a field where large sums of money and manpower are commonplace in investigations. But the applications were strictly journalistic.

The project grew out of an impromptu meeting in the city room on the Sunday night after the riot when editors and reporters began reflecting that after all the work and sweat and good reporting efforts, still nobody knew who the rioters were and why they had rioted.

To find out, it was decided to conduct a systematic survey of attitudes among riot area Negroes. A quick liaison was established with the Detroit Urban League, which agreed to pay the field operation and data processing costs, and with a social scientist at the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, who was hired as a consultant.

The goals of the survey were basically those of a reporter who talks to people on street corners to try to judge the mood of a community—as many reporters for many different organizations did after the Detroit riot. But its methods were systematic and powerful.

A probability sample was drawn, so that every Negro 15 years or older living in the riot area would have an equal chance of being interviewed. ...

Negro interviewers were hired. All were college educated and most were school-teachers. Each was given a list of specific addresses to visit and a procedure for choosing the persons in each household to interview, which took the matter of respondent selection out of her hands. Thus, chance alone and not human bias, conscious or unconscious, determined who fell into the sample.

The questions that they asked were not the kind that a reporter would ask, at least in format. They had to be carefully designed so that each interviewer would ask the questions in the same way, and so that they would produce simple, multiple-choice responses that would make the interviews comparable to one another.

A reporter, talking to people on the street corner, draws comparisons intuitively, almost unconsciously. When dealing with large numbers of people—437 were interviewed in the Detroit survey—intuition is not enough. It takes a computer to count and sort and analyze the thoughts of that many people, and the input must be consistently structured.

Some of the questions were derived from previous attitude surveys. Social scientists have been in the business of asking questions long enough so that they have a pretty good idea of what works and what doesn't. There had even been a previous survey which asked the ultimate question: "Were you a rioter?"

It was conducted by faculty members of the University of California at Los Angeles in Watts, and the Free Press survey used its riot question, slightly rephrased: "Would you describe yourself as having been very active, somewhat active, or slightly active in the disturbance?" Someone who was not in the disturbance at all could, of course, volunteer that fact, and 63 percent of those surveyed did. Only 25 percent refused to answer and more than 11 percent admitted some degree

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**A Negro reporter for the white establishment press is going to encounter suspicion, distrust and a certain amount of unpleasant pressure when he tries to establish news sources among black militants.**

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of activity. The interviewers maintained an attitude of sympathetic neutrality.

Completed interviews were turned in to the Urban League command post at an average of 70 a day, checked for quality, and relayed to Ann Arbor for transcription to punched computer cards. The last interview was completed and the last card punched just two weeks after the city room decision to proceed with the survey.

The third week was devoted to analyzing and interpreting the data and writing the stories for a Sunday edition deadline. The computer's task was simple and straightforward. It did exactly what an army of clerks would have done in pre-computer times. First it counted all of the answers to all of the questions, and then it sorted the rioters

from the non-rioters and printed out tabulations describing the differences.

Such output is useful both for the things it tells that you didn't know before and for the added weight it can give to what you already suspected. This survey did both. For example, it contradicted the popular notion that rioters are displaced Southerners whom the cities couldn't assimilate. Persons born or raised in the North were three times as likely to be rioters as immigrants from the South.

Education and income were not good predictors of whether a person would riot. Unemployment was. Ironically, most Negroes felt that conditions in Detroit were as good or better as in Negro areas in other Northern cities. This lent support to what has become known as the relative deprivation theory of rioting. The theory holds that discontent is highest where there is most opportunity for advancement, because every person who moves ahead is a visible reminder of defeat for those who are not moving....

The Free Press survey also revealed that, contrary to the impression created by TV footage of burning buildings and looters, there was no basic breakdown of respect for law and order. The vast majority of Negroes in the riot area thought of looting, burning and sniping as crimes.

They favored fines or jail for looters and jail for more serious offenses. Even admitted rioters felt this way. To a large extent, then, the rioters were people caught up in the emotion and peer group pressure of the moment. They were, as a Watts rioter once told me, "just going along with the program."

Finally, the survey provided a comprehensive view of the grievances of the ghetto. It verified the suspicion that the arsonists did not throw their firebombs at mere random targets of opportunity. The kinds of businesses burned and the kinds of businesses most complained about were startlingly parallel.

Although it was organized and ex-

ecuted with journalistic speed—nearly two years elapsed between the Watts riot and publication of the UCLA study—the Free Press study was still clean and precise enough to qualify as social science. Dr. Nathan Caplan, the chief academic consultant to the project, later reanalyzed the data and used it, along with material from a Newark study, to construct the widely quoted “profile of a rioter” found in... the Riot Commission report.

Useful as it was in telling the story behind the Detroit riot, the survey project was, in a sense, too late. Negroes should not have to riot before public attention is paid to their problems and grievances. With the effectiveness of the survey tool demonstrated by the Free Press, editors of its sister paper, *The Miami Herald*, decided to use it to measure the mood and grievances of their still-peaceful Negro community....

The survey technique is not an all-purpose problem solver. All it does is what any reporter tries to do: It points out the existence of problems and outlines their nature and structure. It is only a beginning, but it does get one quickly beyond those tiresome questions that are always asked when race relations are discussed: “Who speaks for the Negro, and what do Negroes really want?” If it did nothing else, the survey method would be worthwhile for demonstrating that there are many different Negroes with many different spokesmen and that different Negroes want different things. No one viewpoint deserves all the attention to the exclusion of others.

Whitney Young, Executive Director of the National Urban League, has complained that radical leader Stokely Carmichael has a following of but 50 Negroes and 5,000 white reporters. There is something to this. But the intensity of Carmichael’s followers makes them more important than their numbers suggest. And the error of the press is not in over-reporting Carmichael’s activity but in under-reporting what is going on in the rest of the Negro community. It is the structural problem again. Carmichael has

press conferences. The hungry family with the jobless father whose members nevertheless shun violence does not. Reporters need to start going into the ghetto on a regular basis, and a social science-oriented survey can help map out the strange and unfamiliar terrain for them.

With survey data in hand, a reporter can tell not only how many people a Negro leader speaks for, but what kind of people they are. And he can make a start at covering the Negro protest movement in the way that specialized reporters in industrial cities cover the labor movement or in the manner of political writers covering action in local politics.

Some editors instinctively start looking for a Negro reporter for this kind of an assignment. This could be a mistake. In fact, it suggests a kind of enlightened racism. Negro reporters should be hired, but it might be better to put them on police beat or city hall or general assignment. A Negro reporter for the white establishment press is going to encounter suspicion, distrust and a certain amount of unpleasant pressure when he tries to establish news sources among black militants.

White reporters are suspect, too, of course, in the minds of these news sources, but the suspicion is open and everyone is aware of it. White reporters and black militant sources can work at the arm’s length stance and with the sense of mutual, respectful distrust which the best reporters always establish with their sources.

The black reporter is too likely to be confronted with the “you are either with us or against us” charge. To avoid this uncomfortable position, he should confine his writing on racial matters to human-interest subjects, where a black face might be of help in gaining rapport, and no long-term relationships with sources are required.

One other problem faces any newspaper that decides to take extraordinary measures to enter the ghetto and find out what’s there. It is the fear that talking about Negro problems, especially in the context of past or possible future violence, will increase the prob-

ability of violence. A psychologist addressing one of the Department of Justice seminars for law enforcement officials recently made a reference to the “incredible slums” of the West Coast city where the seminar was being held. Afterward, an angry police chief approached him with the charge, “It is people like you who cause riots.”

“That’s funny,” retorted the psychologist. “I thought it was people like you.”

Discussing problems may indeed be dangerous. But not discussing them is even more dangerous. I suspect that editors who balk at airing Negro grievances do not really believe that discussion causes violence. The real fear is that if discussion is followed by violence, the newspaper will get blamed.

In Detroit, since last November, there has been a painful example of what social scientists call a “natural experiment.” A city with racial tension has been deprived of its newspapers and the effect of the absence of the information variable may be seen. Local observers, including city officials, agree that Detroit without newspapers is a more tense, frightened city with more potential for violence than it would be if the *Free Press* and the *News* were publishing. City officials demonstrated their awareness of this fact when they sought, unsuccessfully, to get a moratorium on the strike after the assassination of Martin Luther King. A steady reliable source of information is the best way to counter fear and anger that is aggravated by rumor. And the need to tell it like it is extends to the longer, quieter periods between peaks of racial tension.

A good newspaper does not turn its back on a problem. The more the race problem is discussed, analyzed, dissected and turned upside down to find what’s there, the sooner there will be workable solutions. ■

*Philip E. Meyer, a 1967 Nieman Fellow, is a reporter for the Knight Newspapers. The staff of the Detroit Free Press, a Knight newspaper, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in May for its coverage of the riots.*

Summer 1978

## Covering the *Real* Politics

BY J. ANTHONY LUKAS

...I now find myself at what I hope is mid-career, writing a book about a subject which some journalists might feel I was wasting my time on. It is not exactly one of the single burning issues of American life today, as conventionally seen. It is not SALT. It is not who is going to be President in 1980. It is not energy or even who's going to win the 1978 pennant. Probably, even for many people in this room, it starts with an enormously tedious subject—the question of what we do about schools and race in urban America. If I were to add the word busing, many of you would probably doze off over your coffee.

It was with that realization—that that word is soporific in the extreme—that I decided originally not to write about busing, but to write about the lives of three Boston families. I came up here in the summer of 1976 to select those three families.

I ended up selecting my first family in Charlestown. I don't know whether a Nieman these days strays into Charlestown. If most of you haven't, as I suspect you haven't, you ought to. To me, Charlestown is one of the most compelling communities in this area, the site, of course, of Bunker Hill. And on the slopes of Bunker Hill, I found a family who regard themselves as Irish, but my research shows that they stem from an Anglican clergyman on the Isle of Man in 1760. So they're one family.

A second family is a black family who lives in a subsidized housing project in the South End (not to be confused with South Boston). The eldest daughter of that

family was bused into Charlestown for two years and graduated last June with the eldest son of the ostensibly Irish family in Charlestown.

The third family is an ostensibly Yankee family. I say ostensibly Yankee because it turns out that this family is actually Northern Irish and rather similar in background to the ostensibly Irish family. But they think of themselves as Yankee while the other family thinks of itself as Irish. What I'm getting at here is sort of a subliminal attack on the Michael Novaks of this world, who see everything in terms of very rigid ethnic categories. I think those categories are often more confused than Mr. Novak or Father Andrew Greeley would admit. The third family is made up of a Harvard-educated lawyer, who went to work for Mayor Kevin White for four years, and his wife, who

runs a Yankee-Jewish foundation which gives a lot of money to Boston's black community.

So it's the lives of these three families over a decade that I've been following for the last two years. And, getting back to my original notion, I'm also examining the political relationships between those three families and the three communities they represent. This will be buttressed by my look at four public figures, whose actions influence those three families: Mayor Kevin White; W. Arthur Garrity, the judge who ordered busing in Boston; Cardinal Medeiros, the successor to Cardinal Cushing as the head of the Boston Archdiocese, and Tom Winship, the Editor of *The Boston Globe*. The way those four individuals intersect with the lives of these families—for me that's politics in this country today. I don't deny that Carter versus Ford is politics. I don't deny that it has a profound effect on the lives we lead and that we need talented journalists to report it. I'm not here to impose my vision on you of what a journalist ought to do, and I don't want to be overly didactic, but—all right—I suppose I feel that



Busing students to Hyde Park (Boston) High School in 1974. Photo by Paul Connell, courtesy of *The Boston Globe*.

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kind of politics ought to concern us as much, or more, than politics conventionally defined. If we regard ourselves as covering the real politics of this country, the real politics of this country certainly include the politics of class and race in cities like Boston.

Among other things, it's the question of why does Arthur Garrity hand down a busing edict which requires the poor of Charlestown and the poor of the South End to mix in schools, while exempting the middle class of Newton or Everett or the other suburbs of Boston? Now, one answer to that, which I'm constantly reminded of by my lawyer friends around this town, is that the Supreme Court's decision in the Detroit case virtually exempts the suburbs from such orders. Judge Garrity is a very fine judge. I'm not criticizing him personally. Under Supreme Court precedents, he had very little choice. I'm questioning the broader political role of the judiciary in maintaining the status quo. I would remind you—and I'm sure that you don't need to be reminded—that the legal profession is as subject to politics as any profession, as is the medical

profession, a notion which often seems to be missing in the way most American newspapers cover those professions. We often tend to accept the mystique of the law and medicine, as defined by those professions, and forget that they are as politically and economically motivated as the rest of us tend to be.

Again, I don't mean politics in the conventional sense—electoral or partisan politics. I mean politics in the sense of the broad power relationships between different segments of our society. And I would suggest to you that nothing could be more political in that

sense than the relationship between the poor and minorities increasingly huddled in our largest cities and the overwhelmingly white, middle and upper classes who predominate in the suburban rings around those cities. When the Kerner Commission warned 10 years ago that we were becoming two societies, it was talking at least, in part, about that as well as the narrower question of who goes to what school. Can we really attack the question at its

turmoil and the racial turmoil of the 1960's, and I can tell you that nothing in my professional life have I found as compelling as what I've been doing in these past few years.

And I think I will end this stirring peroration by simply saying that I would hope that some of you would leave your years as Niemans or Southams and go back to your profession eager to write about politics broadly defined, to be defined as the power relationship



Students and police outside South Boston High School, 1976. Photo by Jack O'Connell, courtesy of *The Boston Globe*.

root if we simply shuffle poor blacks and poor whites back and forth across our cities and ignore the suburbs? Shouldn't we all bear the burden of making those two societies one?

Well, those are some of the political issues which I am currently concerned with, and I find them, I must tell you, the most utterly compelling political issues which I have ever written about. I've had my share of big political stories as a reporter. I've covered Watergate for *The New York Times Magazine*. I have covered some presidential politics and a good deal of the domestic

which exists in society at large, rather than narrowly defined which I take to mean the quadrennial or biennial struggles that go on around an election to a particular office.... ■

*Mr. Lukas, a 1969 Nieman Fellow, is the author of three books and is working on his fourth. His comments were made in March during a seminar with the Nieman Fellows and their guests, the Southam Fellows from Canada. For 10 years, Mr. Lukas was with *The New York Times*, where he won a Pulitzer Prize.*

Spring 1979

# Nonwhite America: The ‘Unseen Environment’

The managerial ranks of newspapers are a purer white than Ivory Snow.

BY ROBERT C. MAYNARD

...It is the “unseen environment” of nonwhite America that is of paramount concern to me. At the National Conference on Minorities and the News, a number of academics, journalists and civil rights leaders voiced the same concern. The following is a remark by one of the keynote conference speakers, Vilma Martinez, President and General Counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund:

“I start by asking myself, do I see myself portrayed? And I am vain enough to want to look in the mirror daily. And the answer is predominantly no, moving toward rarely, toward inaccurately, toward unsympathetically, too often.”

That is the heart of the matter of the “unseen environment” of nonwhite America. It is the question of portrayal—rather nonportrayal or misportrayal.

An observation: No established right to accurate group portrayal exists under the First Amendment or any other codified regime. There is, instead, an implied right of all the people to know what is going on—and to receive it straight. If some aspects of our national life, or significant portions of our community life, are misportrayed, this is a disservice to all readers and a violation of the spirit of the First Amendment as we journalists have tended to argue it. It is in that sense that the goal of an equal press is in the interest of preserving a free press. All who have an interest in the preservation of a free press have a concomitant interest, whether they recognize it or not, in seeing that our press represents and

recognizes the diversity of American society. The beleaguered blessings of the First Amendment can be preserved only if they can be seen to belong fully to all Americans. Every assault on the credibility of the press is an assault on the preservability of the freedom of the press.

This is a serious matter because where nonwhite America—at least a fifth of the population—is concerned, there is every indication that the credibility of the press is in jeopardy. The reasons are not difficult to find:

- Our communities are constantly misportrayed as more violent than they are. That is in part because the agencies that contact our communities most tend to be police and other such groups. Since such official sources are the journalist’s stock in trade, the nonwhite community suffers the resultant appearances of greater violence than is actually the case. The city of Washington, D.C., is a prime example of that point. It has become a metaphor for urban crime and pathology. When the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration of the U.S. Department of Justice attempted to document the incidence of urban crime victimization, it came up with the startling discovery that of 13 cities the size of Washington, 11 had greater rates of crime victimization. Among them were San Francisco and Minneapolis. Why, then, has Washington this reputation for violent crime, a reputation

not shared by Minneapolis and San Francisco, even when their victimization rates were higher? One could search for that answer far and wide, but no better answer is available than that Washington is 75 percent black. In our national mind, black predominance and crime incidence are somehow wedded as a single thought. The fact that Washington is a city largely of middle-income families, government workers for the most part, is not a familiar fact. Only that Washington must be, as one demagogue called it, the “crime capital” of the nation.

- Indolence is yet another element of the misportrayal of nonwhite communities. We are saddled and our children are saddled with the public picture of laziness and unwillingness to work. Dr. Robert Hill, in his remarkable book, “The Strengths of Black Families,” describes an interesting study that bears on this point. Black and white men were asked in the study whether they would prefer a job in a car wash or a welfare program that paid the same amount of money. Ninety percent of the black men and 91 percent of the whites said they would prefer the job.

To anyone who searches for the source of these stereotypes, one of Walter Lippmann’s observations is pertinent. He speaks of what it seems to take to gain the interest of the newspaper reader. “In order that he shall enter, he must find a familiar foothold in the story, and this is supplied to him by the use of stereotypes.”

If Lippmann is correct, our society is suffering from the effects of fallacies that are comfortable for the reader and comfortable for the journalist as well. It is easier to talk about nonwhites and welfare in the same breath without establishing how many of the people on welfare are nonwhite. In the same way, it is easier to discuss the cost of welfare in terms of how great a burden are the poor on the rest of society and

never look at who actually lives on welfare. Would anyone dare to suggest that the middle class, mostly white, physicians who earn more than \$100,000 a year treating patients on Medicaid are actually “living off welfare”? What about the thousands of welfare investigators, many of whom earn top civil service dollars? Are they not living off welfare? Which cost is greater, the money spent on the recipient or the money paid to middle class servants of our bloated welfare bureaucracy? Do we ever address those questions, or do we persist in the stereotypic notion that the nonwhite poor are sapping our national vitality?

Those are questions that lead into the interior of the “what” of portrayal, or misportrayal. The “what” of the matter is only properly understood if we also address the “who” of it—who prepares the news.

The Jay Harris report on nonwhite employment in the newspaper industry informs us that only four percent of the entire professional editorial workforce is not white. That amounts to 1,700 newsroom professionals out of 40,000. If one looks for managers and editors, those who make the decisions about what shall be covered and how, the numbers of nonwhites drop off the scale. Top nonwhite managers are something on the order of four-tenths of one percent of the newsroom workforce, which means the managerial ranks of newspapers are a purer white than Ivory Snow.

If anything accounts for the problems of misportrayal, the answer must begin with those statistics.

What is even more serious than the hiring discrimination is the misportrayal that necessarily results from the white middle class bias that is brought to the news by those who are employed as journalists. Not all journalists who are white engage in this misportrayal. Just too many. Sometimes it is nothing more than ignorance of the subject. Sometimes it is the result of too many college sociology courses about the pathology of poverty. Sometimes it is the result of simple lack of

any sustained exposure to nonwhite people and their distinctive cultures. And, to be sure, sometimes it is the result of racial prejudice. Whatever the particular reason in any given case, there is, in my opinion, but one solution. That is the hiring and promotion of more nonwhite journalists.

We will approach a solution to the problems of nonportrayal and misportrayal when we reach the point where representatives of the “unseen environment” of nonwhite America become part of the “seen environment” of the American newsroom. I can think of no other remedy that is likely to work as well as the full desegregation of the American newsroom; because the fundamental underpinning of misportrayal in our news media is ignorance....

Lippmann was writing more than half a century ago, yet that is what he could have meant when he spoke of the news working “against those who have no lawful or orderly method of asserting themselves.” Violence must not be the only way some Americans get to be heard. We need to build a stable society, and information about our common circumstance must be part of that process.

Here it is important to distinguish this criticism from those who would blame the news media for all our social ills. Many, many of our institutions have failed in their responsibility to cure the legacy of racism. The schools by and large have not been educating nonwhite children. The big industries have not been faithful to equal employment opportunity. The housing industry has not always been fair in dealing with nonwhite home buyers, nor have the banks been faithful to the principles of equal lending. The press did not invent those bad practices any more than the press invented slavery, stole Mexico, or murdered Indians.

All the same, it has that special responsibility to which Walter Leonard referred. It must help in the process by which we become aware that as a people we are of one society, and that we must, as Dr. King so often said, learn to

live like brothers or die like fools.

There is an ancient Chinese curse, “May you live in interesting times.” Today we have no choice. We do live in interesting times, and we must recognize that there is nothing simple about the challenges that face us as a society.

The state of newspaper desegregation is not as bleak as it was half a dozen years ago. Then, there were something less than 400 nonwhite journalists on daily newspapers. There was a sense in the field that editors wanted to do the right thing, but they “couldn’t find qualified” nonwhite journalists.

Now the problem is a little different. Small as that figure of four percent may be, it represents progress. It shows that this job can be accomplished. It shows the problem for what it is, one of supply and demand. There is no reason I know of that we can’t get to the figure of 20 percent nonwhite in this industry. If we had not reached the figure of four percent, we could wonder if there were a structural obstruction of some basic sort. But the fact that we have come as far as we have suggests we can go all the way.

It takes commitment. It takes resources and, most of all, it takes a willingness to understand things that may not at first come easily.

That is why these are interesting—and therefore frustrating—times. It is as if we were in the middle of a journey. We have passed that point of innocence when we could pretend this problem was not there. We have passed the point where any reasonable person could dare to maintain that it cannot be done. Yet, we have not reached the point of assurance that it will be done. We stand on the edge of change, at a place just short of the knowledge that this problem of segregated newsrooms is as sure to pass as the segregated lunch counter once passed.

At the Institute for Journalism Education, we have tried in our small way to help chart a course. We have already trained 115 nonwhite journalists and placed them in the newsroom. We have tried to fashion programs that will assist editors looking for experienced



journalists to turn into editors and executives. We have begun to work on the problem of a news feature syndicate to bring the diverse viewpoints of nonwhite scholars and writers onto the opinion pages of the heartland. We have gone out to meet editors in their newsrooms to discuss the path from here to the place where this problem will be, like that of the once-famous lunch counter, a dim memory.

Will our newsrooms reach that point in our lifetime? This is not a job that any one individual or group can accomplish alone. It is too complex—too sophisticated, too interesting—to be left to any one segment of the news business. Yet our involvement in the Institute in this difficult question is an act of faith. I personally have faith in the ability of our institutions to overcome their past infirmities and faith that even in interesting times our society and our calling will not be diverted from the large purpose of becoming a model for all humanity. If journalism is to keep its faith with those ideals that gave us the First Amendment, the Bill of Rights, and all of the Constitution, then we must act with determination to purge the stigma of racism from our profession. Once that was simply an ideal, perhaps even a dream. From here on, it is no longer a matter of asking, what can we do? We do know what to do. Today it is merely a matter of applying all we know individually and collectively to the task. ■

*This text is adapted from a presentation by Robert C. Maynard to the Panel on Coverage of the Whole Community: Coverage of Non-Elites. The proceedings were a part of the Sixty-first Annual Convention of the History Division of the Association for Education in Journalism held last August at the University of Washington, Seattle. Robert Maynard is Chairman, the Institute for Journalism Education, Washington, D.C., Nieman Fellow 1966, and a former editorial board member of The Washington Post.*

Summer 1992

## We Weren't Listening

By not tapping into rap's message of violence media failed to prepare public for rampage.

BY HAROLD JACKSON

Conversations with blacks and whites during the three days of mayhem that followed the April 29 verdicts in the Rodney King police beating case revealed a difference of opinion that pollsters were late to record.

While whites were shocked and appalled at the assaults, the looting, the firebombings, many blacks were only appalled. The subtle difference is that a lot of blacks weren't really surprised at the violent reaction to the innocent verdicts given the cops accused of beating King.

That most whites had not previously realized the degree of rage among black youths that exploded in the Los Angeles riot can in part be attributed to the media's ineptness in reporting why that rage existed. It didn't start with the Rodney King case.

White readers, watchers and listeners of the daily news absorb the fact that homicide has become the leading cause of death among young black men as easily as they wipe up a kitchen counter spill with a Bounty towel. The media have failed to provide them with the perspective to be genuinely touched by such numbers.

The carnage occurring in America's cities daily is not normal; rage is its fuel. But because of the way it is reported, as news from the urban war front, far removed from where they live, many whites simply don't care to know why the people involved are killing each other. They don't know them.

Even black suburbanites, however, can't help identifying with what is happening in the inner cities. Many of them came from such surroundings.

Some have personally witnessed the disregard for human life that would allow someone to uncaringly shoot anyone within range of a speeding car or stomp on the head of another human being.

The media daily provide glimpses of such aberrant behavior, but those glimpses were not enough to prepare TV-watching white America for the sight of Reginald Denny being pulled from his truck, beaten bloody, then shot in the leg.

Perhaps white America would not have been as surprised had the media done better reporting the messages being sent to black youths, messages that tell them violence is an acceptable means of expression.

It was almost comical to see news staffs across the country tap the usual suspects, the "black leaders," to explain the anger expressed not just in Los Angeles but in many cities from San Francisco to Atlanta.

These black leaders, usually men, usually 50-plus years of age, could relate to what was happening in the streets but they did not have the perspective of the young people participating in spontaneous anarchy.

Why didn't the media go to today's leaders whose messages more closely resemble Bobby Seale's than Martin King's, the leaders whose messages have made violent reaction the chosen form of protest among many young blacks? Why didn't they go to the rap music artists?

It is a mistake for mainstream, white media to write off this music form as sheer entertainment, totally frivolous. Rap is often political, it is often philo-

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sophical, many of its artists have the power to motivate masses of people. In fact, some do just that.

O'Shea Jackson, the rap artist who calls himself Ice Cube, released a song last year titled "Death Certificate," that included the words "Oriental one-penny motherfuckers... Pay respect to the black fist/Or we'll burn your store right down to a crisp."

Was that not the attitude of blacks who sacked Korean shops in Los Angeles? Their anger was not just jealousy that Korean merchants were doing well in black neighborhoods. They believe the Korean merchants only see blacks as customers or robbers, never as people....

Some listened to the electrically charged rap of Ice Cube or other proponents of violence as a solution, artists such as NWA (Niggers With an Attitude), Sister Souljah and Public Enemy, whose "By the Time I Get to Arizona" video depicts Arizona public officials being killed for opposing a Martin Luther King state holiday. News reports about Ice Cube's "Death Certificate" and Public Enemy's "By the Time I Get to Arizona" primarily concerned white reactions or the artists' defense of their work. Left unexplored was the racial climate, the anger among black youths, that would make it profitable for record companies to promote songs with those subjects.

The media usually find it convenient to paint rap artists with the same stereotypical brush they use for many things African-American in nature. They want to place them in a niche that does not take into account their complexities.

Reporters need to point out that artists such as Sister Souljah (Lisa Williamson) are more political activists than rap stars. A former member of Public Enemy, Sister Souljah makes fiery speeches that reflect her being both streetwise and formally educated. She spent four years at Rutgers University, with overseas studying stints in Spain, Zimbabwe and the Soviet Union....

Whites might not have been as sur-

prised by the violent reaction to the King beating verdict had the media given them more than occasional disjointed reports on the violence that has so consumed the lives of many young black people that it even includes their preferred music.

The media don't hesitate to report the results of that violence, someone being maimed or murdered. They even occasionally report on the violence found in rap music, but rarely do those reports take into consideration the conditions that have created an audience for this vitriol to a hip-hop beat.

Some might argue that every time there is a new release of statistics showing the depths to which America's black citizens are still assigned, the media report it. Indeed, they have reported that black unemployment, at more than 15 percent, is twice the rate of whites; that blacks make up 12 percent of the U.S. workforce, but 27 percent of the chronically unemployed; that nearly one in four black men aged 20 to 29 is either in prison or on parole or probation; that the median household income for black families is \$20,000 compared to \$36,000 for whites.

### Perspectives Needed on People's Feelings

Numbers and more numbers are reported and reported. But what is lacking in the analytical stories that accompany the statistics is the perspective that makes people realize what those numbers say about how people feel about themselves and others.

Missing are enough stories about the people in those statistics that have nothing to do with numbers, positive stories that make the reader or listener feel empathy for that person when the statistics are released.

In retrospect, the King beating case verdict should not have been unexpected. It is very difficult to get people who feel this country has given up too much to criminals to punish their protection against crime....

A jury would not convict police officers of brutality in the case of Don

Jackson, the private investigator who videotaped his arrest three years ago in Long Beach, California. The police pushed his head through a plate glass window. And The Chicago Tribune reported during the Los Angeles riots that only six cops there have been charged with abuse in the last 10 years and only one was convicted, an officer who shot an unarmed man in the back of the head during a 1983 traffic stop.

But just as the King beating trial verdict might have been expected, especially given the change of venue to a suburb popular with police retirees, the aftermath of the verdict should have been anticipated, too.

And perhaps it would have been had the media done a better job of connecting the dots, a better job of reporting that the violence being played out in urban neighborhoods daily is not just about dope deals and domestic arguments.

This violence has at its roots not just criminality but a common despair, a common belief that the system only responds to anger. That anger exists in this country wherever there are people who feel they don't count, that they are not being treated fairly, that they are not being heard. If the media doesn't listen to them and report what they are saying, then who will?

The 1960's riots saw the number of black reporters and photographers rise in cities where the media found a brown face could go where a white one could not. But the violence that broke out in cities after the King beating verdict included attacks on journalists regardless of their color.

The media are no longer trusted to tell the whole story of the neglected communities where violence is most likely to occur. The media must regain that trust. ■

*Harold Jackson, a 1991 winner of the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing, is with The Birmingham News. A journalist for 17 years, he has also worked for The Philadelphia Inquirer, United Press International, and the Birmingham Post-Herald.*

Summer 1998

# Roy DeCarava Retrospective

BY LESTER SLOAN

Roy DeCarava doesn't occupy a space, he blends with it. But to say that his approach to photography is stealth-like is to attribute to him a potential for discord that does him a disservice. With DeCarava there is no hidden agenda; his is a harmonious presence. In his carefully composed black-and-white images of the common man, we are allowed to see the colors of shadows. Rich and evocative, they render his subjects in what one essayist calls "a reflective state of grace."

For close to 50 years, DeCarava has consistently explored one subject, New York City, primarily Harlem. It is this community that educated and nurtured him and provided this only child with a surrogate family among whom he always found a place at the table. To paraphrase the poet, unlike the smoke that forgets the earth from which it ascends,

DeCarava never betrayed or strayed from what appears to be a solemn trust. The love and care with which he embraced this family is repaid in the access he is given to their lives. Through his images, we become part of his extended family.

DeCarava made a decision early in his career to chart his own course, "aspiring to his own values," as he puts it. It is a decision that has cost him dearly. Both his choice of subjects and his approach to his art would put him

outside the commercial loop. As a professional, he would later do a two-year stint at *Sports Illustrated*; it was not a match made in heaven. For a man who believes in "listening to the moment," keeping his eye on the ball was not conducive to making good pictures.

But to suggest that DeCarava fails as a photojournalist is to confuse style



"Bill and Son, 1962," from "Roy DeCarava: A Retrospective." © 1962.  
Photo courtesy of Roy DeCarava.

with content. That he chooses to render his subject in what some consider an artistic fashion need not be taken as evidence that he abandoned the tenets of photojournalism. His pictures simply tell a story about a different black America, one that is not in a constant state of trauma. The results attest to a vision unencumbered by preconceived attitudes about his choice of subjects. Indeed, it can be argued that his pictures speak to a higher truth about his subject in a style that embraces their

humanity rather than denies it.

At its best, photojournalism is simply a way of telling a story where the content of the images minimizes or exceeds the necessity for copy. DeCarava does this superbly, with an expanded, richer vocabulary. His nuances in shades of gray and black are his adjectives and adverbs used to describe his subjects and their condition, his four "w's" and an "h." If some of us see it as art perhaps it points to an unfamiliarity with the style and language rather than tampering on the part of the photographer.

In the profession of journalism, the photographer's contribution usually serves to augment or support the copy of the writer. It is the word-smith who not only tells the story, but also sets the parameters for the photographer's participation. And if anything is to be cut, it is usually the pictures first. Picture magazines like *Life* and *Look* reversed that equation, and television totally changed things. DeCarava's approach to photojournalism, and his choice of subjects, set him apart at a time when the image-makers were encroaching on the turf of the writers.

That DeCarava found greater acceptance in the salon than the newsroom says a lot about the opportunities that existed for photographers who wanted their pictures to tell their own stories. And one who selected Harlem as his beat put limits on his acceptance and his options. Ultimately, great photojournalism ends up in galleries and museums. DeCarava got there early... ■

*Lester Sloan, a 1976 Nieman Fellow, is contributing essayist to National Public Radio's "Weekend Edition" and a freelance photojournalist.*

From the 1940's through the 1990's, technological innovation in electronic media has tugged print journalism into unaccustomed realms of news reporting. During earlier decades, this tug came most strongly from television. Today it arises out of the proliferation of cable stations and the explosive growth of the Internet. Throughout this time, commentary about the evolving impact on journalism has appeared in Nieman Reports.

"The challenge of television to the newspaper is one which newspapermen cannot take lightly," **John S. Hayes**, then President of The Washington Post's radio station, advised the American Society of Newspaper Editors in the fall of 1951. "If you do not consider carefully what you can do *better* than radio or television... you will find yourselves in a losing battle for time, and you will find the public will drift from you to the other media."

By the following year, cartoonist **Al Capp** accused television of going the way of radio and airing editorial views "bought" by advertisers, something he argued would never occur in "any great American newspaper."

And by the mid-1960's, **Richard L. Strout**, Washington correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor, suggested that radio and television be barred from live presidential press conferences. "The effect [of their presence] at White House press conferences is to make us all reluctant, unpaid, Hollywood actors, ending all intimacy, and encouraging the exhibitionists," he wrote. "As every reporter knows, it is not the first question in a group interview that gets the answer, it is the second or third follow-up question. But with TV the question is asked, it is answered or evaded, and that's that. The reporter has had it."

CBS Producer **Fred Friendly** reminded Nieman Fellows in a 1981 seminar that "you can't do the news in 22 minutes. The tragedy is that people think they are getting the news. So they say, 'Well, I don't have to read a newspaper, certainly not an afternoon newspaper. I heard all the news; that man said, 'That's the way it is,' so that must be the way it is. But that isn't the way it is; it's a bunch of very good reporters running around Washington with cameras."

What was referred to as "the interactive, multi-media world" in the early 1990's would in a few years be known widely as the Internet. In 1994, **Katherine Fulton** (NF'93) offered a prescient glimpse into that future when she wrote, "...newspaper publishers... [are] taking old forms and formats and retrofitting them for use on line, trying to adapt the strengths of an old medium to a new medium no one yet understands. As anyone who has studied the media will tell you, that won't be enough. But what will be enough? Nothing less than re-imagining what it means to be a journalist in a democratic society, with these new tools at our disposal." ■

January 1949

# The Newspaperman Meets Television

BY LOWELL M. LIMPUS

“I never expected to see an old hand in the newspaper business cavorting in front of a bunch of cameras with his face covered by makeup.”

Thus Danton Walker, the Broadway columnist, paid his laughing respects to a group of veteran political reporters clustered about the WPIX news desk during the telecasting of the Republican Convention in Philadelphia. The shaft struck home because a number of us were engaged in a performance, the like of which we had never anticipated in our cub days.

It continued to fester—in my own case at least—during the ensuing months. I found myself becoming more and more deeply entangled with the problems of television as applied to

the newspaper business. Since most of you are apt to become involved in the same predicament in the future, it may be that you would be interested in a recital of the problems faced and some of the tentative conclusions drawn by one of us pioneers.

I do not, however, pretend to know all the answers—or any appreciable proportion of them.

Television is a new medium and most of us seem to be feeling our way in the dark, but it definitely concerns the working newspaperman, since more and more of us are being drawn into its clutches as various newspapers invade the new field.

My own paper—the New York Daily News—established station WPIX early last summer and immediately drew

upon the editorial staff for personnel. Most of the original ones came from the radio broadcasting department which had been feeding hourly news bulletins to FNEW for several years. The head of this department, the veteran Carl Warren, became Director of News and Special Events for WPIX and recruited the backbone of his staff from the News’s editorial department.

Men like Warren, who definitely transfer into the field of the new medium, are forced to learn an entirely new set of technical arrangements. They remain newspapermen but rapidly become specialists in the expanding television medium as well. They, however, have sufficient time and leisure to devote to the project to master it.

The rest of us are drawn in gradually at first, devoting only a small part of our time to the new medium—but, as time goes on, we find it occupying more and more of our attention. I presume my own case is typical.

I had never seen a television camera when I was borrowed by WPIX as a political advisor to make recommendations regarding the problems attendant upon covering the conventions. When I reported—chock full of advice—I was requested to prepare a tentative script, and the first thing I knew I was reading it under the watchful eye of a young director-engineer, who had just joined the staff from the General Electric Laboratories at Schenectady. He decided that I might be one of the performers he was seeking and, the next thing I knew, I was selected to become one of the television commentators at the convention.

The selection resulted, in my own case, in a problem with which I presume few of you would be faced. It involved my whiskers.

My Nieman classmates will perhaps recall that I sported a goatee while I was at Harvard. I had shaved it off during the war, in an effort to make myself appear younger while applying for active duty as a reserve officer. My chin had remained nude ever since.

I discovered later that I was merely one of several political writers on the



The 1948 Republican Convention in Philadelphia. *Photo courtesy of UPI/Corbis-Bettmann.*

News staff who had been considered for the convention assignment, and the director had sent down to the morgue for pictures of all of them. A careless librarian had submitted an old photograph of me—one which still showed me wearing the Van Dyke. When I reported the director threw up his hands in horror.

His first question explained his reaction.

“Where are the whiskers?” he asked.

“Oh, I haven’t worn a Van Dyke for seven years,” I replied.

“Hell,” declared the director. “That was one reason we picked you. We may want to put you on the air and I thought the beard might go well on television.”

“Is it essential to the job?” I asked.

“It is, if you want it,” he replied. “How long would it take you to grow it again?”

I explained that I thought I could do it in three weeks—and he insisted that I had better make the attempt if I wanted to earn the extra fee, which the station proposed to pay for the service.

I wanted the fee and so I complied. I presume that makes me one of a very few people who are paid real money for wearing whiskers—and since the goatee has become familiar to television audiences, directors of other programs insist that it be retained. It begins to look as though I am stuck with it. Especially since I became involved with additional programs soon after.

My experience at Philadelphia resulted in an offer to become the moderator of a new political forum which the station had just launched the preceding week.

I took over that weekly program and before long they asked me to participate in another one, built around the joint interview of national celebrities by Mrs. L.W. (Chip) Robert, the well-known Washington hostess and columnist for *The Washington Times-Herald*, and myself.

Shortly thereafter I was detailed—as a part of my regular newspaper work—to write the stories reporting the results of the Daily News’s Statewide Straw Poll and almost immediately WPIX decided that it wanted to broad-

cast those results. Since I was beginning to be regarded as a veteran around our young studio, I more or less naturally inherited that program as well. Thus, within the space of three months I became established in three programs a week.

There is not a great deal of money in it—at least in these early days. You get paid something for each performance (which in my case at least was a welcome addition to the family budget) and you get so interested in the work that you willingly accept more of it.

My experience so far has been limited to three kinds of programs—the forum, the interview, and the straight news commentary. Each type presents its own particular problem. But most of them are problems with which newspapermen are familiar. The solutions therefore are not too difficult.

In handling the television forum—especially if it is an audience participation show, as ours is—the moderator has to be continually on his toes, watching for libel and slander. You must follow the discussion with hawk-like accuracy because you have no chance to eliminate the libelous matter on a galley proof, if it once takes form. You cannot even replate it out and thereby hope to reduce your damages. You must be ready to gavel down the offender—and if necessary to shout him down—before he can get you into trouble.

In our political discussions we found that the charge of Communism was the most dangerous possibility to be watched. If a member of the audience attempted to brand an opponent a Red, we learned to expect immediate repercussions from the target. One such charge did get on the air, despite my pounding gavel, and the next day we had a request for a complete transcript of the show from the eminent officeholder whom a questioner had implied to be possibly a Soviet sympathizer (and who, incidentally, happened to be a Republican). Fortunately it wasn’t too specific and our explanation was acceptable. It would seem advisable, however, if the charge is once aired, to permit a defense against

it to follow.

Needless to say, the moderator must be strictly impartial and avoid any appearance of favoring either side of an issue. He cannot even make a wise-crack which could be twisted into an implication that he is airing his own personal views. The temptation to make such jocular remarks simply must be resisted.

The television interview proves exceedingly difficult because the subject almost invariably refuses to go on record with anything of a controversial nature. The sight of the camera seems to slow him up exceedingly. During a radio interview he sometimes gets interested in the discussion and forgets about the microphone, but he never loses sight of the twin red eyes of the camera glowing just outside the audience’s field of vision....

Furthermore, because of the cameras, he usually is unable to refer to notes or a prepared statement; at least he does not like to, since he prefers to seem to be speaking off the cuff, and that means that you just cannot get him to commit himself to anything that has not been rehearsed in advance. The only solution seems to be to go over the entire interview before going on the air and to permit him to answer prearranged questions in order.

It appears to work very well. One of my most successful interviews was with General Jonathan Wainwright and was conducted largely by signals. The grim old hero of Corregidor suffers from defective hearing as a result of his prison camp experience, but refuses to use a hearing aid. He could not follow the conversation in a crowded studio but he memorized in advance the order in which my questions would be asked. When I would lean forward and accidentally touch his knee, the General would begin replying to the next query. It worked out very well, too.

On the other hand, at least during these early days, most celebrities when making their first few appearances on television are much more easily handled in front of the cameras than elsewhere. They seem to be awed by the sight of the equipment and the

realization that their performance is being broadcast in moving picture form.

The most dignified and eminent statesman appears to lose a considerable portion of his self-control when he enters the studio and finds himself stumbling across trailing cables and dodging between cameras and microphones. He “steps lively” when ordered to do so by the members of the sound and camera crews and ducks in pure horror if even a dead camera swings in his direction in an unguarded moment. Occasionally he freezes up with a bad case of camera fright, and then the interviewer must be prepared to wade in and keep talking until the celebrity recovers the use of his tongue.

The commentator simply finds himself talking an editorial to the camera, and his success depends upon his ability either to memorize this talk or to continue with occasional glances at fragmentary notes on the table before him. It is fatal to try to read a prepared script unless the commentary is being illustrated by a series of charts, graphs or other material—including news films. In that case it simplifies matters to pick up the script and read it, although it must be carefully marked to indicate when the live camera will return to the speaker. The trick is to drop the script and be looking at the audience as the camera comes back and you continue your conversation.

Such are a few of the problems which must be faced and solved by the newspaperman who finds himself operating with the new medium. I repeat that I do not know all the answers, and I know nobody else who does. We are experimenting every day in an effort to discover new and better ones.

But you had better begin thinking about them yourself.

You never know when they will become your problems, too. ■

*Lowell M. Limpus, veteran correspondent and political writer of the New York Daily News, relates his initial adventures in television. He was a Nieman Fellow in 1941.*

October 1951

## How Can Newspapers Meet Competition of Radio and Television?

BY JOHN S. HAYES

**T**he challenge of television to the newspaper is one which newspapermen cannot take lightly, and one which you must consider, as radio is having to do. What you face, and for that matter what radio faces, is an intense new competition for the free time of the American public. Time to read newspapers. Time to listen to the radio. Time to watch a television set.

What is important, is that each of the media makes certain that it has its proper share of this free time. The challenge, then, which television and radio toss at you is this: that you so conduct your newspaper press that you are able successfully to compete with radio and television for your equitable share of the overall time to be given to reading and listening and watching.

If you do not consider carefully what you can do *better* than radio or television, and emphasize that part of your operation, you will find yourselves in a losing battle for time, and you will find the public will drift from you to the other media.

It seems to me that if I were a newspaper editor I would be more concerned, in view of television reporting, with seeing to it that my coverage of those events, which were also televised, would henceforth put as much emphasis on background and analysis as on cold reporting.

The newspaper enjoys a certain advantage in mobility. The two legs of a reporter can carry your newspaper into places not easily reached by the cumbersome cameras of a television crew. What did Mr. Costello say after the hearings? What about his family? What

is the story of Mr. Costello's life? What is the background to the appointment of Senator Kefauver's Committee? These are matters which the television cameras cannot easily cover, but these are topics to which your men may easily be assigned.

It also seems to me that if I were a newspaper editor, I would make sure that my journal gave more attention in the future to so-called minor events which might not be televised. The television camera can be in only one place at a time. It can broadcast only one fire during one hour. It can program only one parade in one program segment. But you can be everywhere, and at the same time. If the television camera is at a fire downtown, your men can be at the same fire, and at the same moment be at police headquarters on the other side of town.

I think you must now consider in your daily news budgets where the television camera has been before you. And you must not be so dazzled by the importance of an event that you forget many of your readers have already witnessed the event in their living room. You must be sure that you give coverage to other events which have occurred that day—events, which to you, in the classic tradition of editing, may not seem as important. Unless you do this, you will find the American public looking upon their newspapers as a secondary medium of information where once you had enjoyed some primacy in that field. ■

*John S. Hayes, President, WTOP (Washington Post Radio Station), made these remarks to the American Society of Newspaper Editors.*

April 1952

# Al Capp Views the Networks

BY AL CAPP

**T**he two main ways to communicate ideas in America are by press and radio. I've communicated with America both ways. I've found freedom of speech in the American press. I've found an immovable, frightening Iron Curtain in American radio and TV.

In Communist Russia, you think like the Kremlin thinks, or you'd better stop thinking—out loud, at least. On the American air, you think like your sponsor thinks—or he finds someone else who does.

That is why all the thinking that comes out of TV and radio—both from the frankly commentary and opinion programs—and the concealed “messages” in the entertainment shows represent the thinking of a small group of Americans—the group that sells the whisky and the girdles and the body odor glorifiers—just as all the thinking on Soviet radio represents the thinking of another small group in the Kremlin.

Now I think that minorities should have a voice. I am prepared to fight to the death for the rights of the men who make whisky or girdles or banish unpleasant smells—but I think us majorities have some rights, too.

In radio, the majority of Americans long ago exercised the one right we had left—the right not to listen.

I have every confidence that the unbeatable team of network and sponsor will make TV just as unbearable.

They are mighty proud when they have succeeded in getting five million sets turned into one show, instead of being ashamed that they've succeeded in getting 20 million sets turned off. The great idiocy of air surveys is that

they rate only the preferences of the people who are listening. They neglect to find out why more millions, who have invested fortunes in their sets, have rearranged their living rooms to accommodate 'em, who are desperate for decent entertainment, honest news shows, and yet who have been so bored, sickened and offended by the muck that comes out of their machines, that they turn the damned thing off and read “Li'l Abner” instead.

After the Democratic primaries in New Hampshire, TV can no longer plead that it is merely an entertainment medium—and therefore has no responsibility to the nation—but only to the whisky distillers or the girdle

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**Any advertiser can buy the editorial influence of any great American network, by buying time and making sure that the commentator who uses the time is their own obedient baby boy.... It's dangerous—it's un-American.**

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architects. TV has demonstrated its impact on American thinking by creating a widely popular presidential candidate out of a heretofore obscure Senator from Tennessee, who, because of a few appearances on TV, was able to beat the pants off the President of the United States and the regular Democratic political machine.

TV, whether the men who run it like it or not, has become, along with the press, the most powerful means of communication (and therefore influence) in the United States. With power comes responsibility. The American press has by and large shouldered that

responsibility. No advertisers can buy the editorial columns of any great American newspaper. Any advertiser can buy the editorial influence of any great American network, by buying time and making sure that the commentator who uses the time is their own obedient baby boy.

In this way, a tiny minority of national advertisers control most of our network time and can, and do, pull an Iron Curtain down between the public and any views but their own.

It's dangerous—it's un-American. We don't want our thinking dictated to us, shaped for us, by any small group of commissars, either from the Kremlin or from the promotion department of a soap factory. It is up to the networks to realize, no matter how uncomfortable the idea is, that in TV they have one of the most powerful media of influence and that this power must be used for all America, not just their sponsors.

Now the networks have every right to make a buck. It would be, in my opinion, disastrous for us to give control of TV to government. The air should remain, like the press, the property of private enterprise.

But, like the press, the air should be run in an American way—it mustn't, like Russian air, be the property of a small group. It should, like the American press, keep its influence

a clean and unpurchasable influence. TV should remain a business—but a business as great in its dignity and honesty as it is in its influence, not a shabby, unprincipled racket that is willing to sell itself—and us—for 30 pieces of silver.

Well, I guess you won't be seeing me on any TV shows after *this*. At any rate, I'll still be seeing you in the funny papers. ■

*This provocative statement by the cartoonist Al Capp was heard on March 12 by a Boston audience of several hundred.*



October 1959

# The Square Eye vs. the Written Word

BY MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE

The thought occasionally occurs to me that if the present obsession with television and radio continues, the written word may become unnecessary, irrelevant and obsolete. Mankind may develop square eyes, or generate a single square eye in the center of the forehead. As what Professor J.K. Galbraith has so aptly and ingeniously called “The Affluent Society” goes on developing, the increasing leisure thereby made available may be devoted more and more to watching television.

Over considerable areas of the world, print has already largely abolished thought. I do not see why viewing should not in its turn abolish print. However, unless and until this happens, we have the two media existing side by side. I was going to add “in competition,” but was pulled up by the thought that the masters of the printed word, the newspaper and magazine proprietors and publishers, have prudently insured themselves against television losses by going into business themselves whenever possible, thereby becoming also masters of the visual image.

In my own country, in England, this has recently happened. We used to have a monopoly in the hands of one of the most singular institutions ever to exist since the Holy Roman Empire. I refer, of course, to the British Broadcasting Corporation, which may perhaps be described as begotten by John Knox out of the Bank of England with the Fabian Society intervening. Now this organization—next, of course, to the monarchy—is most dear to me. The sentiment unhappily is not reciprocated. I have in fact been cast off, excommunicated with bell, book and candle, as unfit to contaminate its vir-

tuous little screen. (Nonetheless I continue, like a brainwashed Communist, to venerate my chastisers and to applaud the logic of my chastisement.) The only reason I mention these little

incidents is to make the point that if we are talking of freedom of expression, television lends itself even better than newspapers to utter rigid control in the interest of orthodoxy and conformism. This should be kept in mind.

We have now as a matter of fact, in England, what is laughingly called Independent Television. This is presided over (at any rate nominally) by a former permanent undersecretary of the Foreign Office, who is apparently always available for such posts as these. Now apart from this fortunate circumstance, the actual ownership of the Indepen-



“Television by its nature has to move on...it cannot explain or expound.”—Muggeridge. Civil rights march on Washington, D.C., 1963. Photo courtesy of the Still Picture Branch, National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

dent Television companies is much enmeshed with the ownership of newspapers. For instance, that most famous of all newspapers, the News of the World (into whose offices I used enviously to peer when I was editor of Punch, thinking of all the scoutmasters on “serious charges” who were going to be immortalized in its columns), has its slice; so have many others. The ones that haven’t, like the Beaverbrook newspapers, are forced to solace themselves by complaining in the most high-minded manner imaginable of the large illicit profits of Independent Television and of the degrading character of its productions. Now in the United States, Australia and elsewhere in the free world, a similar situation prevails. Thus commercially speaking, there is no more competition between television and press than there is between Time, Life and Fortune....

Even so, there is no possible doubt that the two media, the visual image and the printed word, have profoundly influenced one another. Take the case of the evening newspaper. In London we have three, each priced twopence-ha-penny. The office toiler as he makes his way homewards, packed tight in buses and in underground trains, is increasingly disinclined to buy, let alone try to read, an evening newspaper, when on his arrival in the bosom of his family he will see on television the evening news for nothing. When I add that even public houses—as sacred in the English way of life as women’s clubs are in the American—have suffered a like deprivation from the same cause, you will understand the magnitude of the threat. Morning newspapers are less afflicted. But they too have been forced to take account of the fact that news may well have lost its bloom of television by the time they print it, that prized features may have wilted because of some tedious discussion program the night before. That even the seemingly secured territory of the obituary has been invaded, leaving them only with editorials (which, as Sir David Eccles remarked the other day with some notoriety, “nobody reads”) and births, deaths and marriages, which

can scarcely be regarded as circulation-builders or advertisement winners.

What has been the reaction of the newspapers to this, from their point of view, very serious state of affairs? Oversimplifying, I’d list three.

First: attempting to go with the television tide by, for instance, using television personalities as columnists and giving a massive coverage to television shows, to gossip and controversy about television.

Secondly: attempting to provide a rival attraction to television by neglecting news stories and concentrating on frivolous human-interest themes—by, in other words, becoming a magazine.

Thirdly: attempting to meet the challenge by producing more of what television cannot by its nature produce or produces only inadequately, superficially and fleetingly; I mean comment, exposition, the search for the meaning and significance of the contemporary scene apart from its mere presentation.

My own preference, I hasten to say, is point three, but before going into that a little more fully, let me say a little word about one and two. With regard to the journalistic exploitation of “televisioniana,” it’s a rather barren pursuit. The television personality, in any other respect, is seldom interesting and is, happily, (with one or two notable exceptions) short-lived. When, in a very minor way, this fate befell me, I found myself billed in newspapers as “a television personality.” A controversial figure, I wrote even more foolishly than usual as a consequence. The only noticeable result of this strained situation was that it became difficult for me to engage in clandestine pursuits—like adultery—for the very simple and cogent reason that in hotels and other resorts where adulterers consort one was immediately recognized, to the embarrassment of all concerned. You may consider that this is one of the few moral justifications for the invention of this terrible thing, television.

Nor, as a matter of fact, in my opinion, can newspapers sustain themselves by providing information about television, which in any case specialized

magazines, in England and in America, exist to provide. The viewer views—and having viewed goes to bed—waking the next day to view again—and there is no slack to be taken up in that majestic process.

As for newspapers seeking to be more frivolous, inconsequential and fatuous than television, they will, it seems to me, always be beaten in that contest. As “escapism,” as the soporific, the little screen, making no demands on its addicts—requiring of them only an empty stare—will always win. Compared with it, even tabloids are as ponderous as Kant and even Time and Der Spiegel are as tough reading as Hamlet.

Then to the third point. Here I think there are some grounds for what our Foreign Minister, Selwyn Lloyd, is always describing as “reasoned optimism.” There is so much television cannot do, and so much that the printed word can and always will be able to do. With all its terrific impact, television is little listened to. During the time that I used to appear on it fairly regularly, I never had one single instance of anyone recalling a thing I had said. Television by its nature has to move on; it can mount useless discussions and interviews, but it cannot explain or expound. What, for instance, a brilliant British journalist like Alistair Cooke does in the way of presenting the American scene in the columns of the Manchester Guardian—with all his gifts, he cannot begin to do on television (or even on sound radio).

Thus, it might be that the television cult will rescue journalism from the triviality and sensationalisms which have so corrupted it in recent years. It might force journalism to return to an earlier and better tradition by siphoning off the excrescences, the cheese-cake, the gossip, the melodramatic overplaying of news stories, simply because of the happy chance that, in this field, television is unbeatable. ■

*Malcolm Muggeridge, formerly Editor of Punch, spoke at the International Press Institute assembly in Berlin in May. This is an excerpt.*

September 1966

# LBJ Should Hold Formal Press Conferences

BY RICHARD L. STROUT

...I can see Coolidge riffling through the pile of written questions, deciding which he would answer. On one occasion Charlie Michaelson, I believe it was, got a dozen correspondents to ask the same question! Would Coolidge be a candidate in 1928?

Coolidge looked at the first question and put it aside. He looked at the next! Put it aside. He went on from the third to the eleventh. At the twelfth he paused, read it, and went on dryly, "I have here a question on the condition of the children in Poland. The condition of the children in Poland is as follows..." He then talked for several minutes and concluded, "That's all the questions..."

Every President of modern times has made use of press conferences, adapted them to his peculiar style, and carried them on. It was General Eisenhower, unfortunately, who changed their whole character by admitting live radio and television coverage.

I yield to nobody in my admiration of radio and TV. In their own field they are superb. But there are places where I would not admit live radio and TV coverage. The effect at White House press conferences is to make us all reluctant, unpaid, Hollywood actors, ending all intimacy, and encouraging the exhibitionists. As every reporter knows, it is not the first question in a group interview that gets the answer, it is the second or third follow-up question. But with TV the question is asked, it is answered or evaded, and that's that. The reporter has had it.

Let me make my position plain about the relationship of the Washington press corps to the Presi-

dent. It is true that I have a jealous regard for the prestige of my profession. But I hope I am reasonably objective about it. I think more doors are open in Washington, and more information available in spite of carping and criticism, than in any other world capital. And I am aware, too, that the relationship of press to President is apt to be an adversary relationship: The White House wants us to have the favorable news, we are after *all* the news.



"It is my judgment that Mr. Johnson wants to hold control in his own hands."—Strout. Photo by Jack Kightlinger, courtesy of the Lyndon B. Johnson Library Collection.

I do not find fault with this relationship. I do not want the press to be a smirking sycophant, nor do I want it to be a snarling, snapping prosecutor. (In my lifetime I have seen it take on both characters in Washington.) But the presidential press conference itself is very much what the President makes it. It is an honorable, a salutary and, I think, a necessary adjunct to our government, and I do not like to see our profession let it wither on the vine without a protest....

Roosevelt had just under 1,000 conferences. Mr. Truman, if my figures are right, had well over 300; General Eisenhower cut the number down to 200, and President Kennedy in his bright 1,000 days had a conference about once a fortnight.

Alas, this tradition has not continued in recent days. President Johnson has been one of the most accessible men to the press of any President, that is, in informal gatherings, meetings with individual bureau chiefs, or tips to favorite correspondents. But as for *formal* press conferences, I can only figure that he had *nine* last year. So far in 1966 he has held only a few.

But in the United States the executive is all rolled into one. No other democracy has an elected leader with such enormous, such awful power. It is the power of peace and war. There is no question time in Congress. This is my chief argument—I think it is terribly important that somebody on behalf of the people meet the President face to face and ask him what he's doing. Not in a hostile or challenging manner. But just to make his position clear.

Where a modern President forgoes the regular press conference—and I acknowledge it has many faults and is time-consuming and even irksome—you are apt to get a substitute; it's funny how all these metaphors run to hydraulics: government by *leak*, information by *seepage*, or let me call it *news-ooze*....

News by osmosis may be suc-

cessful for a while, but in time it produces, I believe, a credibility gap; the kind of gap which some think they see at present. Gen. Maxwell Taylor, presidential adviser, wants to mine Haiphong Harbor; we ought to be able to ask Mr. Johnson about it.

There are evidences that the President is of two minds about regular scheduled press conferences. On March 13 and on March 20 a year ago he promised “at least one press conference a month.”

Why hasn't he held them? In a celebrated interview not long ago Bill Moyers attacked the radio-TV press conference as a “circus,” “televised extravaganzas.” Well, for heaven's sake,

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**As every reporter knows, it is not the first question in a group interview that gets the answer, it is the second or third follow-up question. But with TV the question is asked, it is answered or evaded, and that's that. The reporter has had it.**

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who made them that way? Who brought television into the press conference? I believe TV does a superb job (and radio, too, of course). But I think television should be outlawed in three places, anyway—in the Supreme Court, in the nuptial bed, and in White House press conferences.

Actually I think the thing goes deeper than Bill Moyers' explanation. President Johnson, in my estimation, does very well at formal press conferences when he has held them.

It is my judgment that Mr. Johnson wants to hold control in his own hands. His ideal is a private audience with selected reporters where he can talk and they can listen, and nobody asks too many unexpected questions. It is a habit, an approach, an instinct that he cannot break. He discovered in the Senate that when he disclosed his views he limited his freedom of choice, and his opponents thwarted him. He is a very complicated man. He is divided

about the press: He affects to decry it, and reverences it; he patronizes it, and he writhes under it; he will overreact in an extraordinary way to woo some individual reporter.

Yet the President cannot leave it alone, what it is saying, what the polls are saying, what his rating is. Theoretically, I am sure, he has faith in the ultimate give-and-take of opinion in a free democracy, but he can't overcome a lifetime of trying to manipulate the scales in his favor.

And this brings me to my conclusion. A reporter in Washington can become a kind of dramatic critic to a tremendous show in which the President inevitably is the central character.

Woodrow Wilson was one of our greatest Presidents, yet he had a tragic flaw, his Calvinistic rigidity which betrayed him in the end. By making concessions he could have crowned his life by having us join the League of Nations. He couldn't. We didn't.

And now President Johnson. I believe he has in him a mighty yearning for success, and unquestionable elements of greatness, but there is a testiness, a secretiveness, a sensitivity about him all expressed in his unwillingness to accept the normal discipline of a formal press conference; a perfect tool for him to fill the credibility gap, if he were prepared to use it.

Well, the time may come when he will be glad to use it. ■

*Mr. Strout is Washington Correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor. This is an excerpt from the George Polk Memorial Lecture he delivered in New York.*

Summer 1981

## A Conversation With Fred Friendly

I've been asked to say something about Walter Lippmann. There would be no Niemans without him; I don't think American journalism would be as good as it is—and it's not as good as it ought to be—without him. I'll try to tell you what I think he contributed.

When Walter Lippmann was dying in a nursing home in New York, my wife (who is a schoolteacher) and I would visit him two or three times a week. Once I asked him, “What's wrong with this country; why doesn't it work?”

He answered, “We have lost our comity.”

I went to the dictionary and looked that up because it's not a word you hear very often. (It means social harmony.) Democracy only works when you have gentlemen and ladies, Lippmann felt.

Modern Americans have a kind of adversarial disease which, when controlled, works. When out of control, which I suggest it may be, we have battles between the First Amendment and the Sixth Amendment, battles between those who want to do something for poor people and those who want to do something about inflation. We've reached the point where there is such a lack of comity, to borrow from Lippmann, that the very thing we prize the most, the democratic system, may not be working.

And what's that got to do with journalism? Everything.

I'm so old I can remember when there was no such thing as radio. We lived on 110th Street in New York. In 1922 my father—I can remember because it was the year of the Dempsey-Carpentier fight—took me up Broadway, to right near where I teach now,

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and we bought the components to put together a crystal set. He held one earphone and I held the other, and we listened to Graham McNamee describe the fight. When I eventually met Graham McNamee, I asked him, “Gee, you seemed to understand that fight, but could you really describe everything you saw?”

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**But one thing I learned from all those people I used to work with—more from Murrow than from anybody else—is that a journalist is an explainer of complex issues, and you can’t explain something you don’t understand.**

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“No,” he said, “I made that up as we went along.”

That’s the way radio was at the beginning, and that’s not a joke. The way radio was and also the way television might have been, had it not been for the Murrows and the Cronkites and the Severeids and some other people who tried to make it serious. But one thing I learned from all those people I used to work with—more from Murrow than from anybody else—is that a journalist is an explainer of complex issues, and you can’t explain something you don’t understand.

Every time I read a news story that doesn’t work, or listen to the radio and it doesn’t tell me what I thought I was going to understand, if I analyze it—and too often I don’t—I’m aware it’s because the reporter doesn’t know what he or she is talking about. We live in a world that’s litigious, cantankerous, adversarial, full of journalists who love to use the word “controversy.” It’s almost a byword—if you have a weak story, you put the word “controversy” into it, and that hypes it. If you want to hype it more you say “very controversial.” But most of all you have journalists, like me, like you, explaining things they don’t understand, whether it’s El Salvador, productivity, what’s going on in Poland, or at Three Mile Island, or in South Africa. This is not because they

are venal or sloppy people. It’s because they are not given enough time and because journalism is, as Lippmann said, an underdeveloped profession. It is more developed now than ever before. Fellowships like this [Nieman] help. But we live in a world in which the gatekeepers, whether they be television producers or newspaper edi-

tors, don’t really have time to let people understand what they’re reporting. You have people writing about productivity who have no sense of understanding the problem of productivity in this country. They don’t know whether it is a problem of labor strife, of depression, of reform, of health benefits, or of management out of control.

When I was that young man, I used to laugh at a President named Calvin Coolidge, who said, “The business of America is business.” I thought that was a great joke.

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But that’s what it has all become—it happens to be true. Detroit is one of the great American stories—a tragic, horrendous story. How can reporters who have been trained to write who-where-why-what-when, and get-it-in, get-it-out, how can they possibly begin to explain anything as important as why Ruth Friendly buys a Honda be-

cause it is so much better made than the automobiles of the country that invented the automobile? That’s about as complicated a story as you can find, and the roots of it go all through our society. People say, “Let’s put tariffs on, that’ll fix it; let’s put a quota system on;” other people say just the opposite. And a journalist with a microphone and a camera, or a typewriter, or a pen, has to sit down and try to explain it.

The news is the biggest consumer item we have—more important than whether caffeine gives you cancer, more important than which automobile is the best import, more important than whether “x” food or “y” food is better, and yet the news media doesn’t report on itself at all—is offended at the very thought of it. Only a few newspapers have ombudsmen and women.

In between the time that Mr. Lippmann suggested to the President of Harvard University, James Conant, that there be a Nieman Fellowship program [and now], journalism has become a major industry, a major factor in America. We run the elections—you may not like that, but we do. Television and newspapers set the agenda. There was a day when, in smoke-filled rooms, politicians like Jim Farley and Al Smith decided who was going to run for Presi-

dent. We thought that was bad, so the reformers came in—yet most of the people who have been nominated in your adult lifetime have not been very good candidates.

Question: If we are setting the agenda—and a lot of people do not like the way the agenda was set by television and newspapers this past

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election—you've been in television management, how would you do it differently?

Answer: I don't think because we set the agenda that it's our job to run the country. That's not what I meant to say. What we do is focus attention. If you lived in New York, you would see attention focused on the Scarsdale murder by the greatest newspaper in the world. I was at a social occasion with the editor of that newspaper, and I said, "Abe, I've gotta admit that I read some of that stuff, but why is it such a big story?" He said, "Fred, I've gotta tell you—that's our kind of murder."

What I am talking about are not the micro-editing decisions, but why there is only 22 minutes of nightly news on the networks. That's almost obscene. To say to the American people, "We are now going to tell you the news," and

have the people in Providence, in San Antonio, in Louisville, say, "This man that I respect, this great news organization with 80 correspondents, one of the great news organizations in the world"—I'm talking about CBS—"is going to tell me the news, and therefore I'll know all about the news."

But in 22 minutes, all you can do is an index. People get up from the set and they say, "Now I know everything that's happening in El Salvador and Detroit and Poland and everywhere else"—they have not just been cheated, they have been cheated without knowing they've been cheated. There's no reason. You can't do the news in 22 minutes. The tragedy is most people think they are getting the news. So they say, "Well, I don't have to read a newspaper, certainly not an afternoon newspaper. I heard all the news; that man

said, 'That's the way it is,' so that must be the way it is."

But that isn't the way it is; it's a bunch of very good reporters running around Washington with cameras. You clock the nightly news and you'll find a lot of emphasis on Washington. Why do you think that is? Because Washington's important. Why else?

Cronkite and I have talked about this a lot; you do in television what you predict you're going to get. You can't start at four o'clock getting this story and get it on the air at seven o'clock at night. You can't. You can say it but you can't do it, so you make up a day book of where you can get your cameras.

If there's a war in Vietnam or El Salvador, you know you can get a picture out of there every day. You have 20 camera crews in Washington, and senators and congressmen say, "When would you like a hearing? We'll do a hearing on the environment whenever you want." McCarthy invented that. He'd say, "We're going to have a hearing, and we're going to have so-and-so, who's a Communist, there—what day do you want us to do it, Fred?" And up to a time we did it that way.

The people in Washington have learned to manipulate the news. El Salvador is a big story now, because it's a Washington story, and it's a way for a new administration to show that they're going to be tough. There's an El Salvador story every day on the news, because it's a story you can get your hands on. There's a White House story every day. There are eight or nine Washington stories every day, not



"...Murrow had the sense of curiosity that all journalists have to have, a need to understand something before he talked about it, and a marvelous ear for copy."—Friendly (left), with Edward R. Murrow. *Photo courtesy of CBS Photo Archives.*

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**When you read, it's not just a passive thing, you're working at it. All kinds of thoughts and ideas and dilemmas pounce through your mind and manufacture themselves into pictures in your head.... It can't be done when somebody says, 'Do it and wrap it up in a minute and a half,' which is what happens today.**

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because they're important but because they're there.

Question: Would you comment on Murrow and Cronkite?

Answer: Murrow and Cronkite—two different men. Cronkite got an honorary degree here at Harvard. With a sense of awe and almost embarrassment, he said to me, "You know, Anna Freud got an honorary degree, Professor so-and-so who won a Nobel got one, and yet when I stood up, there was a standing ovation. What's it all about?" he asked, without a tinge of false modesty.

I said, "You know what that's about."

He said, "You mean television?"

"No," I answered. "Not television. At a time when everybody has been lying—fathers, mothers, teachers, Presidents, governors, senators—you seemed to be telling them the truth night after night. They didn't like the truth, but they believed you at a time when they needed someone to believe."

Cronkite has a capacity to make people believe him. I hate it when people talk about his avuncular quality. I don't know how that ever started, but he's no more of a nice old man than Walter Lippmann was. He's a very smart man who understands his limitations and who thrives on explaining complex issues—the space program, the four dark days of the assassination. There's no way of explaining what he has contributed. In many countries during four such traumatic days there would have been a revolution. Television, which stayed on the air for four straight days, played a role. All the things that are wrong in that billion-dollar penny arcade paid off in those four days, and that's the tragedy of

television—at its best, it is so very good. But television can make so much money doing its worst that it can't afford to do its best.

Walter Lippmann couldn't do the nightly news, he couldn't. Just to get him to do an interview was hard. What Walter Lippmann was good at doing was understanding, and he would spend two-thirds of his time understanding an issue, and then he would sit in his study all morning and write or dictate his story.

Murrow was a completely different kind of person from Cronkite. He could not do the nightly news. When I read newsmagazines and they quote these two men, they're completely different characters with different strengths. Murrow did a nightly radio program which some of you remember, in which he read the headlines of the news for eight minutes and then he did a think piece, a news analysis, and he did that very well from about 1948 to 1959. But the two things he did best were the Battle of Britain and during the McCarthy period. And that's what I'd like to talk about in the little time that you can spend with me.

Murrow was not an intellectual in the academic sense of that word. He would tell you that. His father was a railroad engineer and he was born in Polecat Creek near Greensboro, North Carolina, and then moved to the Olympic Peninsula in Washington. He got on the radio by accident. He had originally gone to Europe as the head of the International Education Association that exchanged students from European countries—McCarthy eventually tried to use that against him. And he was later director of talks for CBS,

which meant that he would arrange for scientists and scholars to talk on the radio for 15 minutes on Sunday afternoons. Then World War II began. Suddenly, Murrow was on the air. He had a remarkable ear, and because he understood the grammar of broadcasting, he could write well. There was no tape in those days, in fact no tape throughout World War II. Everything had to be live. And Murrow had the sense of curiosity that all journalists have to have, a need to understand something before he talked about it, and a marvelous ear for copy.

I would play you two things if we had time. They show you the value of radio—still the best teacher of electronic journalism there is. One is the tube, the underground in London, during the blitz. Part of the problem was to make the American people understand what was at stake—that Western Europe was blowing up. Murrow in London was trying to explain this to the American people. How do you do that without hortative editorials that don't achieve anything? He didn't want to be a preacher. Murrow reporting from the London subways, which were air raid shelters. Switch to Murrow, live, 7:45 at night. "This is the underground near St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Listen..." And what you heard was children's feet running on a subway platform, air raid sirens going off, their special wail in time of war, ack-ack guns, and that was all. And Murrow just held the microphone there and said, "Listen to that orchestrated hell," and he let that run for three minutes, which would be almost unheard of today.

That was not just journalism, that was being in the transportation busi-

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ness. You could take 20 color cameras and put them in London, put them in that subway, put lights there, sound men there, all kinds of equipment, videotape, ENG, and you still could not, I submit, transport the American people to that war that way. Because there is something in the mind's eye that is the most graphic scene dresser there is, the best photographer there is: the imagination of the human being.

That's why reading is so important. When you read, it's not just a passive thing, you're working at it. All kinds of thoughts and ideas and dilemmas pounce through your mind and manufacture themselves into pictures in your head. That's what radio was able to do, when used well. It can't be done when somebody says, "Do it and wrap it up in a minute and a half," which is what happens today.

The British people will tell you that for all of Churchill's eloquence and the American vote for the draft, the American willingness to do something in Europe was as much the result of radio, and therefore Murrow, as was any other single force.

Another Murrow sequence: Buchenwald. I run it for my students; it's 24 minutes long. Did any of you ever work at a radio station? Ever hear one piece by one man or woman that runs for 24 minutes? Buchenwald is overwhelming. April, 1945—the day of Roosevelt's death, concurrent, accidental, related only in a certain sense. Murrow, then your age, countless bombing missions over Germany, hated the Germans, follows the Third Army into Buchenwald, sees what you know was seen there, was profoundly moved, depressed, angered. His anger was his greatest weapon, but he knew how to control it. He described people being piled up like cords of wood. No adjectives, I don't think I ever heard him use an adjective. People piled up like cords of wood, ten deep, and the smell. Without saying that he vomited, you knew that he had.

Murrow had been giving money to some people there when he met a leatherworker from Pilsen. And this man said, "You an American?"

"Yes."

"I am a leathermaker. I have been in this prison camp for five years." The man weighed 95 pounds. He said, "I haven't touched leather in six years, could I touch your wallet?"

Murrow described that better than I can. And he went on like that for 24 minutes. There is no way that any other reporter—not Lippmann, not Cronkite—could have done that. Walter Lippmann could have written about that but unfortunately he never saw the concentration camps. Cronkite could have explained it to you with words and pictures but he wouldn't have let himself become involved. But there was a quality in Murrow and intensity of purpose, a consciousness—he was an American conscience. Walter Cronkite was an American presence: present at the liftoff, present at the assassination, present when we laughed and cried, present when it happened. Lots of integrity. Walter Lippmann was an explainer, an analyst, detached, quiet, very carefully selecting what he did, and that's why there are such gaps in what he reported.

Murrow, who couldn't write nearly as well as Walter Lippmann and who could not ad lib in the same league with Cronkite, had an ability to transmit his intensity and his sense of caring that no other journalist in history, I suggest, has ever had, or will ever have. He was present when television was invented, when a half-hour of air time cost a sponsor some \$15,000. Today a one-minute announcement in prime time costs \$300,000 or \$400,000. But Murrow had a half-hour every Tuesday night.

I think Murrow, and those who worked with him, get too much credit for the McCarthy period. If Ed were here, he would tell you that we were a year late doing the McCarthy program. It was the only time in his whole life when he preached. We did six or seven programs about McCarthy and McCarthyism. It was my job to put the elements together and then he and I would write the script. If Joe Weshba or I did the first draft, he would rewrite it. But the night of the McCarthy pro-

gram I asked Ed to write the last four minutes—which turned out to be a scathing analysis and denunciation of McCarthy. After writing it, he said instinctively, "We'll offer him a half-hour of time next week." And McCarthy took it three weeks later. Murrow felt that if we tried to be too fair on this program it wouldn't work, and yet if we're not fair to him it's lousy journalism, so we gave him a half-hour. Bill Paley wanted it that way, too. The way it turned out—if you've never seen those two programs they're worth seeing back to back—the program in which McCarthy attacked Murrow was a bigger indictment of McCarthyism than the program that we did.

Those three characters—Murrow, Lippmann, Cronkite—have contributed more to journalism than any other three people I have been privileged to work with. There were others, perhaps as gifted, all different, and probably all sui generis. I don't think you'll see another Lippmann, I know you won't see another Murrow. The opportunity just won't be there, to have all the equipment, all the capacity, all the intellect, all the caring. I don't suppose you'll even see another Cronkite; that mold changes. But they're models, and they changed the profession, and they held the country together.... ■

*This text is taken from the transcript of comments made by Fred Friendly in a seminar with the Nieman class of 1981. Friendly, who is the Edward R. Murrow Professor of Journalism Emeritus at Columbia University, was Advisor on Communications at the Ford Foundation from 1964 to 1981 and was Producer of "See it Now" with Edward R. Murrow. The former head of CBS News, he is the author of "Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control: The Good Guys, the Bad Guys, and the First Amendment," and, most recently, "Minnesota Rag: The Dramatic Story of the Landmark Supreme Court Case That Gave New Meaning to Freedom of the Press."*



*Summer 1985*

# Media Power and the Dangers of Mass Information

The national media are no longer just observers and messengers, but are now lead actors in government.

BY MICHAEL J. O'NEILL

...For different reasons, both our elected leaders and most political scientists have been slow to see the crucial connection between mass communications and their laments about dying parties, fragmented power, and failing governmental institutions. Even a Washington veteran like Lloyd Cutler admits it came as “a distinct surprise” when he got into the White House and saw “how much television news had intruded into both the timing and the substance of policy decisions that an American President is required to make.”

“Television news,” he said, “now has a much greater effect on national policy decisions—especially foreign policy decisions—than print journalism has ever been able to achieve and more than most experienced observers realize.... Mastering the art of television presentation is now critical to governance.”

His underlying point—and the one I want to make—is that television is not just another page in media history, the son of radio, that requires some social notice but no significant institutional adjustment. It is an utterly unique phenomenon that is profoundly influencing everything we do—how we act, how we think, how we see the world, how we govern. It is altering and distorting our perceptions of reality and, together with computers, not only expanding knowledge but also changing its very nature.

So it is more urgent than ever before to address two questions which a prescient T.S. Eliot posed more than 50

years ago:

“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

“Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

Where indeed? Because we are confronted with a dangerous paradox—the fact that the greatest outpouring of new knowledge in all of human history is undermining the very wisdom it is supposed to serve. Mass information—hurled at us by powerful media, twisted into new forms by television and computers—is democratizing knowledge the way higher education was democratized after World War II. But it is also diminishing our capacity for the rational analysis and deliberative judgment on which public wisdom depends and on which effective government depends.

How is our knowledge being changed? How are our perceptions and our thinking processes being affected? In a number of ways:

First, television alters the prisms through which we see the world. The most distant events are swept inside our personal horizon, broadening our “affections,” to use Hamilton’s phrase, beyond family cultures—from the Super Bowl here to great human disasters in India or Ethiopia.

We no longer have to manufacture our own images out of aging words and older pictures. Real-time experiences are delivered into our living rooms, in pulsating color, so that we can share vicariously in the daily triumphs and tragedies of the human

race. The result is a new kind of knowledge that is existential and impressionistic, immediate and global, that artificially extends our human linkages and changes the mix of our personal responses. It is also an evanescent knowledge in which images flicker for only an instant on the mind’s screen and then disappear while other images crowd in.

Second, the very process of thinking and deciding is altered. In written communication, the words stand passive and still on the page, never moving. The imagination must work to convert them into individual versions of reality, and then the mind has to take over and reason its way toward conclusions and action. The progression is from words to reason, to conviction, to action.

In the case of television, on the other hand, movement, sound and color rush actual experiences directly to the senses, producing instant emotional reactions, as we saw after the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut. There is no need for verbal translation or rational interpretation. The process moves from image to impression, to emotional impulse, and then to action. Sensation and emotional intensity dominate. The reflection and reasoning, which verbal communication demands, are bypassed....

A third point about television’s effect is that it necessarily distorts knowledge because it must be centered on visual events—action that can be photographed and issues which can be both dramatized and simplified. It cannot deal with subtle, complex and abstract subjects that lie beyond the camera’s beady eye....

Fourth. Flashing television images mobilize popular feelings on a massive scale never seen before and with stunning speed. The historian Richard Wade believes Japan would have surrendered much sooner if our atom bomb test had been televised for the Japanese people. Scenes of Bull Connor’s swinging clubs applied the public prod that finally launched Kennedy toward civil rights reforms. Television helped to end the Vietnam War and to reverse

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administration policy in Lebanon. It instantly popularized the invasion of Grenada, making a laughing stock, by the way, out of a lot of carping television pundits who completely misjudged the American mood. As Jody Powell chortled later, “It was sometimes difficult to tell which the American people enjoyed more, seeing the President kick hell out of the Cubans or the press.”

When television is in its natural element, transmitting real events in real time, it can be superb. Very often, however, it has a disruptive effect, amassing emotions and generating demands for action that frequently run ahead of a government’s ability to respond as, for example, in the so-called “revolution of rising expectations.”

Fifth. Like television, but in a different way, computers are also changing the way knowledge is applied to public problems. One example is the pressure for concrete facts and quantifications. Another is the bias in favor of machine-storable data as opposed to abstractions and subjective analysis. Just as Leonardo da Vinci once sought mathematical formulas for human proportion, so man is now hugging his computers in hopes he can quantify all of human life. Reflection and reasoning are neglected....

A sixth and final note about television’s effect on our thinking is that the sheer volume of information overwhelms the brain’s capacity for absorption, selection and interpretation. The rat-a-tat-tat of the news shows—headlines and weather, weather and headlines...fires, murders and taxes...hijackings and nuclear talks. Everything is repeated endlessly, motion and image chopped into tiny pieces, like diced ham, but impossible to digest. Again, analysis and judgment are the victims....

These changes in the nature and uses of knowledge have enormous consequences, not only for public wisdom, in the theoretical sense, but for the practical business of making our democracy work. To begin with, television and the mass media have altered the basic relationship between the

people and their government by giving voters instant access to the same information being received by their elected representatives. This produces instant mass emotions, instant mass opinions, and then mass pressures which force policymakers to act without prior thought and against their private best judgment....

The national media are now no longer just observers and messengers but lead actors in government, creating, shaping and often distorting the informational base of decision-making, magnifying as well as reporting the conflicts of power, advocating, nagging and harassing as well as explaining. They are the targets of manipulation by every party to every issue, the objects of guile and deception, the victims of conflicting pressures, witting and unwitting participants in the management of crisis and in the formation of policy, both the collaborators and adversaries of government.

The ability of the press to mold public opinion is now so great that issues and events are often shaped as much to serve the medium’s needs as to promote the general welfare. Newsmakers modify their behavior, creating controversy on demand, turning away from debate and petition in favor of protest and demonstration. Manufactured issues and synthetic facts are created in profusion. They carom against reality, often displacing truth, in an endless contest for media impact and public favor....

“The most harmful effect of television news,” says Cutler, the insider who has been the most outspoken on the subject, “is its tendency to speed up the decision-making process on issues that television is featuring and to slow down and interrupt the process of deciding other important issues that get less television attention. Whatever urgent but less televised problem may be on the White House agenda on any given morning, it is often put aside to consider and respond to the latest television news bombshell in time for the next broadcast.”

The result, most often, is immediate, frenetic action rather than careful

thought or long-range planning. Policymaking is essentially reactive, specializing in fire control. It is not prospective, seeking out the causes of crises before they occur with the novel ambition of preventing at least some of the calamities which befall us. It is a system that invites the ambushes of history in which we are so frequently trapped....

What can be done about all this? Anyone who raises problems is supposed to have solutions. That is the American way....

Among other things, I would specifically recommend a new kind of journalism—“preventive journalism” as opposed to the popular investigative journalism—that would approach the world in a very different way from what the press does now. Instead of only describing the ruins that follow disaster, preventive journalism would search in advance for the hidden forces of change; it would try to identify the underlying causes of crises before, rather than after, they explode so that an alerted society might have time to protect itself from the ambushes of history. It is not enough for the media to provide the videotapes of war; they should also patrol ahead to uncover the hissing fuses.

This would require a different mindset and new techniques. It would mean looking deeply into societal trends on a sustained, long-term basis, so that the public can see and hear the grinding gears that precede the crises which the media eventually cover so fully. To their credit, The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times are doing some of this kind of reporting. But television and most newspapers are still dominated by an action-reaction mentality. And that is a worry.... ■

*Michael J. O’Neill, former President of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, gave the above annual Carlos McClatchy Memorial Lecture, sponsored by Stanford University’s Department of Communication. Mr. O’Neill was Editor of the New York Daily News from 1975 to 1982; he has been a journalist for 30 years.*

Spring 1994

# A New Agenda for Journalism

## A Call for Action to Stake Out the Role of News in the Emerging Technological World

By Katherine Fulton

**H**ow can a news company survive and prosper, given the current communications free-for-all? What's the right choice? Anybody who claims to know for sure is either a fool or a salesman. To judge from the announcements of new divisions, mergers and experiments, every company involved in journalism is suddenly searching for the answer.

Unfortunately, it may not be the right question.

Certainly the convergence of technological and market forces in the late 20th Century has created a historic turning point for journalism in this country. But newspaper publishers, editors, reporters and broadcasters tend to frame the problem solely in the most narrow economic terms—how can my company grab a piece of the action?

Early in this century, newspaper journalists dominated the flow of information in their communities. News, raw data, advertising messages, communication to and among the citizens—newspapers were in the business of publishing them all, and the distinctions were not particularly important. They were all part of the same manufactured product. A journalist, meanwhile, was a person who had access to an audience through this one-way mass distribution system.

This world has virtually disappeared, of course, as control has passed to audiences and advertisers. Local journalists no longer monopolize the megaphone. New competitors proliferate, exploding the old newspaper business into many parts. News has become a commodity, available from CNN 24 hours a day. Computer-based on-line

systems deliver raw data on demand. Television, radio, print niche competitors and the Post Office have segmented the advertising market. Citizens can talk back on radio call-in shows and on-line systems—when the plentiful entertainment and leisure options don't drown out all public discourse. In the age of "America's Funniest Home Videos" (not to mention the video that eventually caused Los Angeles to erupt), just who is a journalist and who is a publisher is up for grabs.

We've hardly begun to adapt to these changes. Now comes the interactive, multimedia world—in some as-yet-to-be-determined form. When newspaper publishers haven't been tossing and turning in the night, they've been busy exploring personal communications, entertainment and transactional services—the products expected to drive change in the new communications environment. Or they're taking old forms and formats and retrofitting them for use on line, trying to adapt the strengths of an old medium to a new medium no one yet understands. As anyone who has studied the media will tell you, that won't be enough.

But what will be enough? Nothing less than re-imagining what it means to be a journalist in a democratic society, with these new tools at our disposal. Journalism companies won't have a future (at least as journalism companies) unless journalism itself has a future. Who, what, when, where, why and how are the urgent ethical and practical questions we need to ask about journalism itself.

Given the new technological and economic realities, when will journalists get in the way of democracy, and

when will we be essential to it? What are the new opportunities for journalists to connect with citizens and citizens with their governments? Who is a journalist and what is journalism, in a world where data, information and raw video will be plentiful and where everyone with access to a computer and a telephone will own their own press? What will make professional journalism valuable?

These are the sorts of fundamental questions anyone concerned about journalism's survival needs to ask. The industries driving the changes in the new communications systems—telephone and cable TV companies, computer and entertainment companies—aren't going to ask these questions, let alone answer them. The business sides of newspaper and broadcasting companies may not ask them, because they don't obviously relate to the short-term bottom line. Indeed, the business people—for all the hype surrounding their decisions—are often as clueless as the rest of us. I sometimes wonder whether the frenzy of media mergers has been fueled by the search for a partner who understands what the hell is going on.

Journalists, therefore, have got to get a whole lot more sophisticated about understanding what's going on and what it means—to journalism, to the political system, to the public, and to the old and new businesses that sell journalism under the protection of the First Amendment. Then we've got to ask ourselves what we need to accept and what we need to do, before it's too late.

Here are some ideas about where to start, individually and collectively.

1. Launch a massive technological literacy campaign for journalists.

We're making progress here. Many individual journalists are teaching themselves, and organizations such as Investigative Reporters and Editors are providing better and better training opportunities. Recent Pulitzer Prizes have showcased the difference computer-assisted reporting can make.

Still, given that personal computers

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have already been around for more than a decade, it's shameful how slowly we're still moving to take advantage of the new tools for reporting, thinking, communicating and telling stories. The nation's newsrooms are full of reporters and editors who have no idea how to mine the vast resources of the on-line world—much less how to prepare themselves to produce journalism for interactive, multimedia formats. It's as though a whole generation of journalists and journalism educators secretly believe that they'll be able to retire before having to relearn their jobs.

For their part, many publishers talk a good game about the central importance of the information franchise, arguing that substance and content—not delivery systems—will drive the future. That's good news for journalists. Yet the big investments go into new delivery systems and mergers, rather than into the hiring, training and equipping of the people who gather information.

We can do better, much better. And we must, before our ignorance kills us. The communications marketplace is already full of information providers who spotted the new opportunities traditional journalism companies have missed. Nexis and CNN spring immediately to mind.

People at the top of the profession, in a position to negotiate for resources, need to provide more aggressive leadership, inspiring their colleagues and their companies to adapt old values to new realities. Reporters and editors need to be given time and the equipment to learn new skills and imagine how to do their jobs better. Newsrooms need to be energized by the possibilities, not immobilized by fear.

Proposed innovations need to be funded and rewarded as experiments that will increase the learning curve.

We also need to insist that the journalism schools train their students for the future, not the past. Nobody should graduate from a journalism school now

without sophisticated computer skills, a broad introduction to working in various media, and the understanding that their jobs may require them to work well in teams.

Journalists in the future will be asked to perform new functions, in new jobs, in new market niches. Will we be ready?

2. Educate ourselves about the ethical, economic and political issues surrounding the “information highway”—and cover them aggressively.

The hype about any new technology always races ahead of serious questions about the moral and social implications. Certainly that has been the case so far about the multimedia, inter-

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**[N]ewspaper publishers...are taking old forms and formats and retrofitting them for use on line, trying to adapt the strengths of an old medium to a new medium no one yet understands. As anyone who has studied the media will tell you, that won't be enough.**

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active future, which has been covered in the mainstream press as a business story, a feature story, and a subject for grumpy Luddite columnists. This failure is due, in part, to the ignorance just discussed, not only of technology but of history as well. Important technology stories are waiting to be discovered in the schools, museums, libraries, hospitals and governments. But too many reporters and their editors don't know where to look or what questions to ask.

The restructuring of the communications system is an enormous story. So far, the agenda has been shaped by the big industries most affected, especially telephones and cable television. The nation's press could do a big service by helping frame the debate in broader terms—not as a business story, but as a public policy story that will

affect every citizen for decades to come. If access to the information highway will mean access to the democratic system, as many experts believe, what protections need to be built-in to make sure that no one is left out, that not just the elite benefit?

Educating ourselves about these changes will have an important side effect: a deeper understanding of the stakes for journalism. If huge, new companies are allowed to control both the conduits and the content that moves through them, what are the dangers? If the system develops as pay-per-view, what are the implications for news programming?

These are urgent questions in a year when major communications reform bills are moving through Congress.

3. Make the case that journalism is worth saving—then sell it to the public.

Technology and economics aren't the only challenges we face. Indeed, one might argue they aren't even the greatest ones. Our own performance has led to a deepening credibility problem, which in turn feeds the desire some people have to bypass main-

stream journalism and search for other information sources.

We're arrogant, we're ignorant, we're destructive. If citizens are disengaged from politics, our cynicism is partly to blame. This litany from critics inside and outside the profession is familiar—and mostly ignored in the nation's newsrooms.

It's not just that journalists failed to report well on such major stories as the S&L crisis and the massive redistribution of wealth that took place during the 1980's. The problem extends deeply into the journalistic norms that favor drama, conflict, celebrity and toughness when it comes to defining news.

“The blunt truth is that tinkering and half-measures will no longer do the trick,” Washington Post media writer Howard Kurtz said in his book “Media Circus.” “There is a cancer eat-

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ing away at the newspaper business—the cancer of boredom, superficiality, and irrelevance—and radical surgery is needed.”

Novelist Michael Crichton went further in his speech last year to the National Press Club, labeling us dinosaurs whose ingrained habits for gathering and reporting the news are little more than “a way to conceal institutional incompetence.” Our product, he said, is “flashy but it’s basically junk. So people have begun to stop buying it.”

People also don’t understand why good journalism matters. Public support for government censorship during the Gulf War dramatically illustrated how few citizens understand the difference between propaganda and independent reporting, and therefore the need for a skilled, free press. The popularity of tabloid TV shows deepens the problem, especially when mainstream reporters start behaving like infotainers, promoting every Tonya Harding story into a major international event.

In short, we do not really know how many publics there are. If that is true now, imagine the problems journalism will face in the new world. Who will be our publics? How many are there? What information will they want? In what form? How will they want to get information? When and how often will they want the information? How can we serve such a fragmented market? We cannot decide what we will do until we understand the needs and desires of the segments that make up the market.

If professional journalism is to survive, professional journalists have to be willing to be as tough on ourselves as we routinely are on others. And we need to understand that there’s nothing sacred about *how* we’ve defined our jobs in the past—which is where the new technologies and economics may provide us with an opportunity.

It is easy to imagine a future in which the newspaper won’t be dropped on the front porch. The “newspaper” can become the community’s front

porch. New technologies will make it possible for people to gather, to gossip, to debate, to play a game together, because the “newspaper” has made it possible for them to find each other. Journalists will sit on the porch, too, telling their stories and listening to people’s reactions. Just behind the front porch, through the front door, will lie the world of information and ideas and people. The “newspaper” will help anyone who walks through in search of a fact or a service, whether they’re looking for the most minute detail about the local sandlot league or about desert sands half a planet away.

In this future, journalists can more often be perceived as raconteurs and

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**But what will be enough? Nothing less than re-imagining what it means to be a journalist in a democratic society, with these new tools at our disposal.**

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bridge builders and researchers, not just cynical public prosecutors. Indeed, electronic mail and “real time” forums are already making new relationships with audiences possible.

So we can and should make the case that journalism is worth saving by improving our performance and reaching out to readers and viewers. But we should consider finding other ways of reaching out as well.

We might call for a new Hutchins Commission report for the 21st Century—a blue-ribbon panel of respected Americans who can study the purposes and performance of the press. This group may be precisely the place to sort out the whos, whats, whens, wheres, hows and whys of responsible 21st Century journalism. The commission could, for instance, study the democratic functions of town hall meetings, talk shows, electronic interest groups, and investigative reporting. Facing the future may well mean coming to terms with when journalists aren’t needed, as well as when we are.

Or, as Bill Kovach, the Nieman Foundation Curator, has suggested, journalists might get involved in popular culture, creating scripts and series that tell the story of real journalists doing their jobs.

Whatever the strategy, we’ve got to find some high-profile ways to argue that raw data and video, uploaded and downloaded in every home, can’t substitute entirely for professional journalism in a free society.

4. Advocate for, support and pay attention to serious intellectual work that could have an impact on public interest journalism, including the boldest experiments, no matter who is funding them.

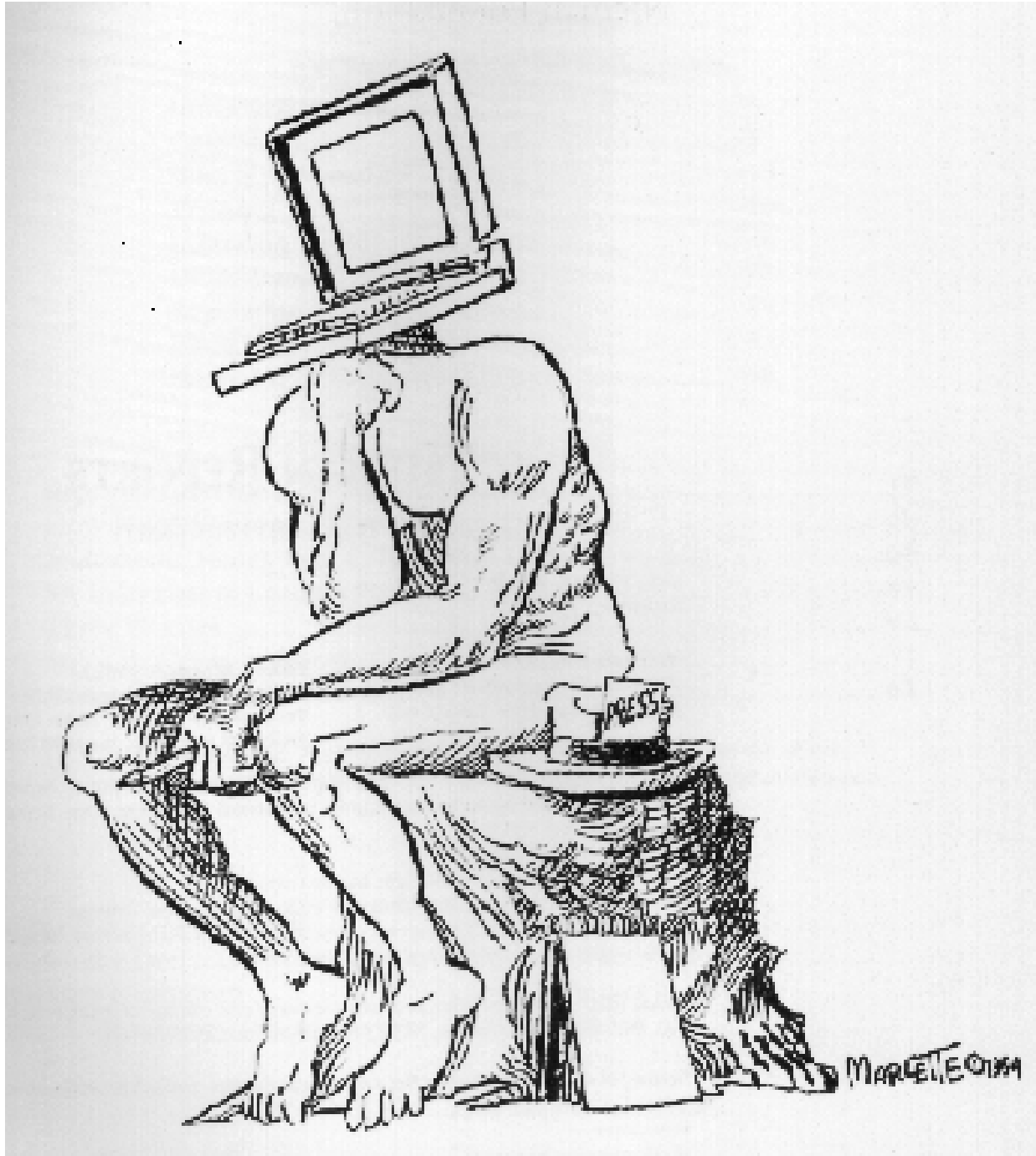
If our job is to help educate the public, we do it, too often, blind. How do ideas spread? Why do some stories have impact and others die? How do people learn from media? What do they retain and what do they forget? What’s the role of fun, and aesthetics, and the ability to talk back? What kinds of stories are best told in print, which in video?

We can’t afford to guess about questions like these. Serious corporate thinking is going on about interactive video advertising messages, sophisticated new computer games, new computer agents to do our information retrieval for us, and lord knows what else. A few journalistic pioneers are out there experimenting with and promoting new ways of getting citizens involved in community dialogues. But we need more high-profile and intellectually rigorous efforts to look at the kind of communication a democracy needs—and how indeed it might need to be marketed.

Listen to this description of the kind of research going on at Xerox’s research facility in California: The head of the facility “envisions a new, dynamic ecology of communications—rather than a static architecture of information.”

That’s just the sort of sophistication we need about news and communica-

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*Cartoon courtesy of Doug Marlette.*

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tion in a political system. We may get some of it from MIT's Media Lab, where investigators are exploring the possibility that news could become a service integrated into your life, rather than a product you retrieve.

So far, the high-profile redefinitions of journalism—The Orange County Register and Boca Raton News, for instance—have advocated viewing readers as customers who need to be given what they want. That's an important antidote to top-down high-mindedness. But it may not go far enough. Maybe, as Tufts' political scientist Russell Neuman has suggested, we need to start over and ask, what is journalism that serves the people—and how can we fund it?

Since that sort of big project is unlikely to be supported coherently by an industry that has always lacked serious R&D, independent researchers and journalists will probably have to assemble the pieces on their own, by studying bulletin board systems, 24-hour local cable news channels, the computer industry's R&D, the first interactive television experiments, and much more. We need to be open to learning from innovators, whenever and wherever we find them, inside or outside journalism, inside or outside Big Media-funded projects.

Will the bulletin board systems really make newsrooms more accountable? What kinds of public dialogues work best on line? When is it a good idea for reporters to carry video cams, as we carry tape recorders now, and when is it really a bad idea? What can we learn from the newspapers-on-TV experiments in Chicago and Philadelphia? Will Xerox show how new communication systems can change human relationships? Will the alternative press and specialized magazines show the way, as they so often have during the last 30 years? Should frenets be absorbed by local news on-line systems, or should certain kinds of public information be protected from proprietary commercial interests?

These are the sorts of questions we need to study, while remaining open to the surprising answers we may find.

Certainly the early newspaper-funded video text experiments hinted that personal communication, rather than data retrieval, is central to the new on-line cultures. That's a message that might have set newspapers on a different course much earlier—if they had heeded it.

In short, we need to unlock our imaginations, deepen our knowledge, learn to see the intellectual box we're sitting in. We need to get beyond what University of North Carolina Professor Donald Shaw has called "analog thinking in a digital world."

5. Consider whether we need a new advocacy organization for journalists.

Do any of the existing organizations have the muscle and the vision to redefine journalism? Maybe. Or do we need to make a fresh beginning, as the newspaper publishers recently did? New York University Professor Jay Rosen has suggested a Union of Democratic Journalists, dedicated to re-imagining the purposes of the profession.

Journalists, I believe, need to carefully differentiate the stakes we must defend from the stakes of our employers—or even the fate of the particular medium we have preferred to work in so far. The corporate identities and product lines of our employers will change. The media are all going to blend together.

We need to understand that what we have in common is far more important than what separates us, whether we practice our journalism as mainstream reporters, book writers, independent documentary filmmakers, magazine editors, public radio correspondents, television magazine producers, or alternative press columnists. Powerful forces are arrayed in opposition to the quality journalism and dissenting voices a democracy needs.

So we don't need an agenda for newspapers, or television, or radio—how to save them, how to improve them. We need a new agenda for journalism and perhaps an organization to help us move beyond our lone hero culture.

Such an organization could advo-

cate for the ideas already mentioned on this agenda. It could certainly facilitate communication about innovation. And it could help explore new ways to finance public interest journalism.

The current regulatory fight over the shape of the new communications system is a good place to start. Journalists need to consider joining with librarians, public educators, and public interest groups in lobbying over access and pricing issues. Along with these groups, we have an interest in keeping public information free or cheap, and access open to small competitors, such as journalists who may want to open their own shops. Our employers may well have an understandable interest in protecting their investments by limiting access and charging high prices for easy access to large databases.

Then there are the coming battles over intellectual property. Again, journalists may need to part ways with our employers. We will have an interest in preserving the most open intellectual marketplace possible, where those who generate knowledge can make sure potential readers get access to it and authors get compensated fairly for repeated on-line uses.

In other words, journalists have to find new ways to work together because the huge once-in-a-lifetime story we need to react to, to mobilize our resources for, is journalism itself.

So there you have it—an attempt to address some of the opportunities and threats before us. We need to help each other learn and act. After all, when it comes to facing this complex future, there's really only one ethical stance for committed journalists: tough-minded hope. ■

*Katherine Fulton, Founding Editor of the North Carolina Independent and a 1993 Nieman Fellow, is teaching courses on media technology and women and leadership at Duke University's Sanford Institute of Public Policy. She would like to thank current and former Nieman Fellows Melanie Sill, Katherine King, Francis Pisani and Phil Meyer for their contributions to this piece.*



A photographers' poker game at the Halsman Studio, New York, in the early 1950's. Gjon Mili is sitting in the white chair. Clockwise from him: Dmitri Kessel, Robert Capa, Pepi Martis, Philippe Halsman, and Cornell Capa. Photo © *Yvonne Halsman, used courtesy of the Halsman Archives.*



October 1952

# Does Press Freedom Include Photography?

Consider the record of smashed cameras and the arbitrary barring of news photographers.

BY JOSEPH COSTA

The proper dissemination of news by a free press is not accomplished solely by the printed word. There is a visual record, too, that must be transmitted to do the complete job. The object of this complete job, of course, is the informed public on which our democracy stands.

Our American public gets as much of its news through pictures as it does through the printed word, that is, when it is permitted to see photographs of newsworthy happenings.

Freedom of the press implies exemption from censorship and the right of all persons to publish what seems to be in the public interest, providing, of course, they do not violate the various laws of libel, treason and sedition. And yet, insofar as pictures in the news are concerned, we have anything but a free press.

Admittedly, this is a biased report—biased in favor of complete freedom of information so that the public may not only read about events, but also see for themselves—biased because the writer has lived through 32 years of news photography and has seen attempts at censorship of news pictures by individuals in every walk of life.

The censorship of photographic news starts with our courts and the American Bar Association and goes right

down to U.S. Marshals and the Department of Justice, firemen, policemen, private citizens, industry, labor union members, etc. These and many more act the role of self-appointed censors at the source of the news in trying to determine what news the public shall or shall not get.

There is hardly an organized group, whether it concerns industry or labor,

professional or amateur, that doesn't think of pictures and the press photographer when trying to promote campaigns in which their own interests are involved. Yet scarcely a week goes by without physical attacks on press photographers peacefully engaged in covering their news assignments in the public interest.

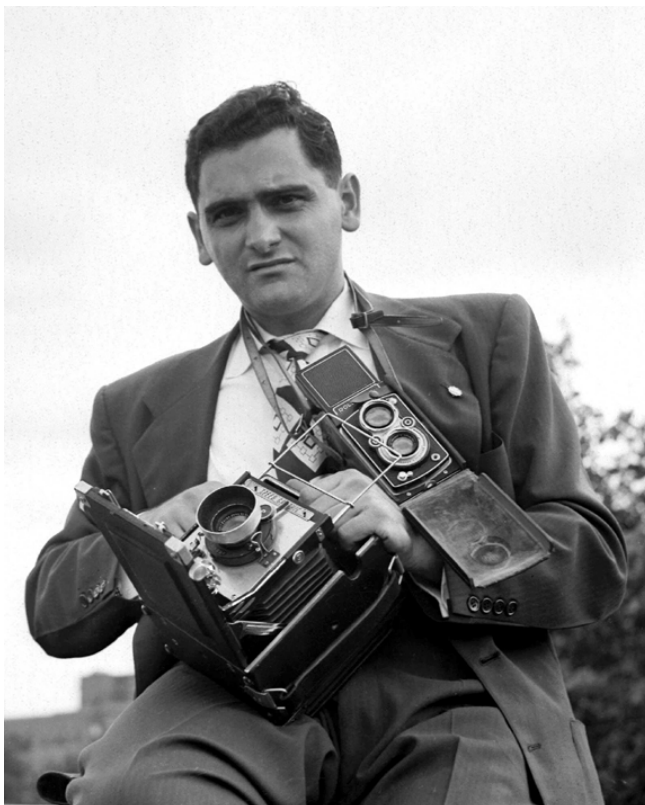
As a social instrument which serves the public so well in providing visual information, it is subjected to more abuse and restrictions than any other legitimate field of endeavor known to this writer.

Press photography is hampered in the courts because of the archaic thinking of some of the most powerful leaders in legal circles, individuals whose thinking is still in the horse and buggy era. The American Bar Association and the entire legal profession, which is supposed to protect the interests of the people, has adopted a canon of judicial ethics which states arbitrarily that the taking of pictures is "calculated to detract from the essential dignity of the proceedings, degrade the court, and create misconceptions with respect thereto in the mind of the public and should not be permitted."

Many judges and lawmakers disagree with this fallacious line of reasoning, not based on facts. They feel that news photography in the courtrooms would bring to the American public more accurate reports of the tribunals, but few of these dare to oppose the old die-hards by publicly favoring press photography.

Originally there was good reason for banning pictures in courtrooms. Large bulky cameras, flash powder which went off like a miniature atom bomb, tripods, etc. etc. made this prohibition necessary.

As Max Ehrlich, a prominent New York attorney, in discussing this problem pointed out to the Brooklyn Bar Association, "When the reason for a law per-



Photographer A. Stanley Tretick in 1952. At the Republican Convention that year, Tretick was punched when he tried to take a picture of a delegate who fainted. *Photo courtesy of The Associated Press.*

ishes, the law itself perishes.”

Today, because of technological advancements in photography, pictures can be taken in any courtroom in the land by means of the existing light only and with cameras so small as to be relatively as inconspicuous as are the reporters taking notes.

“When the reason for a law perishes, the law itself perishes.”

Mr. Ehrlich was quoting the famed Mr. Justice Benjamin N. Cardozo in “The Nature of the Judicial Process,” who said, “I think that when a rule, after it has been duly tested by experience, has been found to be inconsistent with the sense of justice or with the social welfare, there should be less hesitation in frank avowal and full abandonment.” Yet it is those who guide this same legal profession today who refuse to see the logic of this forthright thinking.

Back in 1928 the writer had the good fortune to make a picture, unknown to the subjects therein, which showed the chief defense attorney in a sensational murder trial lunching with the forelady of the jury at the courthouse sandwich bar. As a result, the judge excused the juror from service in the particular trial. That picture was a great service to both the court and the taxpayers. Had the relationship between the chief defense attorney and the forelady been discovered after the trial was finished or after it was well underway, it could easily have necessitated a retrial. This would have meant many additional thousands of dollars expense to the taxpayers.

Although news photography had performed a great service to the court and it had been convincingly demonstrated that pictures could be taken in existing light, without distraction to the subjects or their even being aware of the camera's presence, the judge refused to permit coverage of the trial by press photographers....

Press photographers are the victims of physical attacks almost daily, but what do you think of a fire department

which turns its hoses away from a burning building in order to douse the photographers who are taking pictures of the fire and of the efforts to extinguish it? Impossible you say? Well according to the Lexington (KY) Herald, this actually happened and quite recently, too. On orders of Fire Chief Frank Dillon, members of the Fayette County, Kentucky, Fire Department, turned their hoses away from a burning structure and directed them onto Lexington Herald photographers covering the fire.

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**...scarcely a week goes by without physical attacks on press photographers peacefully engaged in covering their news assignments in the public interest.**

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Attacks of one kind or another are growing in number. They are inflicted by self-appointed censors at the source in every part of the country. This has been going on almost unchallenged for years and lately has shown a great increase. Most of these attacks result because every Tom, Dick and Harry seems to think that he can push around news cameramen engaged in doing their legitimate task and get away with it. Unfortunately, in many cases, that is exactly what happens.

Let me cite some of the recent cases that have been brought to the attention of the National Press Photographers Association [NPPA]:

A story in the Tulsa (OK) Tribune told how Royce Craig, staff photographer, was slugged in the face by Police Lieutenant Arthur Graves, while Graves held Craig defenseless by shoving his service revolver in Craig's stomach. The assault took place in a federal building corridor after the photographer had taken a picture of Lieutenant Graves outside the courtroom....

In Borger, Texas, a deputy sheriff confiscated the camera of a staff photographer of the Borger News-Herald,

who was taking pictures of the crash of an obsolete Navy Bearcat fighter on a public highway. The deputy sheriff said he did it on “orders” of a Navy commander who was executive officer at a nearby Navy base. The Navy commander explained that he wanted to avoid “bad publicity” for the Navy. As a result of a protest from the NPPA, the Navy policy on the photographing and publicizing of Navy activities was made clear by Admiral R. F. Hickey, the Navy's Public Information Chief at Washington. In a letter to the NPPA, Admiral

Hickey said: “The Navy's policy with regard to photography and other public information coverage of any event, *accidents included*, is to cooperate to the fullest extent. This is true when the incident occurs inside a naval establishment. In the Borger incident...there was no reason at all why full coverage was not appropriate,

and it appears to me that one of our field personnel did not appreciate what would or would not start ‘*bad Navy publicity*.’ I have found that giving honest facts is the best procedure.”

The Navy recognizes the public's right to see and be informed, but that recognition and apology did not fill the blank 3-column rectangle, which the Borger News-Herald ran on its front page in lieu of the suppressed photograph....

One of the most unpardonable attacks on a photographer took place at the recent Republican National Convention. Stanley Tretick, United Press photographer, nursed a bruised ear as a result of the slugging he received when he tried to take a picture of a delegate who had fainted. Photographer Tretick was covering the floor of the convention, and he was wearing the credentials issued by the Convention Committee, which authorized him to take pictures of goings on during the sessions. Photographs of the slugging were published in papers across the country.

Surely not even politicians can expect to stage a national “circus,” issue

credentials to the legitimate members of the press, and then permit delegates to attack photographers performing their assigned duties. Despite the fact that the published photographs very clearly showed one individual with fist raised as he was striking the photographer, while another individual had his arms locked around him, no effort has been made by the Republican National Committee to have these two would-be "censors" reprimanded for their attack on Tretick, nor has the press association taken any legal action against the culprit to protect its own photographer....

Every single attack on a working newspaperman, who is conscientiously and properly covering the story to which he is assigned, is in effect censorship at the source and is an attack on freedom of the press, as well as the civil rights of the photographer or reporter.

Several editors have already recognized this fact and publicly expressed their views in their editorial columns. It would be helpful if more editors took vigorous action in their news columns and in the courts when circumstances indicate such procedure to be proper.

The Pawtucket Times said editorially after an attack on its photographer, "Civil rights supposedly guaranteed to every American went out the window when a Times' photographer was assaulted recently. Looking at it as a *suppression of the freedom of the press*—which it was—might mean missing the really personal side of the unprovoked attack." The editorial closed with these words: "The work of these men, in keeping the public alert to what is going on, should not be made any harder. They don't ask special treatment. They ought to be able to expect common courtesy and assurance against lawless assault."

In contrast to this, the Atlanta Constitution, whose photographer was attacked and his camera smashed, did not even reply to a letter when it was urged by the National Press Photographers Association to prosecute to the limit of the law "both for the protection

of their own personnel who were attacked in the line of duty, and in the public interest."

Generally speaking, the press appears largely to overlook the cumulative effect of these many personal attacks on its photographers and reporters, as they go about their assigned tasks. Although these attacks are spontaneous and completely unorganized, they constitute a continuing threat to freedom of the press....

As social instruments, news pictures have been responsible for the speeding up of many social reforms which we enjoy today. Whether they be new rules for mine safety, safety on the high seas or on the highways, they were hastened into being by dramatic photographs of bad conditions that were responsible for the disasters.

Slum clearance projects have been hastened by pictures informing the public about the actual condition. Every social effort of modern civilization is helped by the judicious use of news photographs which reveal to the public the conditions that need correcting.

The terror of war has never been brought to the attention of the people with greater impact than was the case in World War II and in the current Korean conflict because of pictures.

Whether it is the bedlam of a political convention; the daily street scene; the glamour, pathos and tragedy of everyday life, or the horror of that worst of all killers, the traffic accident on America's highways, press photography brings it to us in a manner which everyone—the literate and illiterate—can readily understand. ■

*Joseph Costa, of King Features Syndicate, is Chairman of the Board of the National Press Photographers Association. In his 32 years of photographic journalism he has seen too many cameras smashed and too many arbitrary instances of preventing the picture record to which the public is entitled.*

Autumn 1974

## Words on Pictures

BY STEVE NORTHUP

The media—and in particular newspapers—are taken to task by Edwin Newman in the October [1974] issue of *The Atlantic* for appropriating words and phrases, overusing, abusing and, finally, sucking them dry. With this premise in mind, let's proceed to the word "photography." Its derivation and direct translation read: "to write with light." Let's look at the light writings that appear in our daily newspapers. Same, same. Thus, it is not only words that grow stale, and even though photography has made great advances in the last 20 years, very little progress is manifested in our daily pictorial journalism. To be sure, there are papers where great concern is given to the visual; but by and large, the guy who pays his 15 cents is getting visually shortchanged.

My purpose is to try to express some of my understanding of that shortchanging and, more importantly, to try to start a dialogue in these pages in the issues to come about our daily use of pictures.

To start with, in most city rooms photographers are second-class citizens. Until recently their pay was less and their chances for advancement up the managerial chain minimal. This is true not only in the smaller papers, but in the nation's major dailies as well. Only in the past five years has the chief visual voice at *The Washington Post* been an assistant managing editor.

Most papers have one or more reporters who are called upon to travel with some regularity, but this fails to carry over to the photographers' assignments. Again, I cite the *Post*: A few years back Bill Greider was sent out

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around the nation to do an Indian roundup—the social, economic, cultural state of the first Americans. Not only was no photographer assigned, but no word of the project ever reached the department head until it was well under way. In the case of *The New York Times*, seven times that newspaper has sent reporters to China, but not once has it thought enough of its readers' visual interest to send along a photographer. Our readers deserve better.

This discrimination starts early. Even the prestigious Columbia Graduate School of Journalism omits mention of pictures in its course offerings. The only reference to their use and importance is contained in one line which suggests the desirability of “experience in still photography”—no courses.

Now all these horror stories aren't caused by meanness of spirit or tight-

ness of purse. I submit that these and the other daily visual atrocities the reader suffers are perpetuated by lack of understanding, interest and imagination. For we are, in fact, talking about two different disciplines within the media.

The huge majority of managing editors and city editors and page editors are word people. Perhaps it should be so as by training, by experience, by desire and inclination, they have been educated to think in terms of print. Writers can ponder subtleties of meaning, word roots, and sentence structure while the poised pen or the silent typewriter waits.

Photographers, on the other hand, work in what we'll call “real time,” a world of images speeding by, constantly changing. Tools for this profession demand action—fast. A camera is an

extension of eyes, ears, hands, heart—and the photographer is confronted every day with a thousand choices of “the moment,” all irrevocable. He or she must decide exactly which of these images will best explain all those other images, their cause and importance. A person daydreaming, or in the john, or just asleep at the switch when that best instant whizzes by, is out of luck. In this side of the business, there are no fill-ins from buddies—everyone “sees” in a private way. This is the primary difference between word people and picture people.

But there are other contrasts: To fully do his (from now on I'm going to use “his;” I'm not sexist, and some of the best work in the field was and is done by women, but men far outnumber them) job, then, the photographer must look beyond the words being



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spoken. There is a whole nuance of body language and facial expression. Relative position can tell whole stories in the picture of several persons. Sometimes a picture from the back, or simply a close-up of a man's hands, will tell more than words ever could.

Writers and photographers use different inputs, of course, to arrive at the same point to tell or amplify the identical story or moment. Most editors have had their only photographic experience in college, where they spent a semester or two learning how to return with a recognizable image; for others, it may have been a stint on a small paper where they had to make their own pictures, but since then—nothing. As a result, and when one thinks of light as a language, our profession suffers from a terrible rate of visual illiteracy. We are assigning pic-

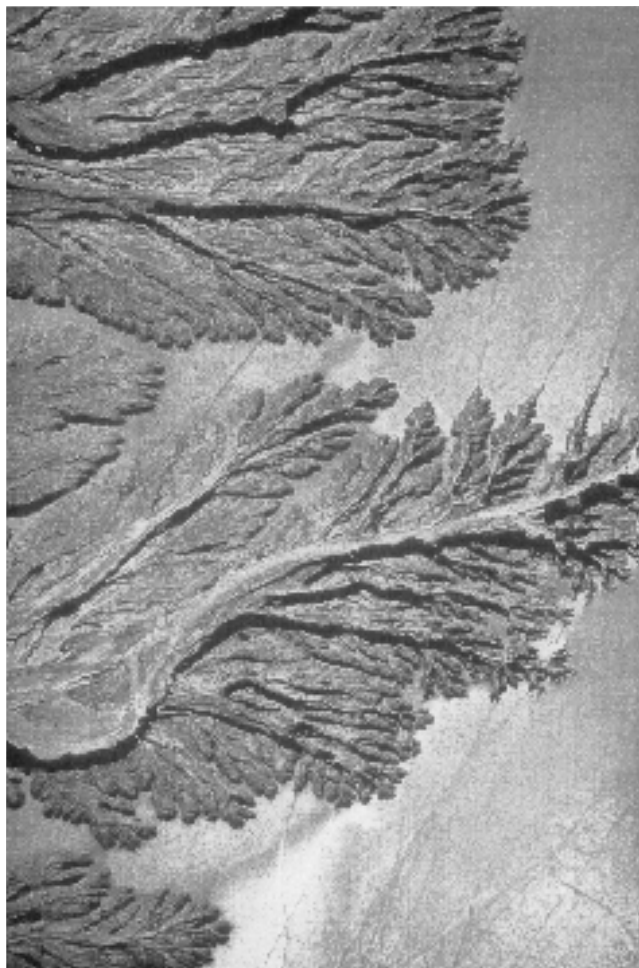
tures that were out of date even when they were invented, at a time when television is making great visual inroads. What is the image of your community reflected in your pictures? If you cut out the photos in your daily paper for a month and showed them to local residents, would they be able to recognize the town? How much news—and how much accuracy—would that stack of clips convey?

Much is said these days about newspapers becoming daily magazines in order to compete better for the readers' attention and interest. For photographers, this is a welcome move, as in most cases it is coupled (in the individual papers) to a clearing of the front pages of each section, opening up a variety of space for picture play. Variety is the operative word. The growing spread of op-ed pages is a welcome

sign of space available. Like most photographers, I'm pretty much satisfied with the amount of space allotted to photographs. Rather, it is their form and content that bother me.

About that content: Ask any photographer on any publication for his main gripe and you'll hear, "They never run the good stuff." All too often he's right. In the big year-end photojournalism contests only about 20 percent of each year's winners have ever seen the light of day. Now there's something wrong here. Too many good pictures are getting away because of lack of visual incentive and poor editorial judgment.

There is another side to this situation as well—assignments. Try this little experiment: Look through a week's worth of papers—not only yours, but those you have access to in your office. How many handshake pictures can you



A series showing patterns where the Colorado River flows into the top of the Sea of Cortez. *Photos by Steve Northrup.*

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count? Here is an example of pure visual hogwash. The reader collects next to no information from this space. Now if the point of the exercise is to get a picture of the mayor in the paper, then send a photographer down to spend some time with him and run a good one. On the other hand, if the desire is to show the recipient of a plaque/check/key/etc., then spend some time with that person and show the special qualities perceived. I know if the recipient were, say, a woman who had pulled six kids from a swollen creek, it's a little hard to illustrate her in a re-rescue; but you might picture her talking with the kids, or simply make a good portrait of her by herself.

One other thing you could consider trying: Watch someone—or better yet, several people—reading the daily paper for a few days. See how much time they spend on each illustration and where it takes them, whether into the story, or on to something new. One thing becomes apparent right away: You have precious little time to catch the eye and mind. Here impact, content and position are everything. Looking through a stack of feature pictures or wire service prints to fill that three-by-five-inch hold on page six is a sure way to lose.

I think we know the problems—our papers for the most part are visually unimaginative, even dull.

There is a bright side to all this, however; the means of change are available. The profession has a better crop of photographers than at any time in its history: not only the younger men and women but the older photographers who survived the dramatic changes in the technology in the field. Talk to them, urge some initiative, find out their complaint. In the past few years newsrooms across the country have felt and heard the valid complaints of the women and blacks in the business. If it helps, look on us photographers as another minority—but do listen.

We live in an environment that is rapidly changing—not only our towns, but also our people. I feel it is vitally important to document and record these changes, to see where we are,

where we have come from, and in which direction we are headed. Photography is a precious tool in this effort—it can help us explain ourselves to others and to us.

The great need is for visualists in the editorial process: We should put more qualified photographers in positions where their voices can be heard. Images should be edited with a light-reading eye to integrate their importance fully into the product.

Pictures speak a universal language. I have a feeling that if you took Eddie Adams' great photograph of South Vietnamese Colonel Loan shooting the Vietcong on that Saigon street and showed it, without caption, to as wide a spectrum of viewers as you could reach, the same emotions would be engendered. The outward manifestations would probably vary, due to cultural and political mindsets, but down deep, where the real guy lives, the stirrings would be the same.

At a time when many changes in technology are upon us, this might be a good moment to sit down and take stock. Offset offers superb reproduction and the future will undoubtedly hold a photographic system, most likely using magnetic impulses, that is computer compatible, thus freeing photographers from their cross of silver. Meanwhile, many other pressures are being felt by the picture side of our profession: The tree squeeze is on and that hurts; a silver shortage looms, and that is probably going to be restrictive. But far more serious than any of this is the simple lack of concern shown on too many papers.

It is high time to get our act together. Too much visual information is getting away from us as a result of inattention and ignorance. We need to honor the eyes of our readers, pay them the dignity and respect they deserve. The media are capable of doing much better—and need to cooperate to place before the public a more accurate world, both with words and with light. ■

*Steve Northrup, a 1974 Nieman Fellow, is a Time, Inc. photographer.*

Winter 1982

## Fragile Moments

A sensitive photographer deals with the difficult assignments.

BY BILL WELCH

Through the viewfinder of my camera I could see people looking sympathetically at the Vietnam veteran, tears in his eyes, the tattered American flag in his hand.

His very private moment was on public view—and I was photographing that moment for thousands of newspaper readers. I was depicting his personal sadness, his inner pain, his solitary reminiscence of his experiences in Vietnam.

I had come to Centennial Park that day, October 4, 1981, to observe and to photograph events as Nashville paid its salute to the near-forgotten veterans of a controversial war.

By chance I had come across this former soldier who was consumed by the hurtful impact of remembering lost friends and shattered dreams.

I have no idea how other photojournalists feel at such moments, but I suspect that no matter how experienced or “professional” they are, somewhere within them there is something of what I felt: a sense of intruding on an almost embarrassingly intimate time.

Suddenly I sensed the mood of other people nearby.

I was “news media” preying on grief, exploiting tragedy, exposing the raw nerve of sadness. I was a “flesh fly.”

Through the viewfinder I could see people glaring at me as if I was committing some obscene act.

I understood what my job was. I had come to this huge gathering in the park to try to capture on film the essence of the community's day of tribute to veterans who had been denied even words of thanks for what they had done for our country.

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Scott Summer, a former Vietnam medic, holds the tattered flag taken from the grave in Vietnam of his best friend and weeps during a star-spangled salute to Vietnam veterans. *Photo by Bill Welch, courtesy of The (Nashville) Tennessean.*

The point of the assignment, ideally, was to give thousands of newspaper subscribers, through their viewing of photographs, a means of understanding and even sharing what this event was all about.

The picture of the suffering of Scott Summer—the veteran I was photographing—symbolized that day for me. It was a day of mixed emotions, a celebration with tears.

I attended that day with a good deal of personal curiosity, as well as a journalistic interest. I wondered, given the complexity of the issues surrounding the war, what form this salute would take. How would the city honor veterans of a war most citizens were trying to forget? How would veterans, who strongly feel their service had been demeaned and who believe society wanted to forget them, react to the day?

I had not gone to Vietnam. I had been just the right age. I had tried to go and had been turned down for physical reasons. But I experienced that time at home. For my part, I never want to forget about it.

In the park that day I was struck by the military hardware on display. There seemed to me to be irony at the sight of children climbing at play all over an M-60 tank. By chance I bumped into a friend, and I expressed surprise at the presence of the military weaponry.

“It was just part of the war,” he said, “just like the men who were there.”

There were special events—a helicopter taking off and a paratrooper from the 101st Airborne parachuting to earth, an American flag streaming behind him. There was music, and there was speechmaking.

### A Tattered Flag

I worried inwardly about “celebrating war.” I took pictures of what was going on, the speechmakers, the parachutist, the children on the tank. But still I was looking for a single scene that would communicate the symbolism of this unique funereal festival.

Then I saw a man waving that small tattered flag. There was an isolated

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presence about him—a man alone in a crowd. I began to photograph him, attempting not to invade what seemed to me to be his reverie of controlled misery.

As some participants in the ceremony were retiring the colors, I approached him to ask his name, address and something about his service in Vietnam.

Scott Summer was friendly. The ragged flag had belonged to his best friend, Kenny Brown, he said. They had come from Fort Scott, Kansas, and joined the army together. Kenny was a door gunner on a helicopter; Scott, a medic.

Kenny had been killed November 3, 1970—Scott's birthday. On this day Kenny was on Scott's mind. Scott was remembering times when the two of them would get together in Vietnam. Scott loved chocolates; Kenny loved beer. They would meet and swap beer and chocolates—and enjoy talking about home.

Somehow, Scott said, he did not feel that he was “home” from Vietnam yet. It was, this day, almost as if he were still in Vietnam. Tears welled up in his eyes. He started to cry. Again, I began to photograph him.

He put his head in his hand. The drama of the moment peaked. I stopped photographing.

I said good-bye. I had the picture that to me symbolized the day. I should have been happy. Somehow, as I walked to my car, I didn't like myself very much.

Driving back to the newspaper I tried to evaluate why I felt that way. I knew that what I had on film was powerful. If anything could move people to understand the Vietnam veteran's situation—first rejected, then forgotten but still clinging to what remained of national idealism—it was the picture of Scott Summer.

But how would Scott and those who had been around him feel when they viewed the photograph, knowing that I had taken advantage of his most vulnerable moment?

**Reaction From the Veteran**

The picture ran on the front page the next morning—and the response was immediate.

The Associated Press selected it and sent it out to newspapers in other cities. It made the front page in Boston, and a reporter called to ask how I had come to take it. Locally, people began to telephone me. Two women who said they lost friends in Vietnam asked me to send them copies of the picture.

Then Scott Summer called. His voice was warm. He said he appreciated the picture. It had helped him to see himself weeping publicly. His attitude made me choke up. I started crying on the phone. Scott said the torn flag expressed the way he and many other veterans felt—“torn and dilapidated inside.”

Journalists need to care about what they do and about people they deal with in covering the news. Since that experience with Scott Summer I have reflected on other assignments....

**A Glimmer of Truth**

Most journalists I know reject the idea that “bad news is good news.” But bad news is news. And pictures that vividly portray real-life scenes of tragedy are part of that news. They tell us how acts of violence threaten to consume us.

That is less than profound. But as long as such photographs provide at least a glimmer of human truth, I will continue to make them, believing that society needs to be reminded regularly of its dark side—unless and until I am consumed by the feeling that I am not a photojournalist but a “flesh fly.” ■

*Bill Welch, with The Tennessean in Nashville, has been a newspaper photographer for eight years. Prior to that, he was in urban planning. This article first appeared in The Tennessean and was also published in the Gannetteer. It appears here with permission; © The Tennessean.*

Summer 1998

**Photo Essay**

BY MICHELE McDONALD

These photos were taken in August, 1993 in Serbia, Bosnia and Kosovo for The Boston Globe. Reporter Sally Jacobs and I were sent from Boston to do stories that would give Globe readers more perspective and understanding of the chaos in the former Yugoslavia than they could get from the daily reporting of the war.

The photos each tell a specific story, but together I think they give a more powerful glimpse into a terrible time in Balkan history.

In Belgrade, I photographed a man strapped to a bed in a mental hospital. There were soldiers there who had literally gone crazy fighting the war. The Serbs allowed me access because they wished to show how the world's sanctions were hurting them. There were no psychotropic drugs left—so they were forced to strap down violent patients. The nurse, who pulled back the sheet to show me this man's legs, cried.

The story is not so simple, though. The economic sanctions allowed food and medicine into Serbia—but the government had to buy them. The Serb government had money to support the war effort but chose not to buy desperately needed medications.

The very first morning we were in Bosnia, we heard of a massacre during the night in a small Muslim village 30 kilometers from where we were staying in Banja Luka. We were in Banja Luka, a stronghold of radical Serbs, to report on what life was like for the region's remaining Muslims. Although the Serbs, who controlled the roads, told us the village was closed, we drove there and were able to enter because the roadblock was unattended. (It turned out the Serbs were at a meeting with U.N. workers who had also heard



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of the killings.) The heat and humidity were searing but people in the village had not yet buried the five people, including two elderly women, who were tortured and killed. They were afraid the Serbs would deny anything had happened. I took the photos of the villagers showing us the dead and the mourning widow of one of the killed men here. Sally wrote the story of the year of terror and “ethnic cleansing” of one small village.

Finally, we visited Kosovo, recently catapulted into 1998 headlines because of the violence erupting there. International human rights monitors had just left Kosovo when we visited in 1993, and the Albanians were attempting to continue to document human rights abuses by the Serbs. Afraid to show their faces, the Albanians showed us photographs and written reports of beatings, etc., of Albanians by the Serbs. The Albanians had established an alter-

native society with their own President, government, clinics and schools. I photographed the smoking boy when I was out walking in the middle of the

day. The Albanians had stopped sending their children to school when the Serbs refused to allow the students to be taught in the Albanian language.



Widow of Muslim man killed in Banja Luka is comforted.



Albanians show reports of beatings by Serbs in Kosovo.

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Albanian boy no longer goes to school.



Bodies of the victims of a massacre in Liskovac.



Serbian soldiers in mental hospital in Belgrade.

*Photos courtesy of Michele McDonald, a 1988 Nieman Fellow. She is a freelance photojournalist. ■*

*Summer 1999*

## Using the Camera to Peer Inside

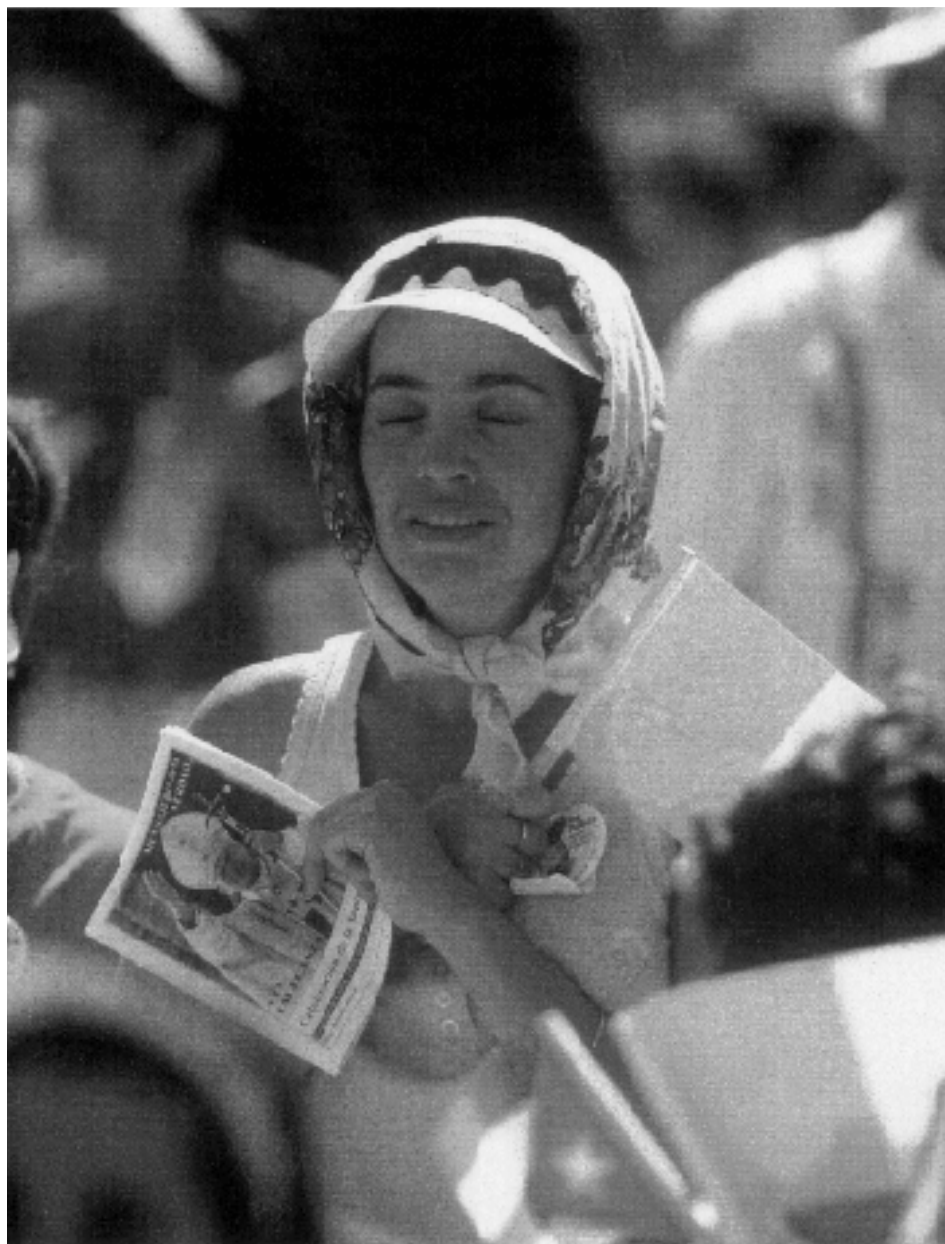
BY BEATRIZ TERRAZAS

When I went to Cuba in January 1998 to photograph Pope John Paul II's historic visit, I was seeing a familiar subject—I'd been there with my camera for his visits to Mexico and the United States—but I was capturing images of him and his worshipers in unusual surroundings.

The juxtaposition of Communist and Catholic icons gave the events in Cuba a sense of incredulity. From the main press platform at the site of the mass in Havana I could see a full color rendering of Jesus that hung several stories high at the altar. Then, when I looked 90 degrees to my left, the likeness of Che Guevara, also several stories high, looked down upon the crowd. Because of the tight government controls, there were no vendors hawking miters or young people wearing paper masks in his likeness as I'd seen at other papal events. There was only a set of government approved commemorative stamps for sale.

But the biggest difference for me, as an American journalist, was found in the conversations I had with Cuban people. Some were wistful for the life I am able to live, the freedom I have to travel, and what I can afford to buy. Others wanted to reassure me about the strength of their religious belief despite their government's claim to the contrary. And everywhere I went on the street women approached me to ask for lipsticks or magazines.

The images that stand out for me from this trip are not of the Pope but of the faces of Cubans. Etched in their faces are memories I have of conversations we had, of times when strangers approached me to share their stories and left me thinking differently about my life and aspects of it that I realized I too often take for granted. ■



Other Cubans “wanted to reassure me about the strength of their religious belief despite their government’s claim to the contrary.”—Beatriz Terrazas, a 1999 Nieman Fellow and staff photographer for *The Dallas Morning News*. *Photo courtesy of The Dallas Morning News.*

It was not until 1952, 14 years after the Nieman Foundation was founded, that the first international Fellows arrived in Cambridge. They were from New Zealand, Australia and Canada. Since then, 328 journalists from 72 countries and every continent have been part of Nieman classes, contributing important insights and invaluable perspectives to the ongoing discussion about our craft.

When these journalists return to newsgathering, many continue this dialogue by writing about their experiences in Nieman Reports. Their dispatches provide critical connections. They provide a compelling record of the all too frequent abuses of press freedom so many of them endure. And their words also lift our spirits with testimonies of triumph as some share glimpses of courageous coverage, a vital reminder of risks so many reporters still face in adhering to journalism's core principles.

"You deserve a bullet," an anonymous letter informed Russian independent journalist **Yevgenia Albats** (NF'93) after her investigative series on Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov revealed his connections with Russian businessmen who were subjects of Interpol's interest.

**Percy Qoboza** (NF'76), a black South African newspaper editor, said what scared him during his Nieman year was "the fact that I had accepted injustice and discrimination as 'part and parcel of our traditional way of life.'" After his Nieman year, he told a friend, "the things I had accepted made me angry. It is because of this that the character of my newspaper has changed tremendously. We are an angry newspaper. For this reason we have made some formidable enemies, and my own personal life is not worth a cent. . . ." In 1977, Qoboza's championing of justice and liberation resulted in his imprisonment under South Africa's detention without trial laws.

Another challenge of chronicling international events involves the ability of reporters to convey news within its meaningful context. From the Congo in 1961, **Henry Tanner** (NF'55) described the new nation as "a reporter's nightmare" and worried about the impossibility of being able to accurately describe to non-Congolese audiences the chaotic rush of events. Foreign correspondents, including **Walter Sullivan**, and Nieman Curator **James C. Thomson, Jr.**—both of whom were in China during the Communist takeover—gathered decades later to examine the "intellectual baggage" they brought with them and how it influenced reporting. And **M.G.G. Pillai** (NF'77), writing from Malaysia, asked Nieman Reports readers, "Is the Western press listening to its colleagues in Third World countries?" ■

October 1961

# Congo: Reporter's Nightmare

BY HENRY TANNER

*Leopoldville September 3.*

**T**he Congo is a reporter's nightmare—mostly because the English language is woefully inadequate for describing Congolese affairs.

Words like “strongman,” “general,” “minister,” “offensive,” “Communist,” or “civil war” all have a generally accepted meaning and presumably evoke a fairly precise image in the reader's mind. Well, let the reader be disabused. Any resemblance between the things he visualizes, when reading such words in a dispatch from the Congo, and the things the reporter has seen is strictly coincidental.

“General” Mobutu once was the Congo's “strongman” and is still to be reckoned with. But take the quotes off his titles and what remains? A general in the sense of West Point? A strong

man? Certainly not. He was a non-commissioned officer in the Force Publique, the pre-independence army, serving in the “Department for Secretaries, Accounting and Stenography.” For a while he worked on the fringe of journalism. He is a personable young man with an intelligent face and an attractive, ready smile. And lately, especially when he has had a glass of champagne or two, he has been affecting a carefree military swagger.

But a year ago, when he held the Congo's fate in his hands, he was forever bemoaning his ill fortune, complaining about overwork and ill health. “Do you want to kill me? Can't you see I am sick?” he asked reporters who went to see him at his heavily guarded residence. Then, having set the tone, he dropped onto a sofa and held an hour-long press conference. Recently,

as the capital was buzzing with reports of another “Mobutu putsch,” the General held a meeting with reporters in his headquarters when Adoula, then Defense Minister, stormed into the room and curtly ordered the General “to terminate this conference.” The “strongman's” reaction? A nervous giggle, then silence.

The evening of Mobutu's putsch on September 14, last year, the Telex broke down earlier than usual, while Mobutu was still talking. There was barely enough time to type out a few lines on the live line to London. That night I woke up in panic, remembering my lead: “The army took over the Congo tonight.” Of course the army had done no such thing. Mobutu had climbed on a table in a local café and there, to the surprise of the assembled guests, had said he was taking over the country. Once the announcement was made he went home and callers were told that the Colonel had retired for the night and that further inquiries should be made in the morning. How could an experienced reporter be stampeded into confounding the Colonel's statement with an accomplished fact? But a few days later the putsch seemed real enough. Mobutu was taken seriously, on even flimsier evidence, by the world powers. While standing on his café table the fledgling “strongman” had proclaimed that the “Russians must leave the country.” Three days later the Soviet and Czech ambassadors staged a disorderly, hasty exodus, taking with them scores of “technicians,” a dozen-odd planes, and tons of radio and other equipment that had been intended to help Lumumba stay in power.

Or take parliament. Newspapers have always made politicians look more intelligent than they are by improving their grammar and compressing their rambling statements. But what do you do about a senate which solemnly decides that “the events of the last three days are void and have not occurred,” and where a member gets up in the middle of a crucial debate and announces that he has to leave the chamber because he “has something to do”?



Soldiers in the Belgian Congo, ca. 1943. *Photo courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.*

What do you write about a Prime Minister who holds clandestine press conferences in private homes and reporters' apartments as did Ileo during the crisis last year?

Or how do you report the economic policies of a government, whose working habits are these? A minister calls in his adviser and tells him that a plan must be worked out to give employment and decent salaries to 100,000 unemployed. The adviser promises to mobilize the experts of various ministries and to have a detailed project ready within two or three weeks. "You don't have two weeks," the minister replies, "I need it by three o'clock this afternoon; I have a ministers' council and must submit the project."

How can you explain, in the single paragraph that such an occurrence merits in a news story, that the project was submitted that afternoon? That of course it was totally unrealistic; that the minister, who is a highly intelligent man, knew it was unrealistic; but that the fact of having a project in writing and being able to adopt it in a formal meeting, solved the entire problem of unemployment in the country and disposed of it, because the government had "assumed its responsibilities" and that was all that was needed?

"To assume one's responsibilities" is a favorite phrase in the Congo. It means that an official, a minister or a general, has recognized the existence of a problem and has perhaps discussed it with other ministers or generals—and that therefore the problem is taken care of.

How can a reporter write about the "Cold War" and "Communism" in a country where the representative of the Ford Foundation hears a furtive knock at the door of his hotel room one morning? The man who enters wears the well-pressed dark suit and white shirt that is the uniform of the successful politician and, of course, carries a briefcase. He identifies himself as a political leader from the interior and explains that his purpose is to solicit financial assistance from the United States and particularly from the

enterprise directed by Mr. Ford. When the man from New York asks what the funds would be used for, the provincial leader, unfazed, answers in an urgent, conspiratorial whisper: "To establish Communism."

Or, how can a reporter make it plain that a "coup d'etat" in Leopoldville is not like a coup in Algiers? Why? One day a prominent foreign diplomat makes a routine call to the residence of one of the highest ranking men in the country. "Tell me," the host says after the preliminaries, "you have been here several months now. How many provinces do you think we should have?" The foreigner answers that if there were a request from the Congolese government a team of experts might be organized to make a survey and come up with a solid answer. The high ranking Congolese has lost interest. "More urgent," he says, "how do you go about making a 'coup d'etat'?" The visitor, knowing his host's sense of humor, answers easily: "Well, you'd get hold of the airport first, then the radio station, the post office of course, and you might want to..." Then he sees the gleam of keen and totally unhumorous interest in the questioner's eyes and breaks off the conversation. Next day the Congo is front-page news. There has been a "coup d'etat." Kasavubu has dismissed Lumumba and Lumumba has deposed Kasavubu, and the airport, the post office, and the radio station are focal points of the power struggle.

So it's all a comedy—a Marx brothers movie in an African setting. Or is it? I have heard it argued, before censorship on outgoing news was lifted in the Soviet Union, that in fairness to the American reader every dispatch from Moscow should be preceded by a box saying that it had been passed by censor.

Perhaps, by the same token, every dispatch from the Congo should be preceded by a box to this effect: "When the Belgians left on June 30, 1960, this country did not have a single Congolese officer or a single Congolese physician. There was one Congolese lawyer and perhaps half a dozen young men with some training as economists,

administrators and technicians. These men had to run a country as large as the United States east of the Mississippi."

Whenever the dispatch contained a reference to "rampaging soldiers," the box might well include a passage like this: "These Congolese soldiers belong to the Force Publique which lost all but a dozen of its officers, all Belgians, at the start of its mutiny immediately after independence. Before that the Belgians kept the Force Publique like a good police dog on a short leash but lean, mean and hungry. Whenever there was trouble in the villages, they let it loose to deal with offenders in its own unceremonious way." The box might add that what happened after independence was that the dog broke his leash and jumped his master in the way he had been trained to attack others.

Furthermore, if the dispatch referred to people being kicked and beaten with rifle butts upon being arrested, a bracketed insert might explain that beating a prisoner, whether he is guilty or innocent, a thief or a political offender, is a reflex that in this country comes as automatically to the arresting soldier or policeman as the pangs of hunger came to Pavlov's dog when the bell rings. The insert might add that Congolese soldiers and policemen got their training before independence.

There are many more contradictions and incongruities in the Congolese story which defy description in a newspaper dispatch of printable length. How can one explain a scene in South Kasai where a group of us saw a charge of Baluba tribesmen, 80 or 100 of them, emerge from the bush and bear down on us across a field brandishing spears and bows and arrows? How, without taking half a column of unavailable space and confusing the reader more than would be fair, could we explain that the tribesmen were not naked, not wearing feathered headgear, weird masks or rings in their noses, but dark pants and white shirts which, had they been clean, pressed and without tears, would have looked every bit as proper as the traditional garb of a U.S. office worker out for a coffee break?

How could one make it plausible, in a few well-chosen words, that many of these “savages” hundreds of miles from the nearest urban center actually were young office workers who a month or two earlier had been employed in the administration of the principal capital, where tribal and family ties had over the years given the Balubas a near-monopoly on office jobs, and had left the city in obedience to the orders of their “King” who wanted his “nation” regrouped in a separate state?

How could we explain that the handful of tough and reasonably well trained Congolese soldiers who were with us failed to fire a single shot from their modern rifles and submachine guns to halt the charge of spear-wielding tribesmen? How does one describe the terror in the eyes of these soldiers as they scrambled aboard our truck to seek safety from the tribal charge? We couldn't ask the soldiers why they were paralyzed with fear. They spoke Lingala only, and even if they had understood our questions, they would not have known the answer. We could only guess that an attack like this, a band of tribesmen caught in an outburst of mass anger and mass hysteria, was to these Africans an elemental force like lightning or a tidal wave. One doesn't argue with the elements, one doesn't fight them; one runs and seeks shelter.

So there you have the picture of these Congolese who kick and beat their prisoners, who burn villages, and push their tribal enemies back into the flames of a burning hut, who massacre each other and maim women and children when caught in a frenzy of tribal hatred. Here are the “savages” of whom Conrad wrote only 50 years ago that the “worst of it [was] this suspicion of their not being inhuman.”

How, having reported this picture, can one explain to the reader that these same Congolese are one of the gentlest, most sensitive people you ever met; that to an amazing degree they are capable of human kindness, of graceful generosity, and that in their reactions toward strangers they are thoughtful in a way that Europeans like to at-

tribute to “breeding” and to good manners being taught in kindergarten?

How can one explain that the tape recorder carried by a radio reporter might cause a group of soldiers to panic in fear and then to attack with rifle butts and bayonets, just because the gadget, which looks mysterious and therefore dangerous, trips a mechanism of fear and, hence, aggression? How does one explain that the soldier approaching you with his finger on the trigger is actually trembling with fear even though you are not armed, and that he doesn't know yet, as he steps forward, whether he will shoot at you, crash his rifle butt against your ribs or pump your hand in a friendly welcome? How can you explain that moments later, having overcome his fear and his urge to attack you, he will thank you earnestly for having talked to him so kindly and explained the business that brought you here?

So, old Congo hands among reporters are inclined to admit defeat and to refer the reader to the one writer who did justice to the Congo—Conrad, in “Heart of Darkness”—who described the “general sense of vague and oppressive wonder;” who felt the “great demoralization of the land” where “there is no joy in the brilliance of the sunshine;” who traveled “back to the earliest beginnings of the world when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were king;” who glimpsed “a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage;” who knew he was “cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings;” who felt the “great silence,” and who summed it up as “the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention.” ■

*Henry Tanner, a Nieman Fellow in 1955, was New York Times correspondent in Algiers when the trouble began in the Congo. He was one of the first correspondents to reach the Congo and has dealt daily with all the nightmarish aspects of its story.*

March 1964

## Why Diplomats Clam Up

BY JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

The resident American press corps during my time in New Delhi (1961-1963) was comparatively small—the two wire services, the Times, Time, The (Baltimore) Sun, NBC, U.S. News & World Report and, toward the end of my tour, The Washington Post—and very good. The members, with scarcely an exception, liked India and worked hard to understand the country, its culture and its problems. All were by way of becoming experts; at least three, Henry Bradsher of AP, Paul Grimes of the Times and Selig Harrison of the Post, were first-rate scholars. At the same time, all the members took a detached view of official pretense and mendacity which, both in volume and self-righteousness, is roughly on a parity with Washington.

Relations with the Embassy were on a similar level. I met with the members who were in town for an hour each Wednesday and more frequently if something were stirring. I tried to be liberal with information that could be used; I am persuaded that, with rare exceptions, what must be said off-the-record had best not be said at all. The questions on State Department or mission policy, or what passed for it, were informed and sharp. The questioners were sufficiently resistant to evasion, rotund generalities or misinformation to protect me from temptation. The flow of information was in both directions. I relied on these meetings for knowledge of what Indian officials were saying in their press conferences, background briefings or press leaks; for the rumors that were making the rounds of

the parliament and press gallery; and for knowledge of the stories that members of the press corps were going to play. Members also kept me advised on spot news....

I don't want to give the press a completely clean bill of health. From time to time high-level visits and especially the Chinese invasion brought to New Delhi the fire brigade that goes out with all great people or to all great events. It did much less well. Few were well informed on the country. Some rose above information to intuition. Not many put the event they were covering in proper perspective. All were, of course, relentless in their demand that I reform the public relations

or security procedures of the Indian government and (in the case of the military correspondents) get them immediately to the front line or a few furlongs beyond. But my comment here is on the resident correspondents with whom my relations were personally most agreeable, valuable as a source of information and (I think) useful as an avenue of information on our public activities in India to the American people. It also provided a sharp illumination of the press problems of the State Department. In principle, the department supports a liberal policy toward the press; those professionally responsible work hard and intelligently to further it. In practice, a policy such as the one followed in New Delhi runs into strong headwinds.

The first difficulty is the surviving conviction that diplomacy is a privileged occupation into which the press and the public should not really be allowed to obtrude. This is a minority attitude but it exists, and it is not confined to career officers. Some of the New Frontier appointees have reached extremes in stuffiness and even outright constipation in their press rela-

tions, partly in the conviction that this is the way diplomats are meant to behave. Fear is also a factor and the feeling that the press, like the Congress, exists largely to louse up foreign policy. In American diplomatic practice, the current policy becomes to a remarkable degree an article of belief. We are not cynics. So if the policy is to present the Nhu family as the arch-paragons of

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**The man who seeks to avoid all error, all misinterpretation, will say nothing and do the worst job. He will live...in a mentally crippling fear of his own tongue. The man who consistently puts his foot in his own mouth and that of the press should obviously be retired or loaned to Barry Goldwater.**

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democracy, or blame everything that goes wrong in Latin America on Castro, a differing view by a newsman seems not only wrong but willfully perverse. Better ignore the bastard.

But there is a more persistent if less visible source of restraint. Anything that comes in over the press wires is scrutinized by the score or more of people in Washington who are concerned in one capacity or other with that country. There is not much that can be said that will not strike someone as out of line even when the location of the line is known only to God. A bland comment on the advantages of peace or the need for better weather will be thought by someone to have hit the wrong note. This alert officer then tucks the clipping or tape in his pocket and, at the next meeting with his Assistant Secretary, say: "Did you see, sir, what came out of Pnom Penh yesterday? Going a little far, I think...." In all organizations, the cultivation of executive vanity is a considerable industry. The State Department is up to average. Officials are rather easily persuaded that their prerogatives are being prejudiced. Out goes a telegram of warning.

"We note with some concern...."

The danger that any politically experienced person will say anything really damaging is slight. In the course of two and a half years, I found myself in hot water only once. (That was a careless and somewhat disputable endorsement of one part of Pakistan's claim to Kashmir made at a press briefing in Washington which was relayed back to New Delhi at something greater than the speed of light. And like the rest of last year's headlines it had no permanent residue.) I also found that an ambassador can stand off this nitpicking as, I am sure, many do. My formula was to ignore it except for an occasional very rude response. In the end, it stopped. But quite a few less securely situated people would have clammed up. As a result, they would have denied both themselves and

the country valuable information. They would have a perfect record of no errors and no indiscretions at the price of a much reduced understanding at the post and at home.

The remedy is scarcely novel. It is to see the problem of press relations as one of maintaining a high score. The man who seeks to avoid all error, all misinterpretation, will say nothing and do the worst job. He will live, as do a surprising number of our officials, in a mentally crippling fear of his own tongue. The man who consistently puts his foot in his own mouth and that of the press should obviously be retired or loaned to Barry Goldwater. The man who maintains a steady flow of sound guidance and information should know that he is allowed an occasional error or mishap. Washington must, of course, also know this and restrain itself accordingly. ■

*Former Ambassador to India, author of "The Affluent Society" and much else, J.K. Galbraith used to be a journalist himself (Fortune magazine). He is now back at his post as professor of economics at Harvard.*



March 1972

# Reflections on Vietnam, the Press And America

BY PETER ARNETT

God knows we are not perfect as professionals. To be honest, after eight years of covering the Vietnam War, after grinding out those thousands of words and seeing many of them build into big, black, bloody headlines; after agonizing over what to write and when to write it; after talking it all over with publishers and editors and senators and congressional investigators through the years—I am still not sure in my own mind whether what we did as reporters in Vietnam was enough or too much, whether we were neophytes or prophets, whether we performed the classic American press role of censuring government policy or whether we botched the whole job and aided and abetted the enemy. And it might be argued that we never really satisfactorily figured out who the enemy was.

But if I am to be judged, better in the broad context of the American press tradition than the narrow interests of venal politicians or partisan colleagues.

Saigon, 1962. Vietnam then was just a problem in counterinsurgency. You could sit at a sidewalk café with an aperitif, ogle the graceful girls strolling down the Rue Catinat, and talk politics into the warm evening hours. No signs that Vietnam would become a word synonymous with ugliness, horror and butchery.

I was 27, a gadfly in the journalistic backwaters of Southeast Asia, expelled from three countries in an area where you have not really made the grade with Old China hands until you have been expelled from at least six.

And here was the cubbyhole the AP called its Saigon bureau, cluttered, smelly. Malcolm Browne was the sole AP reporter in Vietnam then. He was

beating a two-finger tattoo on his old Remington the day I arrived, trying to complete the daily 700 words of copy we used to send then to Tokyo by morsecast—a far cry from the batteries of teleprinters tied in directly to New York that would eventually grace a much expanded AP bureau.

Mal didn't look up when I walked in. I surveyed the cluttered room. A withered hand hung on a wall, brought back I learned later by our Vietnamese photographer who had been to an ambush scene. Browne had hitched it to the wall to remind visitors that there was a war beyond the casually luxurious life of the foreign community in the Saigon of the early sixties. Hanging below the hand was a bloodied water container picked up at another ambush. I wanted to leave.



Peter Arnett, AP staffer in Saigon, poses beside a burned-out airplane in 1965, near Bien Hoa, north of Saigon. *Photo courtesy of The Associated Press.*

Mal looked up and grinned at my queasiness. He introduced himself and tossed across a mimeographed booklet entitled “A Short Guide to News Coverage in Vietnam.” He had authored it for the neophytes like me who came into Vietnam from time to time to assist him in his reporting task. What Mal wrote in 1962 applied up to the day I left late last year. Reading about the press problems in covering the Laos incursion, I guess it still applies.

“Coverage in Vietnam requires aggressiveness, resourcefulness and, at times, methods uncomfortably close to those used by professional intelligence units. You can expect very little help from most official sources, and news comes the hard way. Correspondents in Vietnam are regarded by the Saigon Government as ‘scabby sheep’ and treated accordingly. At the same time the Vietnamese people are friendly and agreeable, and private sources can be cultivated....” That from the introduction.

Here are some tips to stringers: “Avoid the crowd. Newsmen and newswomen come to Vietnam by the hundreds, and there is a tendency to gather in bunches—in bars, in offices, on operations and so forth. One of the best stringers we ever had never went to the Caravelle Bar, never went out on a story with another person. Blaze new trails, and do it alone. The fresh story, the new angle, the hitherto unreported—these are the things we want....”

Here is Browne's advice on first aid: “Battle casualties often die from loss of blood. Belts, ropes and field straps make good tourniquets, and the experts recommend thinking of tourniquets first if you are bleeding heavily. Whenever flying in a helicopter try to borrow a flak jacket from the crew—two, if possible. The second one is to sit on. You won't be considered chicken. All crew members must wear them....”

Here is his advice when encountering the enemy: “Carrying pistols is not condoned officially either by Vietnamese or American authorities, but American officers privately approve of the

practice. Under no circumstances try to shoot it out with the Vietcong if you are alone. They also outnumber you and generally pack Tommy guns. If you are stopped by the Vietcong tell them truthfully who you are and what you are doing. Don't try to throw away your identification papers—identity-less suspects are regarded with great suspicion and are subject to very bad treatment. If you are American and happen to speak fluent, accentless French you might get off with just a brief lecture....”

In those early days the war was just an aspect of the story. Like foreign correspondents in other capitals we were obliged to make the rounds of the diplomats, and here is what Browne said about that:

“A resident correspondent in Saigon is invited to three to five cocktail parties a week, sometimes more. It is wise to attend as many as possible because while the faces and the subjects don't change much the most influential people in town often go. People you can't get to interview any other way you often can nail down at receptions. Here are some subjective judgments of news value of the various embassies in Saigon:

“U.S.—Variable, the higher the official the more vague he is likely to be. British—Generally close-mouthed but extremely well informed. Excellent sources. French—Except for the ambassador (who won't talk at all) rather poorly informed. Deeply suspicious of the press, particularly American correspondents. German—Very good company, excellent press dinners, good on cultural developments but worthless for any other kind of news. Ambassador useful if German is kidnapped or killed, however. Japanese—Generally well informed and anxious to swap information with correspondents. Indonesian—Fairly well informed, extremely talkative, apt to be inaccurate. Korean—Friendly to press and well informed. Chinese (Nationalist)—Well informed but difficult to tap because of delicacy of its relations with Vietnam....”

You could detect in that pamphlet the “probing, questioning, disputa-

tious” attitude towards Vietnamese authorities and the war.

Were these guidelines adequate?

Working in Vietnam over all those years, I could never understand the drumfires of antagonism that reverberated about our reporting. I won't go into the gory details here, because in retrospect they were not important: You stuck by us, you published our material. And that was all that mattered.

The press did not send American troops into Vietnam and is not bringing them out. The official cries of anguish about our reporting were the classic syndrome of blaming the bringers of bad news rather than the news itself. The most famous example in history being Peter the Great, the Czar of Russia, who strangled the man who brought him the news of the defeat of Russian troops at Narva by the Swedes under Charles XII. We were never strangled, and thanks again.

Before making a few remarks about the war as I see it, and where it may be heading, I would like to mention the “new journalism.” This is sometimes called the activist approach which is essentially determining which side is right and then becoming the advocate of that side. A journalism student corralled me last week in Urbana and brought up Neil Sheehan's article in *The New York Times Book Review* that [said that] American commanders might be guilty of war crimes in Vietnam. I was asked, “Why didn't Sheehan write about war crimes when he was in Vietnam: why now, four years later?”

I bring this up because the intensity for the “new journalism” disturbed me. I am all for involved journalism, but not for the AP: We deal in facts. So I mentioned that I accompanied Neil Sheehan on some of those military operations he wrote about; I watched hooches burning down; I saw the civilian dead. I didn't write about war crimes either.

We took pictures of those burning buildings, we told of the civilian dead and how they died, but we didn't make judgments because we were witnesses, and like witnesses to robbery, accident

or murder surely it was not for us to be judge and jury. I said my attitude might be broadly classed as objective, but I would prefer to consider it more experience, an intelligent approach to our craft. I said that the way I saw it, if we are to believe in popular decision-making, we have to believe in a responsible press that will provide the information upon which those decisions will be based.

Then how do you remain objective, or better, intelligent about your copy? That is the test of your professionalism, to be able to observe with as much professional detachment as possible to report a scene with accuracy and clarity. I said it might be called a sense of mission, and in the AP it must take precedence over national patriotism in war, regional propaganda or municipal boosterism back home. If you fail in this professional detachment you become an advocate, a worthy enough mission but not journalism.

One example of my attempted detachment:

I stood one hot noon outside the Saigon market and watched a Buddhist monk in brown robes climb from a taxi and squat on the pavement. He squirted gasoline over himself from a rubber bottle and flicked a cigarette lighter. Here was a political immolation a few feet in front of me. I felt horror and disgust as his body blackened and puffed out like burned pastry.

I could have prevented that immolation by rushing at him and kicking the gasoline away. As a human being I wanted to. As a reporter I couldn't. This monk was one of many who committed suicide to dramatize the iniquities of the Diem regime in Saigon. If I had stopped him, the Secret Police who were watching from a distance would have immediately arrested him and carried him off to God knows where. If I had attempted to prevent them doing this I would have propelled myself directly into Vietnamese politics. My role as a reporter would have been destroyed along with my credibility.

What did I do? I photographed him burning on the sidewalk. I beat off half

a dozen Secret Police trying to grab my camera. I raced to the AP office, wrote the story and sent a radiophoto. It was on America's front pages the next morning. Three months later, mainly because of the monk immolations, the Vietnamese public unrest, and the worsening war, the American government gave the signal for the Army to overthrow Diem.

What will happen when the Americans leave? The South Vietnamese are doing most of the fighting now. If they kept it up they could hang on indefinitely. But this situation must be looked at in its entirety: Compared to North Vietnam, the South is a fragile entity. It is vulnerable to political change, it is economically imperiled. The population is war weary. On the other hand North Vietnam is politically stable and has successfully mobilized the population for us. The occasional rumbles of war discontent from the North are insignificant compared to the cries of anguish in the South.

So what will happen? The American withdrawal from the war will not end it. What it will end is effective American participation in a political settlement. The Communists have made it quite clear they will fight until a compromise is reached, and that will mean putting neutralists or Communists in the Saigon government. I think the Communists will fight until that objective is reached, that they mean what they say.

I can see the South Vietnamese army after American withdrawal fighting with decreasing enthusiasm, losing control of one remote district after another, until the Saigon government will have to make a deal or go under totally. Only then will the war end, and it could come in three years or come in 10. And I don't think it can be looked at as a victory for the Communists or the neutralists, or a defeat of America or the free world.

If there is any victory, it will be the victory of good sense. ■

*Mr. Arnett is an Associated Press correspondent. These excerpts are from his address at the Pennsylvania Press Conference.*

*Autumn 1982*

## Endangered Species

BY DAVID LAMB

**T**he independence era dawned over black Africa two decades ago, and in the flush of victory the new presidents promised their people many things: Constitutions, they said, would be respected; human rights would be observed; newspapers would remain free and competitive.

One by one those pillars of a free society were uprooted. Constitutions were abolished and replaced by one party mandates. Human rights were ignored, the victim of soldier-presidents who understood only the power of the gun. And the free press died, too, transformed almost overnight into an organ of propaganda for various governments run by self-appointed presidents-for-life.

Today the role of newspapers in black Africa has declined so dramatically that they have little significance in society. People no longer ask what the future of the press is in black Africa; they ask instead if it has any future at all. And regardless of what yardstick you use, it is difficult to find much room for optimism.

In the mid-1960's, according to the International Press Institute, there were 299 daily newspapers in Africa. That figure includes about 40 papers in the Arab states, mostly Egypt, and about 30 in the white-ruled areas of southern Africa. By the early 1980's, only 150 dailies were left on the continent, and the shrinkage had occurred almost exclusively in black Africa. Nine countries had no newspaper at all.

The combined daily circulation of the papers in Africa fell during that period from well over three million to two million. Thus, the circulation on a continent of 455 million people is only two-thirds of what a single London newspaper, the Daily Mirror, sells in a day.

There are several factors that help explain what is, for all practical purposes, the death of the African newspaper: an illiteracy rate that runs as high as 90 percent in some African countries; the emergence of radio as the most powerful communications medium on the continent; the high cost of importing newsprint from Europe, and the absence of daily or weekly newspapers in the rural areas, where the majority of people live. All this has made newspapers an amenity of the city elite.

But the most important factor—and the most unsettling one—is simply that

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**People no longer ask what the future of the press is in black Africa; they ask instead if it has any future at all.**

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the vast majority of Africa's 50 governments consider any independent, questioning voice to be a potential threat. So the governments quickly took control of the media, eliminating opposition newspapers and using the sole official daily not to inform the people, but to manipulate, organize and control them. Here is how an official communiqué from the Republic of Somalia defines the role of the press: "It is the function of the nation's mass communications media to weld the entire community into a single entity, a people of the same mind and possessed of the same determination to safeguard the national interests."

For a Westerner, this is pretty scary,

Orwellian stuff, but not so for Africans. Their newspapers are written and edited by civil servants, not independent reporters, and their contents are as unbiased as something a U.S. political party might publish during an election campaign. The news is all good: Windy speeches by various officials are printed with painstaking accuracy, and four or five photographs of the President may appear in the same edition. When Somalia invaded Ethiopia's Ogaden region in 1977, for instance, and moved unchecked through the crumbling Ethiopian defenses, readers of the Ethiopian Herald knew nothing about the advance; the Herald simply carried no stories on the subject. It was not until Ethiopia took the offensive that the paper started covering the war, but even then it made no mention of the fact that Russian advisers and Cuban troops were on the front lines leading the Ethiopians—a fact that was capturing page one headlines in Europe and the United States.

Except in Nigeria—where the black press dates back to a paper called *Iwe Irohin*, first printed in 1859—the early newspapers on the continent were published by colonialists for colonialists. They bequeathed to Africa's young nations an independent, competitive press, which, at independence, was the first of the Western-style institutions to fall, for that was the one tool the new, insecure governments most needed to exploit the uneducated masses. Nigeria's first government needed only one year to forget its proud journalistic history in favor of a course that stifled critical comment.

In 1961 the High Court of Lagos found journalist Chike Obi, the “Thomas Paine of Nigeria,” guilty of sedition as a result of a pamphlet he published entitled, “The People: Facts That You Must Know.” The seditious section that resulted in Obi's imprisonment read:

“Down with the enemies of the people, the exploiters of the weak and the oppressors of the poor! The days of those who have enriched themselves at the expense of the poor are numbered. The common man in Nigeria can today

no longer be fooled by sweet talk at election time only to be exploited and treated like dirt after the booty of office has been shared.”

The story across the rest of Africa is not much different, even today. President Hastings Banda of Malawi jailed virtually the whole nongovernmental press corps in the mid-1970's. President Kenneth Kaunda appoints and fires newspaper editors in Zambia. In countries such as Uganda and Zaire journalists shuttle in and out of jail so regularly that their families don't even ask where they have been when they reappear after an absence of several days. In Equatorial Guinea, the late president, Macias Nguema Biyogo, went one step farther: By the time he was overthrown by his cousin and killed in 1979, all journalists in the country had been murdered or were in exile.

Are there any bright spots amid the gloom? A few, perhaps. Kenya and Nigeria each have competing newspapers that are largely untouched by government censors (though individual reporters are mindful of the need for self-censorship), and at least half a dozen countries have produced talented journalists who would have influential voices if they were working anywhere else but in Africa.

But just as the free press was the first institution in black Africa to fall, I'm afraid it will be the last to be resurrected. Before one can even contemplate a renewed role for newspapers, governments will have to become more secure, leaders more tolerant, the masses more educated. Only then will the African journalist have a chance to be a real journalist. ■

*David Lamb, a 1981 Nieman Fellow, was Bureau Chief in Nairobi, Kenya, from 1976-80 for the Los Angeles Times and has been in Cairo, Egypt, since 1982. This article is adapted from his book, “The Africans,” to be published by Random House.*

Spring 1983

## China Reporting Revisited . . .

BY  
JAMES C. THOMSON, JR.

...[E]ven at this stage [following a conference reassessing reporting from China] some facts, insights and themes emerge that can point toward answers to those large and lesser questions about wartime China reporting. Here are a few that seem to me significant:

- Most reporters came to East Asia “by accident”—as wire service people, freelancers, or student travelers prior to 1937, or perhaps as employees of the OWI [Office of War Information] after Pearl Harbor. Virtually none had studied Chinese—and still agree today that “there is no correlation between good reporters and good linguists.”
- Many belonged (as did that pioneer Edgar Snow) to the “Missouri Mafia” as graduates of the University of Missouri's School of Journalism. The Missouri connection often led to employment in the Associated Press or United Press, and the UP's Roy Howard was said to have a special “romantic interest” in China.
- “Romantic” is also a word that the veterans used frequently to describe the atmosphere in the heyday of Chinese resistance to Japan, the years of the United Front between Nationalists and Communists from 1937 to 1941. In Hankow, the temporary capital after the fall of Nanking, the Romantic Era peaked. Suddenly, “we were part of the big world scene,” one recalled. “We were reporters of a just cause.” Before Hankow, journalists had largely worked out of that worldly Western metropolis, Shanghai; later they would molder

## INTERNATIONAL NEWS

in the Nationalists' dank far-inland hideaway, Chungking.

- It was in Hankow that these reporters first met the notable Chou En-lai. Of all the names mentioned dur-



Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai-shek and Lieutenant General Joseph W. Stilwell, Commanding General, China Expeditionary Forces, on the day following Japanese bombing attack. Myanmar, Burma, 1942. *Photo courtesy of the Still Picture Branch, National Archives at College Park, Maryland.*

ing Arizona reminiscences, none was cited more frequently than that of Mao's chief emissary. Chou was accessible, articulate and charming both in Hankow and later in Chungking. One after another, these skeptical precursors of Henry Kissinger confessed their "captivation": there was simply "no one more magnetic" than the suave and open Chou. Even when he told untruths, or something less than the truth, he commanded their admiration. ("Why," wondered Hank Lieberman, "can only high-level Communists have a sense of humor?")

- Once lodged in Chungking, locked into a war of attrition (with the United Front in shambles), the press corps found little "romance." Nationalist propaganda was patently non-credible, while Nationalist censorship increasingly rankled. Not

even Madame Chiang Kai-shek, who captivated millions on her 1943 trip to America, could dispel the realities of corruption, inflation and mismanagement. "It was impossible to

like Madame Chiang," said one who knew her well. "She had eight personalities," said another. Now blockaded by Nationalist troops, Mao's capital at Yenan became for many frustrated Chungking correspondents "the Camelot of China."

- Frustration: Here was a theme that coexisted with ro-

mance. Prior to 1937, it seems, China reporters had found few back in America who would print (or even read) their stories. China news had to relate to hometown readers—perhaps a locally known missionary who survived a warlord shootout (while 700 Chinese, parenthetically, did not)... ■

*James C. Thomson, Jr., Curator of the Nieman Foundation, is a specialist in Chinese history and U.S. foreign policy. He grew up in China in the 1930's as the child of missionary educators, spent the year 1948-1949 traveling there during the climax of the Chinese Civil War, and was an East Asia policy aide at the State Department and White House, 1961-1966.*

Spring 1983

## ... The Crucial 1940's

BY WALTER SULLIVAN

Scottsdale, Arizona—Two dozen of those whose reporting from China in the 1940's helped shape American attitudes and policies in the years culminating in the Communist victory met here recently to discuss with historians whether they did an adequate job.

They were asked if, charmed by so charismatic a figure as Chou En-lai, they had misled the public regarding the consequences of a Communist victory. Or had they failed to make it clear that popular support for the Nationalists was vanishing and a Communist victory was inevitable?

Historians seeking to determine the forces that influenced reporting from China questioned the correspondents on their attitudes and biases—the "intellectual baggage" they brought with them to China. Facing the historians were those who had represented the major news services and newspapers. Also present were two newsmen who had stayed on in China after the revolution. One, Julian Schuman, now edits *China Daily*, an English-language paper in Peking. The other, Israel Epstein, former United Press correspondent, edits the magazine *China Reconstructs*.

The meeting was organized by the Center for Asian Studies of Arizona State University in nearby Tempe to provide material for a book exploring the role of American journalists' reporting on China during the critical years after World War II. It appears to be the first time scholars have assembled reporters who covered a particular period and region in an effort to understand what happened.

## INTERNATIONAL NEWS

A number of the participants blamed such publishers as Hearst, Scripps Howard, and Henry R. Luce, head of Time Inc., rather than their correspondents, for playing down the news of a probably inevitable Communist takeover and the deep-seated reasons for it. John Hersey, former Time correspondent and winner of a Pulitzer Prize, told how a reversal in attitude by Luce transformed Time's coverage of China under the aegis of Whittaker Chambers, then its foreign news editor.

Another former Time-Life contributor, Annalee Jacoby, now Mrs. Clifton Fadiman, said a large part of her interview with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Nationalists, was fabricated in New York—presumably by Mr. Chambers. Mrs. Fadiman, who co-authored the book "Thunder Out of China" with Theodore H. White, said her interview with Chiang was published "with questions I did not ask and answers Chiang did not give." Former correspondents for several major newspapers including The New York Times said, however, that their reports, when published, were not substantially altered.

Mr. Hersey told of his early close relationship with Mr. Luce based in part on their both being "mishkids"—the children of missionaries in China. Originally, he said, Mr. Luce warmly supported such programs as the Chinese Industrial Cooperatives that set up model projects in remote areas including those under Communist control.

Then Mr. Luce underwent a basic change of view. Unlike other missionary offspring, Mr. Hersey said, he could not believe that a Communist victory was fast becoming inevitable. Mr. Hersey placed primary blame on two figures: Mr. Luce's wife, Clare Boothe Luce, who was becoming converted to Catholicism, and Whittaker Chambers, Time's Foreign News Editor, who had joined Time in 1939 after quitting the Communist Party and becoming obsessively anti-Communist. It was his

testimony that later helped send Alger Hiss to jail after Hiss was accused of being a Soviet agent.

By 1944, Mr. Hersey said, such correspondents of Time as Theodore White and Mr. Hersey were deeply disturbed by the "monotone of paranoia" they felt Mr. Chambers had imposed on the magazine. Mr. White threatened to quit in protest at treatment of his material.

When Mr. Luce asked the correspondents to evaluate Mr. Chambers' editing, "the replies were unanimous," Mr. Hersey said. They resembled his own response, in which he said his copy was "torn" out of context and tailored to Time's "editorial bias." Mr. Hersey refused Mr. Luce's offer of managing

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**'China was a mystery to all of us as it remains to this day a mystery to the most learned scholars. We never knew who was doing what to whom and why; we could not penetrate Chinese politics.'**—Theodore White

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editorship. Both he and Theodore White quit the magazine, and it was not until later that such gross doctoring of copy at Time ended.

There was wide agreement among newspeople and historians at the conference that even though they reported the steady decay of the Nationalist position and its loss of popular support, little attention was paid to this at home. Americans were unprepared for what happened.

The result, according to John K. Fairbank, Professor Emeritus at Harvard University and a leading authority on China, was "a first-class disaster for the American people." What he called "non-acceptance of a new order in the Chinese Empire" led, he said, to American involvement in Korea and Vietnam.

John Melby, who had been a foreign service officer in China, said that as

anti-Communist fears took hold in the United States little attention was paid to what the press or foreign service reported from China. Mr. Melby coordinated preparation of the government's 1949 White Paper, documenting American involvement in the events leading up to the collapse of the Nationalists.

It was agreed that a very different situation existed during the Japanese invasion of China in the 1930's. The accounts by such correspondents as A. T. Steele of the Chicago Daily News and Tillman Durdin [NF '49] of The New York Times helped align American public opinion on the side of China, particularly after they provided eyewitness accounts of the so-called "rape of Nanking."

Journalists at the meeting were asked whether they had failed to convey what was really happening because they did not speak the language or remained tied to the big cities, whereas the "real China" was rural. It was pointed out that at least some correspondents, such as Jack Belden who worked for United Press and Time-Life, lived with the peasants or traveled with the armies.

So did Agnes Smedley, a graduate of Arizona State (which sponsored the conference), who reported for the Manchester Guardian and New Masses, becoming a champion for the Communist cause.

A few correspondents, such as Mr. Hersey, and foreign service officers, such as John S. Service, a conference participant, were "mishkids" in Mr. Hersey's term and fluent in the language.

The correspondents were asked by several of the historians whether personalities colored their reporting. It was agreed that Chou En-lai was an extremely engaging individual whereas Chiang Kai-shek and his wife were not. The journalists, however, admitted to no bias in their coverage. The Communist communiqués were depended on, they said, because they almost always proved accurate whereas the National-

ist ones were usually not.

Correspondents who visited the Communist headquarters at Yen-an saw what was described there as “the new democracy.” The contrast with the autocratic and corrupt atmosphere at Nationalist headquarters in Chungking was dramatic, according to A.T. Steele. “It was like going from hell to heaven,” he said. He conceded that the “redness” of the Communists that later emerged was de-emphasized because of growing anti-Communism at home. “We were reluctant to paint them as real Communists,” he said, “because we knew that would go against the American grain.”

“We were all very young men, ignorant men, unskilled men,” wrote Theodore White in a letter sent because he could not attend [the conference]. “China was a mystery to all of us as it remains to this day a mystery to the most learned scholars. We never knew who was doing what to whom and why; we could not penetrate Chinese politics. We lived on the slope of a volcano; we could see it steaming, record an eruption now and then, knew the landscape was heaving, and all of us sensed that this volcano would blow its top.”

It was a remarkable meeting, bringing together those who, from radically different perspectives and backgrounds, had seen the Chinese revolution run its course. So much time had elapsed since the participants had seen one another and discussed such issues that, for at least some of us, it was like meeting in heaven and looking back in serenity at a period when, as Teddy White put it, we were young, ignorant and immersed in one of the greatest upheavals of human history. ■

*Walter Sullivan, Science Editor for The New York Times, was in China during the climactic period of the revolution, 1948-49, as the traveling correspondent for The New York Times. He ventured as far west as Sinkiang and remained for another year on the periphery of China, primarily in Korea and Hong Kong.*

Autumn 1983

## Freedom of the Press

### Is the Western press listening to its colleagues in Third World countries?

BY M.G.G. PILLAI

...[F]our main Western news agencies—Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters and Agence France-Presse—provide 90 percent of the daily wordage of the world, the AP alone claiming a third of the total. But they cover the news superficially. In Kuala Lumpur, where I live, they report on the “coups and earthquakes” and the government viewpoint, providing their objectivity in those human rights appeals, over the next hanging. The Reuters bureau is described by its head office in London as a profit center because of the money it makes out of its economic services, and one does get the impression that the news they send out would never be allowed to “kill the golden goose.” While Americans, particularly, sneer at the French government’s subsidy for the Agence France-Presse, that agency provides the best service out of Southeast Asia, as it does out of Kuala Lumpur. But none of them report on the main issues—the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the government decision to impose a national culture based on the culture of the politically dominant Malay community—or, indeed, what makes this country tick. This attitude towards news coverage can be extended to most countries in the Third World.

Taken globally, the United States and Europe share about 40 percent of the foreign correspondents while Africa has one percent. The American agencies, newspapers, radio and television stations have about half their correspondents overseas, much less than what it used to be, in Europe, and most of the European foreign correspondents are in the United States. So

Europe and the United States are better covered than the rest of the world. The Third World and others get their share of attention only when something out of the ordinary takes place. Few Americans would have heard of Uganda until Idi Amin came on the scene or, for that matter, Vietnam before the American involvement.

The demand for a new international information order, which UNESCO has been spearheading, should be seen in this light. News of the Third World in the rest of the world, and even in the Third World itself, often comes through Western agencies which are seen, with some justification, as unsympathetic. These complaints are extraordinarily similar to those made by the United States at the turn of the century against the domination of its news overseas by Reuters. Kent Cooper, the former General Manager of the Associated Press, once wrote a book about this imbalance. He stated: “So Reuters decided what news was to be sent from America. It told the world about the Indians on the war path in the West, the lynchings in the South, and bizarre crimes in the North. The charge for decades was that nothing creditable to America ever was sent.”

The Third World argument is that this criticism can be extended to the Western news agencies, including the AP and UPI. Whether any change should be orchestrated by such a bureaucratic, politicized body as UNESCO is another matter. But the central complaint of bias cannot be faulted. Two examples will suffice. When the Jonestown tragedy happened, American reporters at the scene trying to put the issue in

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context described Guyana as a country that spoke a form of pidgin English and where illiteracy was a major problem. In fact, 85 percent of the people are literate and they speak a pure strain of English, albeit in a local pronunciation, but certainly it is better understood than the patois and pidgin I heard spoken in the United States during my Nieman year. The reports I read on the tragedy tended to fault the government in having allowed the setting up of Jonestown without mentioning that the government was clutching at any straws to help alleviate its economic problems. The other was a cable I received from an American newsmagazine I write for after a Malaysian cabinet minister was sentenced to death for murdering a political rival. It read in part: “Since he was a rising star of the ruling party, how come his clout did not get him off?”

This assumption that fair play, justice and other ideals that the West hold dear cannot be transplanted is widespread, because these efforts are not highlighted, only the transgressions, in stories. Would that the editor had asked such a question to reporters when the magazine was hounding President Nixon over the Watergate affair. Why is it that when General Motors or Ford raises car prices, it is because of inflation, while oil prices rise because of the “greedy” Arabs?

Unfortunately, the world’s news values are dictated by the major Western agencies, who themselves are not prepared to have an international team of correspondents on a par with their home-based staff. Reuters has a corps of predominantly British correspondents, just as the American agencies have mostly Americans. When they do have local correspondents, they limit them to a single country or a region. Agencies do have other nationalities as correspondents but they are, invariably, European or from one of the white countries of the British Commonwealth—Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa and, of course, the United States. Citizens of other countries who are correspondents are

so rarely on a par with home-based staffs that they count in few people’s calculations. If these agencies had considered this aspect of their operations, the criticism against them would not have been so severe.

The well-intentioned plea, like that 60 years ago against the Reuters’ domination of American news, is being argued out of existence by the bureaucrats and journalists of the Third World and Western governments with such premises as apparent threats to freedom of the press or the management of news. This confrontation hides the similarities that exist among governments and among journalists, whether they come from rich, poor, capitalist or Communist countries. The desire to control unfavorable information is common to governments everywhere, only the degree of control differs. And journalists everywhere have the instinct to find out what is happening. The tighter the official control of the press, I have found, the better informed the journalists seem to be....

The blanket denunciation by the Western news agencies of the UNESCO proposals stems from a contested thesis that this would inhibit the free flow of news. Perhaps it would. But my argument is that there is no free flow of news along the lines the Western media suggest. We in the Third World still know more about the lives of Hollywood film stars and the newly rich in the West than we do about our own neighboring countries. An accident on an American freeway still rates better coverage in Malaysia than a landslide in Indonesia that kills hundreds, and it highlights the priorities of the agencies rather than the sub-editor who selects the news on his daily paper, radio and television station and who is often unfairly blamed for it.

It was the United States which while providing all possible help to reporters to cover the news, nevertheless, put incredible restraints on what they could report. And its penchant for a free press does not extend to the countries considered to be within their orbit: The fact that the Western press was

unprepared and shocked at the speed with which the Shah of Iran fell was an admission that it had not covered the country properly. Even The New York Times did not have a man in Tehran when the troubles started, although for nearly two decades Iran was the linchpin of the American effort in the region.

If those correspondents who covered Iran as part of their Middle Eastern beat had done their homework and filed stories about the havoc caused by Harvard or Stanford graduates and others of that ilk by their “modernization” schemes on a country ill-prepared for them, the journalists might have been expelled for their pains, or worse. But at least their readers and viewers would have understood why a septuagenarian exile was able to turn the country upside down in less than a year after the Shah left.

The Western denunciation of the UNESCO scheme appears to be based on geopolitics rather than the desire for a free press. But the Western media do not seem to have any plans for changes except broad generalities. The feeling of being manipulated in a Cold War confrontation is not a situation that Third World countries like to live with. One reason why they support the Soviet espousal of their cause with enthusiasm is that they hope to stand on their own feet in the end.

The Western contention that ultimately it [the UNESCO plan] could only be disastrous is of little import to a country already drowning in its own problems. Any straw is to be grasped, and the enemy you don’t know may turn out to be your friend, but if it doesn’t work out that way, then the already tight belt must be made a little tighter. But it always has been like that since independence. The desire to control one’s destiny is not news, and the new information order is one expression of that feeling. But what is the West doing about it? ■

*M.G.G. Pillai, a 1977 Nieman Fellow, is a freelance writer living in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.*



*Spring 1988*

# In Memoriam: Percy Qoboza

## Nieman Fellow 1976

BY DENNIS PATHER

“It is true that for evil to succeed it takes far too many good people to keep quiet and stand by.”

The words of Percy Peter Tshidiso Qoboza, one of South Africa’s most respected and decorated journalists, who died in Johannesburg on January 17—his 50th birthday. He had suffered a heart attack on Christmas Eve and remained in a serious condition until his death at the Rand Clinic in Johannesburg.

The evil Percy wrote of are the festering sores of apartheid and racial domination threatening to destroy his country; the “good people” are those who continue to live in blissful ignorance of the racial iniquities that surround them, the injustice they refuse to see.

To his credit, Percy could not keep quiet or stand by—and he shouldered the sacrifices without a flinch. As a committed black journalist, state harassment and persecution were but occupational hazards.

In a country where one’s contribution to the struggle for liberation is invariably measured in terms of the government’s repressive response, Percy paid his dues. Two newspapers he edited were closed down by the government, and he had spent many long months in prison without trial.

In the outside world, his prominence was measured by the many awards he received, including honorary doctorates from Tufts University and Amherst College. He was also the recipient of the Golden Pen Freedom Award from the International Publishers Association and the South African Society of Journalists’ Pringle Award.

A widely traveled journalist, Percy was South Africa’s Nieman Fellow in 1976.

But Percy was by no means a saint. He had his fair share of detractors. His tough, uncompromising stand against racial oppression earned him the distrust of many in authority. On the other side of the coin, some black radicals in the townships were far from comfortable with Percy’s gospel of nonviolence and negotiation. But he was a survivor at heart, and fiercely independent—confident at all times what was best for himself, his newspaper, and his country.

As a writer, Percy had few equals among his peers. His earthy, almost gutsy style struck a chord of rare candor his political foes found hard to smother. His writings poignantly reflected the desperation and bitterness of his people under apartheid. He had lived with and experienced the ravages of the system since his boyhood days in the black slum called Sophiatown.

At 14, as a victim of forced government resettlement, he and his family were escorted by armed police in pouring rain in the back of an open army truck. His home in Sophiatown was destroyed to make way for an elite white suburb, Triomf.

Later, as a young man, he was thrown in jail under the country’s notorious pass laws, which required all blacks to carry their identity documents when in so-called white areas. It was a humiliating experience which earned him a criminal record.

Of that experience, Percy later wrote: “For every man you throw in jail for a pass offence, you release later a potential enemy of the state. Nobody who has not gone through the humiliating experience of being locked up like a common criminal can understand this. Take it from me, it’s shocking.”

A staunch Catholic and regular churchgoer, he entertained early ambitions of becoming a priest, but after graduating in theology at Lesotho University, returned home to enter journalism.

Long time friend and colleague Aggrey Klaaste [Nieman Fellow ’80] recently recalled the escapades of their youth when he and Percy often joined a group of white Catholic priests for spirited discussions about the problems of the world. “We argued religion, discussed politics and all manner of things with these prelates over copious quantities of booze, to the extent that when the money ran out, we convinced the prelates to raid the collection plate. We cleaned that out. Not once, if my memory serves me right.”

After five years as a cadet reporter on *The World*, Percy was appointed news editor and later the newspaper’s editor in 1974.

September 1975 saw Percy nominated as South Africa’s Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. It was a critical choice for the South African Nieman Conference who feared then their link with the prestigious program was nearing an end. “We chose Percy and he made a magnificent breakthrough,” recalled Conference convenor Aubrey Sussens [Nieman Fellow ’61]. “Not only was his academic record impeccable, but his easygoing personality, his integrity and, above all, his sense of humor won the day.”

Such was the man’s charisma and charm that an American Nieman colleague, Peter Behr [Nieman Fellow ’76] now *The Washington Post*’s Assistant Managing Editor for financial news, says Percy became the most important teacher the group was to encounter that year.

Boston University professor James C. Thomson, Jr., then the Curator of the Nieman program, remembers Percy as “an immensely complicated, troubled person.”

“Percy struggled against great tides of conflict, the greatest of which was, for him, reconciling the mystery of the cruelty and hate he faced with his strong

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religious commitment. His sensitivity was both his great strength and great impairment. The pain of the situation was almost intolerable.”

On his return to South Africa, Percy could so easily have fallen into the trap which lured some of his black predecessors. As editor of a mass circulation newspaper aimed at black readers, he could have taken the easy way out, dished out the marketable diet of sex, sensation and sport, and reaped the financial rewards (as well as a paternalistic pat on the back from his employers).

But Percy had other ideas. He realized that in his profession most black journalists were not given the breaks they deserved. Those employed on white-owned newspapers were rarely allowed to indulge in any serious analysis of the political situation. They were not free to articulate the demands, fears and aspirations of their people in the columns of white newspapers.

The Soweto riots which broke on June 16, 1976 provided the occasion for black journalists to show their mettle. They were familiar with the battlefield—the poverty-stricken, soulless townships in which they lived. They spoke the language of the townships, but more importantly, understood the complexities and nuances of black politics.

As head of a major newspaper at the time, Percy was the right man at the right time—black journalists saw him as a strong figure of inspiration. They rose to the occasion, providing readers in South Africa and the world with vivid eyewitness accounts and pictures of one of the major political happenings of our time.

Percy later observed in his writings: “For the first time in my life, I could distinguish between what is right and what is wrong.

“The thing that scared me most during my Cambridge year [at Harvard] was the fact that I had accepted injustice and discrimination as ‘part and parcel of our traditional way of life.’ After my year, the things I had accepted made me angry. It is because of this that the character of my newspaper has changed tremendously. We are an angry newspaper. For this reason we have made some formidable enemies, and my own personal life is not worth a cent.... But I see my role and the role of those people who share my views as articulating, without fear or favor, the aspirations of our people. It is a very hard thing to do.”

Under Percy, *The World* became a much sought-after publication. As a source of news and information on the black political front, it was gospel; to the government, it was seen as the enemy.

To the government’s chagrin, Percy was becoming a legend for his crusading style of journalism; his editorials and popular “Percy’s Pitch” column earned him acclaim both at home and abroad. In the black community, he was regarded as one of the champions

of the cause of justice and liberation.

Percy’s rise to prominence did not go unnoticed in the corridors of power. To the authorities, it was unacceptable that a black man should oppose them with such vigor. On October 19, 1977, as part of a blanket crackdown on the black consciousness movement, the government banned *The World* and its Sunday edition—*Weekend World*. That day the *Rand Daily Mail* published a page one picture of a forlorn Percy beside his idle printing press, the headline reading “The End of Percy’s World.”

Along with scores of others, Percy and Klaaste were thrown into jail for six months under the government’s detention without trial laws. They were never brought before a court of law to answer any charges.

After his release, Percy bounced back as editor of *Post Transvaal* and *Sunday Post*—two newspapers launched to replace the banned *World* and *Weekend World*—and maintained the worthy traditions of courage and integrity in journalism for which he became famous.

In 1980 he was invited to the United States as editor in residence of the



Percy Qoboza (first row, third from left) with his 1976 Nieman classmates.

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now-defunct Washington Star. During his absence the government forced the closure of the Post Transvaal. The newspaper was shut down on a technicality although the authorities made it clear they would have banned the publication in any case.

Percy later took a position as a public relations consultant, but returned to active journalism as associate editor of City Press in 1984, becoming its editor a year later. The newspaper titles changed, but his inimitable style did not. Even at City Press, his editorials and regular column—now titled “Percy’s Itch”—were compulsive reading to his thousands of fans.

In the hazardous minefield of South African politics, the role of a respected black editor extends beyond his newspaper. He is variously expected to fill in as a negotiator, arbitrator, political spokesman, and opinion-maker, roles which Percy filled with spectacular courage and aplomb. When negotiating with government ministers in Cape Town on issues affecting his community, he was often addressed familiarly as “Percy, old chap” by officials across the table. Back in the ghettos, his rapport with young black radicals was at most times based on mutual respect.

“Percy was one whose protest was voiced in thinking terms. And that is what made him a force in the struggle,” observed Jack Foisie [Nieman Fellow ’47], a former United States foreign correspondent in South Africa. Recalling his contacts with Percy, Foisie said: “As an anti-apartheid leader, I found him unusual in that he kept his anger over the injustices well hidden or perhaps, it would be better said that he kept it under control.

“Whenever we talked, Percy’s commentary on a new development in the racial struggle would often be expressed in droll humor, the cutting edge barely showing.”

Percy realized that as a highly visible opponent of the government, he was under constant security police surveillance. Foisie remembers his late night calls to the Qoboza home in Soweto, when seeking comment on a breaking

story. “It was rare in that given the limitations of the Soweto phone system, in contrast to the modern system in the white area, I was able to reach him at all.

“Although both he and I assumed that the call was being monitored, Percy never fudged. ‘Well, since what you write, Jack, is for the world, no sense in not letting the South Africans know about it, too,’ he would say.”

Percy’s writings, incisive and perceptive at most times, were not aimed solely at black readers. He was frequently invited to write for publications aimed at whites. In a 1981 article aimed at white readers, he wrote: “If you sometimes get mad at me, because the sentiments I express keep you awake at night, then I am glad. I do not see why I should bear the brunt of insomnia worrying about what will happen tomorrow. If many of us can keep awake at night, then maybe we will do the sensible thing—talk together about our joint future.”

That passage probably comes closest to epitomizing Percy’s dream of a future South Africa—a stable and peaceful country born out of a spirit of negotiation and conciliation among all its people.

Percy was philosophical about many things in life. But if he harbored notions that death provided the ultimate sanctuary from the pains of repression, he was sorely mistaken. They seemed to haunt him even after death.

Soon after the announcement of his death, the Divisional Commissioner of police for Soweto, Brigadier AP van Zyl slapped several security restrictions on his funeral. They demanded the funeral service at Regina Mundi church be restricted to 200 people; there should be only one presiding priest; there were to be no political speeches. Security police also warned the family not to allow speeches by anyone representing the United Democratic Front or the Azanian People’s Organization (AZAPO)—the two main political forces operating in the black townships.

Fears grew that the strong police and army presence would antagonize

mourners. Clashes between police and funeral mourners are fairly commonplace in areas like Soweto.

Defying the restrictions, over 5,000 arrived to pay their last respects to Percy, the man they loved, admired and respected. Hundreds of police and army personnel in armored vehicles lined the route to the Doornkop cemetery while a light plane flew low and menacingly over the meandering procession. Some mourners were visibly upset at what they saw as unnecessary intimidation.

A group of youth in the procession danced and chanted political slogans, but there were no violent incidents. It was a dignified farewell.

Among the crowd were diplomats from around the world, including the United States Ambassador Edward Perkins. The media was out in full force and included the foreign press corps and representatives of black and white media in South Africa. There were also trade union officials and local dignitaries like Winnie Mandela and Nthatho Motlana.

Tributes to Percy were paid by many, including those on behalf of Harvard University President Derek Bok and the Nieman Foundation. In his tribute, President Bok said: “Harvard University grieves at the loss of its Nieman alumnus, counselor and friend. We mourn Percy’s death as we rejoiced in his life. South African journalism, which has suffered much, now suffers more.”

In a cable to Percy’s wife, Ann Qoboza, Howard Simons, Curator of the Nieman Foundation, said: “On behalf of Niemans everywhere and freedom-loving journalists everywhere, we send you and your children our sincerest condolences. Nothing has saddened Lippmann House more than Percy’s untimely death. May his memory and that of his courage and integrity and hope be an inspiration to all. He will be missed but never forgotten. Cry the beloved man.”... ■

*Dennis Pather, a 1988 Nieman Fellow, is Editor of the Post Natal, Durban, South Africa.*

*Winter/Spring 1978*

# Letters About Qoboza's Imprisonment

December 7, 1977

Honorable Donald B. Sole  
South African Embassy  
3051 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20008

Dear Mr. Ambassador:

As representatives of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism, Harvard University, and of the Nieman Fellowship Class of 1975-76, we are grateful to you for meeting with us at your Embassy on Friday morning, December 2nd. We appreciated your giving a full hour of your time to that discussion.

As you know, we asked to see you because of our deep concern, first, regarding the continued imprisonment of our close friend and colleague, Percy Qoboza, a Nieman Fellow in 1975-1976, and second, regarding the ominous implications for press freedom in South Africa that arise from the jailing and banning of several journalists and the banning of the Daily and Weekend World newspapers.

We wanted your Government to know that concern and outrage on both matters are widespread and continuing throughout our nation and, unless soon defused by your Government's actions, will do irreparable harm to United States-South Africa relations. Some of the evidence for our assessment was contained in Mr. Thomson's letter to you of December 2nd, delivered to you at that meeting, and the nationwide press clippings that accompanied it.

Although we found ourselves in disagreement with much of what you and your associate, Mr. Noffke,

said in defense of your Government's policies, we were grateful for the several assurances and suggestions you were able to offer our delegation:

First, we welcome your "personal assurance" about the safety and physical well-being of Percy Qoboza during his imprisonment.

Second, we welcome your assurance that fully adequate medical care will be provided to Mr. Qoboza during his imprisonment (despite, as you yourself noted, the disturbing evidence to the contrary presented on this subject during the Biko incident).

Third, we welcome your personal agreement with us that Mr. Qoboza is not, in fact, a Communist or Marxist revolutionary and thereby is not a threat to your State.

Fourth, we accept your thoughtful offer to have Nieman Fellows and the Nieman Foundation communicate directly with Mr. Qoboza through letters sent in your care and forwarded in your Embassy's diplomatic bag to him in the prison where he is incarcerated.

Fifth, we accept your offer that we communicate through you and your Embassy's bag our views on the Qoboza-World case to the Review Committee set up to look into the October detentions.

And finally, we fervently hope that you are correct in your assurance that the Qoboza case will be reviewed within three-to-six months. But we urgently suggest that the review be scheduled much sooner since, in our view, Mr. Qoboza's imprisonment, without formal charges or trial, is a travesty of "justice" as that term is understood in the civilized world in which South Africa claims mem-

bership.

Simultaneous with this letter, we are sending copies of it, through your volunteered good offices, to Percy Qoboza and to his wife, Ann. We will also be attaching a copy of this letter to the formal statement we will shortly be addressing to the Review Committee. Finally, we are sending a copy of this letter to the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Mr. Richard Moose, so that he will be fully informed of our concern and our efforts on this matter.

In closing, we cannot refrain from noting that your cordial reception of our delegation, and your kind reassurances to us, were severely undermined later on the very day of our visit by the Pretoria magistrate's decision in the Biko case. We must inevitably now wonder how, in fact, a person of your obvious integrity and goodwill can give us any meaningful assurance about the safety and physical well-being of any Black South African held in your prisons. In view of the Biko revelations and outcome, it is more urgent than ever that your Government release Percy Qoboza, permit him to work as a journalist, permit his newspapers to be published, and move toward conciliation with the vast Black majority of your nation's citizens.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Behr, Nieman Fellow 1976  
Ron Javers, Nieman Fellow 1976  
Jim Rubin, Nieman Fellow 1976  
Ray White, Nieman Fellow 1976  
James C. Thomson, Jr., Ph.D.  
Curator  
Nieman Foundation for Journalism

*Winter/Spring 1978*

Embassy of South Africa  
Ambassade Van Suid-Afrika  
Washington, D.C. 20008

13 December 1977

Dr. James C. Thomson, Jr.  
Curator,  
Nieman Foundation for Journalism  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

Dear Dr. Thomson,

Thank you for your letter of 7 December about our discussion of Percy Qoboza's detention, received only today.

Two points:

1. I said that on the evidence at my disposal I would not regard Qoboza as a Communist or Marxist revolutionary. I did not express any opinion on whether or not he and his activities constituted a threat to the state—since the evidence which led to his detention is not at my disposal.

2. Because of the differences between the South African and U.S. legal systems with respect to the limitations of a coroner's inquest, the United States press has presented a very distorted picture of the precise nature of the magistrate's findings in the Biko inquest. Sir David Napley, Past President of the British Law Society, who attended the inquest as an independent observer, while severely critical of the actions

of many of the witnesses giving evidence, had this to say *inter alia* about the inquest and its presiding officer (vide London Times of December 9).

“Upon my arrival in South Africa I was virtually unfamiliar with both the law and procedure of the South African legal system. It follows that in observing the inquest I had, of necessity, to use as the yardstick against which to base my opinion, my experience of the English legal system over the last 45 years....

“I was concerned whether the inquest was conducted with thoroughness and fairness. I am abundantly satisfied that in so far as the South African Government was concerned, the fullest possible inquiry was facilitated from the moment that the inquest began.

“...However, it was evident to me that the chief magistrate was concerned to insure that the inquiry extended over every relative facet. Indeed, there were some aspects of which it may be said that far more time was devoted to it than was justified.

“I am in full accord with the findings of the magistrate that Mr. Biko died as a result of the head injury associated with extensive brain damage and resulting complications. I also wholly accept that on the evidence adduced before the magistrate he had no alternative but to find in relation to the verdicts open

to him under Section 16 of the Inquests Act that he could not, on the evidence available, determine that death was brought about by an act or omission involving an offence on the part of any person, i.e., any particular person. On the principle that in an Act the singular also includes the plural, this would also be true in respect of any particular persons.

“I do not, however, apprehend on a strict reading of Section 16 that it would have been irregular for the magistrate to have found that the death was caused by one or more of a group of persons without specifying such persons with particularity. In my opinion, however, he was demonstrably wrong in adding the rider that the head injuries which resulted in death, were probably sustained in a ‘scuffle’ with the police at police headquarters.”

I would add that as the papers in the case have been referred to the Attorney General and as a civil action is also pending, it would be improper for me, under the sub judice rule which is applied strictly in South Africa, to comment further.

Yours sincerely,

D.B. Sole  
Ambassador

*Spring 1992*

# China and the Foreign Press

Sources' visceral fear gives way to ironic wariness, although security agents seem ever present.

BY SARAH LUBMAN

Professor Wu's son opened the door a crack and peered into the concrete hallway with a worried frown. "My father isn't home," he said curtly. As I turned to leave, he added, "Don't bother coming back." Later I wished the professor's son had softened his remark with a plea for understanding, but on that stuffy day in July 1989 he didn't have to.

People's Liberation Army troops had mowed down unarmed demonstrators around Tiananmen Square just weeks earlier. Despite his advanced age, Professor Wu—who asked that his full name not be used for fear of reprisals—had spoken out in support of students' demands for a more open political system. The last thing Wu's family wanted was a Western journalist at the

door, much less the questioning by undercover police likely to follow.

## Reporter's Dilemma Never Changed

In the two and a half years since the crackdown, the visceral fear of foreign reporters expressed by the professor's son and many other Chinese has given way to a calm and often ironic wariness, but my dilemma as a reporter never changed. Should I continue to see Chinese friends and sources when I knew I was being followed? Or did the fact that my contacts were only questioned after our meetings, not arrested, mean I could shrug off the unrelenting presence of security agents?

Armed with clumsily concealed walkie-talkies and hidden cameras,

undercover police from China's Ministry of State Security, the country's KGB, have continued to monitor and harass foreign correspondents and their Chinese friends and acquaintances since 1989. Some Chinese have received warnings in person, along with friendly encouragement to inform on their reporter contacts. Others are monitored more subtly, hearing through friends or colleagues of ominous visits by security agents to their work units. Two friends of mine learned from sympathetic coworkers that undercover police had come to inspect their dossiers, or *dangan*, the personal files kept on every Chinese citizen.

## Trip to Sichuan Filmed By Police

Obsessive monitoring of foreign correspondents in China reaches beyond the boundaries of Beijing. Permission to cover outlying regions must be granted by local authorities, who take pains to steer foreign journalists toward showcase villages and enterprises and away from poorer districts. Authorities routinely deny the foreign press access to Tibet and to China's impoverished regions. When local Foreign Affairs bureaus grant permission to visit, the trip may be subject to monitoring by police apparently operating under their own set of orders. Undercover police tailed and videotaped two American reporters during a March 1990 visit to Chongqing, the industrial heart of central Sichuan province, for no discernible reason. A plainclothes policeman even filmed the reporters as they emerged from an innocuous scheduled interview with city officials at Chongqing's light industry bureau.

Within Beijing, constant surveillance has a maddening effect. I was tailed for a year and a half, from June 1990 until my departure in early November 1991. The apparent aim was to thwart the process of gathering news and to silence dissent, and the techniques employed were frustratingly effective.

I wasn't able to ignore the police, despite the professed indifference of the majority of my Chinese friends.



*Photo by Stan Grossfeld, 1992 Nieman Fellow, The Boston Globe.*

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“It’s nothing,” scoffed one Beijing intellectual after seeing me to the door and discovering two plainclothes police in long leather overcoats lurking outside his apartment block, muttering theatrically into walkie-talkies.

Other acquaintances were less cavalier. Older Chinese who bore the scars of the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution asked with evident embarrassment if we could meet less often. A few people stopped calling altogether.

Some took to using cryptic aliases over the telephone, which clearly was bugged. Over time I came to recognize friends’ voices from a simple hello. One friend wryly chose the English name “Tom Sawyer” to identify himself.

“Tom” was on the right track: Humor is one of the few plausible antidotes to the insidious workings of China’s security machine. What other reaction could there be to the inept security agent who, when confronted, claimed he had been dispatched by a mysterious stranger to follow me and deliver a gift of chocolates? (The candy never materialized.) Men with walkie-talkies followed me shopping and to the health club.

### The Mercedes-Benz With Black Windows

State security goons routinely tail reporters in Beijing by car, motorcycle, bicycle and on foot, with lookouts posted at major overpasses and intersections. After many months of omnipresent and often heavy-handed surveillance, I began to recognize the faces of different agents responsible for various locations.

Some agents were elderly, some young. Most were male, except for a sharp-eyed fiftyish woman posted on an overpass and a young woman who followed a Chinese-speaking Japanese friend to my compound several times. The unwanted company didn’t take much observation to detect. Around June 1990, just after the first anniversary of the Beijing massacre, I became aware of the persistent shadow of a Mercedes-Benz sedan in my rear-view

mirror. The car changed colors and models, but in the beginning it was always a gleaming Mercedes and the windows were always black. Remembering similar tales from other correspondents who had been followed, I would occasionally conduct a crude test by pulling off to the side of the road.

My followers would do the same, usually hanging back by several car lengths. As I turned back onto the road, so would the Mercedes, nosing slowly but with a deliberate, sharklike motion into my wake. Subtlety was not a priority.

### Security to Some Only a Nuisance

On the contrary, conspicuousness appeared to be part of the desired effect. Some correspondents disagreed, viewing China’s undercover army as more inept than sinister. Either way, the sum effect of surveillance was a creeping claustrophobia that intensified with time.

At first the monitoring was merely a nuisance. In moments of vanity or the effects of too many spy novels I even tried to take the extra attention as a compliment. In fact, I was a novice reporter, with far less experience and no better contacts than many other resident, Chinese-speaking foreign journalists.

The only distinguishing feature in my résumé might have been my chance enrollment at Beijing University from 1988 to 1989, at the height of the student-led democracy movement. It was at that time, when Chinese students and citizens were most receptive to foreign journalists, that I made the transition from student to reporter.

This personal metamorphosis was intensified by the sense of elation shared by many foreign journalists at the time, who were moved and sometimes overwhelmed by the changes they were witnessing. During the 1989 protests, Chinese students and marchers hailed the foreign press as a mouthpiece for their cause. This was only natural in a country where the concepts of press and propaganda are in-

separable. Western reporters were instantly welcomed and sometimes literally shoved to the front of crowds.

“Make way for the journalist!” shouted a worker in late May, when a reporter tried to push through crowds to talk to soldiers barred from advancing on Tiananmen Square by incensed citizens. The crowd immediately parted.

The contrast after the crackdown was dramatic. During the demonstrations, foreign journalists were given constant access and frequently summoned to impromptu press conferences. After June 4, 1989, we were not only shut out but feared, lied to and even classified as unfriendly. One Western reporter caught sight of an official form handed out to Chinese interviewees in 1991—presumably by the local Foreign Affairs office—that ranked foreign journalists by name from “friendly” to “prejudiced,” with several degrees in between.

To the hard-line Chinese government that had crushed the movement, we were no different from spies. To students and liberal officials, we represented risks that many were and are still willing to take. Government repression has had the ironic effect of increasing information leaks by those infuriated with the present regime and undaunted by state security’s watchful glare. Internal policing appeared to have intensified following the collapse of Soviet bloc Communism, which internal Chinese propaganda attributed to lax political control.

### Surveillance Begins on Leaving Compound

Surveillance brings with it a sequence of tics and gestures that, once learned, will always catch the eye. Leaving one of the walled compounds where all Beijing-based foreign journalists must live would trigger a daily ritual that never failed to infuriate me. The ritual began with the craned necks and outstretched hands of watchers posted at the gate as they reached for the telephone to report my departure.

Next came the gleam of metal on an

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overpass as a plainclothes agent whipped out a walkie-talkie to report my progress. Avoiding the overpasses didn't help. At key intersections throughout the city such as Dongdan and Dongsu, a telltale bobbing motion identified more plainclothes police as they hunched over to speak into lumpy breast pockets or little black bags.

The monitoring didn't end on the street. For weeks on end, my telephone would ring every time I walked through my front door. No one was ever on the other end. On several occasions, the UPI office telephone line cut out abruptly at the mention of sensitive names or topics.

### 'Like a Sickness...Now It's Back'

The suffocating paranoia was compounded by frustration that the surveillance was taking effect, causing some contacts to shy away or to ask nervously if I had brought my "tail." One evening I emerged from a government official's home to find a surveillance van parked ostentatiously in the narrow alley outside. The van's dark windows and long directional microphone attached to the roof gave it the look of an alien predator stalking the crumbling back alleys of Beijing. The official nevertheless continued to see me.

One Beijing teacher aptly likened the fear of China's security apparatus to a long-dormant disease. "It's like a sickness," the teacher said on a winter night in 1989. "We all used to have it in the old days, and now it's back."

The moment the teacher finished the sentence, there was a prophetic knock at the door. We both froze as a friend answered the apartment door and fended off an inquisitive building monitor, who had allegedly come to "collect the water bill"—at 8:30 p.m., after seeing me park outside and walk upstairs.

The harassment experienced by Western journalists naturally pales beside that heaped upon Chinese dissidents and ordinary citizens, who suffer a stream of petty indignities designed



In a village which sits amid mountains known as "Long Hills," a woman sifts wheat.  
*Photo by Stan Grossfeld, The Boston Globe.*

to break the spirit. Having the freedom to leave, I was less fatalistic than the Chinese I knew and lacked the sense not to fight back. I never grew accustomed to the idea of being watched, even knowing that the sole purpose of the act was to intimidate and disrupt.

### Interview Requests Rejected or Delayed

The most damaging effect of the Chinese government's treatment of foreign journalists is that it breeds the very hostility that authorities assume in the first place. The foreign correspondents I knew in Beijing were experienced professionals who had not traveled to China bent on opposing the government, much less subverting it through "bourgeois liberalism," as Chinese propaganda claims. Since Tiananmen Square, the government has cast Western journalists and Americans in particular in the roles of hostile adversaries. A brewing U.S.-China trade dispute and recent American coverage of the sensitive topic of Chinese prison

labor exports has further dampened official willingness to receive American reporters.

The reluctance surfaces in countless petty ways. Interview requests in the capital often are turned down or granted only after delays of weeks or months. One American journalist was unable to get the interviews he wanted even with the intercession by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, which has become increasingly aware of foreign journalists' frustration. When granted, interviews can be grinding tests of patience, often preceded by a lengthy, prepared "introduction" to which the reporter is expected to listen without interrupting.

### No Big Problem, No Small Problem

One typical interview that comes to mind is a 1990 meeting with provincial officials in Anhui, one of China's poorer provinces. I was traveling with Dan Southerland, former Beijing correspondent for The Washington Post, and after much reluctance local bureau-



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crats had agreed to meet with us to discuss Anhui's economy and other topics. Unlike more urbane bureaucrats in much-visited cities such as Shanghai, the Anhui officials appeared unaccustomed to speaking to foreigners and distinctly ill at ease.

The meeting yielded no useful information, save a heap of unconfirmable statistics on Anhui's economic and agricultural triumphs. At least five senior provincial officials sat around a drab room in stuffed armchairs, staring uneasily into the distance, and declining to answer even the most innocuous questions. As the would-be interview succumbed to the pressing inertia in the room, Southerland tried one last desperate question: What was Anhui's greatest social problem?

Silence. An official from the provincial planning commission finally broke it with his reply: "Anhui doesn't have any large social problems." Southerland persisted: What was the largest small social problem? The straight-faced answer was predictable: "We don't have any small social problems." End of interview. The relieved officials were in such a hurry to leave the room that one left his glasses behind on the table.

### Same Scenario In Other Places

I spent two and a half years in China plagued by the sense that I wasn't reporting effectively due to scenarios such as the one above, which was to be played out in similar rooms in many other Chinese cities. It is simply not possible to report accurately on the Chinese countryside while under local supervision. The most enlightening trip I made outside Beijing was a 24-hour sojourn to a village in Jiangsu in early 1990, accompanied by a Chinese friend. The Chinese economy was still reeling from an austerity program imposed in 1988. Millions of enterprises had been shut down or were operating at half capacity, but the effect was difficult to gauge under the usual constraints on the foreign press.

On a narrow dirt footpath cutting

through the village, we met a retired man who had just withdrawn all his money from the bank and stashed it under his mattress. The reason he gave was that he "didn't trust" the bank, which had recently run out of money. In the center of town, male workers idled by production halts and rural factory shutdowns sat on their front stoops tending babies.

### Turmoil Feared More Than Authority

The peasants in Jiangsu were sarcastic and cynical toward the government, yet by no means on the brink of revolt. Many invoked the traditional Chinese fear of chaos, or luan, saying they preferred authoritarian rule to social turmoil.

Such encounters offered rare and unfettered glimpses of life in a Chinese village that would have been impossible under the required supervision. Official trips to the countryside are always chaperoned, preventing spontaneous conversation. During a visit to a village in Sichuan last March, a local official hurriedly waved me away from the sole peasant who called out a greeting, explaining, "Don't mind her. She's mentally ill."

### An Incident Shows Need for Caution

Under the circumstances, how can foreign journalists get stories out without compromising their Chinese sources? There are no ground rules, and each correspondent must find his or her own equilibrium. I personally found that some of the best stories I encountered in China could not be written because they risked endangering others.

An incident that occurred toward the end of my stay confirmed that my caution had been warranted. Less than a month before I was to leave Beijing, two men from a research institute under the Ministry of State Security approached both me and James Miles, the BBC correspondent, in what ap-

peared to be an attempted setup. The men claimed at first to be seeking cooperation with "foreign scholars" on a private social survey. A second conversation yielded a persistent interest in the CIA and assertions that "certain Western journalists" were intelligence agents. At the third and final meeting, one of the two men became impatient and gestured angrily at a copy of Newsweek that featured a story on Chinese labor camps.

"Don't you understand?" he exploded. "We can get you much better information than that, but we need money." I explained that I had no interest in their "survey" and was unable to help them. Such a heavy-handed attempt to incriminate a journalist seemed almost too obvious to believe.

For all the time spent chafing under the irritation of surveillance, surprises popped up when I least expected them. One of the most unpleasant took place on a cool afternoon last October.

I had the day off and spent most of it visiting a Chinese family. Undercover police on motorbikes had followed my car on the way to their home, but appeared to have lost me after I took several wrong turns through a bewildering maze of alleys. Perhaps they took my bad sense of direction for deviousness.

No one was in sight when I parked and entered the building. Yet several hours and innumerable cups of tea later, when the family stepped outside to see me off, someone was waiting. A gray-faced man holding a poorly concealed video camera appeared out of nowhere, pointed it at us and abruptly rounded the corner.

Less than a minute later, I nudged my car around the same corner. The alley was empty. The encounter had been like a hallucination, and yet it had happened—for a moment, the fisheye lens of a police state had stared us in the face.

"I don't give a damn," my Chinese friend said when I mentioned the security agent. For all his nonchalance, the sudden intrusion had the force of a brutal slap in the face.

## Fighting Silence Is Difficult War

Two months later, ensconced in the comfort of home in California, the brutality of that slap came back to me in a passage by Ryszard Kapuscinski, a Polish journalist who spent many years in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. He wrote in “The Soccer War”:

“Today one hears about noise pollution, but silence pollution is worse. Noise pollution affects the nerves; silence pollution is a matter of human lives. No one defends the maker of a loud noise, whereas those who establish silence in their own states are protected by an apparatus of repression. That is why the battle against silence is so difficult.

“It would be interesting to research the media systems of the world to see how many service information and how many service silence and quiet. Is there more of what is said or of what is not said? One could calculate the number of people working in the publicity industry. What if you could calculate the number of people working in the silence industry? Which number would be greater?”

The same applies to China. Until restrictions loosen, foreign journalists in Beijing are in the unenviable position of trying to defy the silence industry without endangering those who choose to speak. It is not an easy task.

*Sarah Lubman began stringing for the Hong Kong Standard in 1989, then was hired as a freelancer by The Washington Post. After the Tiananmen Square suppression, UPI hired her full-time as a “super stringer,” a polite term for doing the work but not getting the pay of a regular correspondent. In two and a half years with UPI she also filed stories to National Public Radio, The Boston Globe, the San Francisco Examiner, and The Chronicle of Higher Education.*

Summer 1992

# The Kept Mexican Press

Cash handouts to publishers, editors and reporters determine what newspapers print.

BY RAYMUNDO RIVA PALACIO

Foreigners have long believed that the Mexican government controls the press through the sale of newsprint by a company the government owns.

Are they right?

Wrong.

Foreigners have long believed that the Mexican government imposes direct censorship on the press.

Are they right?

Wrong.

Foreigners have long believed that the Mexican government exercises an overwhelming power to suppress or publicize any news or opinion it wants.

Are they right?

Again, wrong.

Conclusion: There is a free press and freedom of expression in Mexico.

Right?

Once more, wrong.

Let’s see:

Freedom of expression is protected under the Mexican Constitution. Freedom of expression is widely respected in Mexico; you can talk freely without fear of ending up in jail. You can criticize government officials and institutions. As long as you don’t insult them, you don’t break the law to criticize them, and the civil order is maintained, you will be fine.

Nevertheless, that doesn’t mean Mexicans enjoy a free press or freedom of expression. The issue of freedom of the press in Mexico is complex in many ways.

There are no censors in Mexican newspapers, but there is censorship anyway. The tool mostly used for suppression of ideas and thoughts is not government censorship but the greater

evil of self-censorship.

The Mexican press is never the bridge between those who govern and those who are governed. The Mexican press is not the mirror of the society but the means through which elites communicate with each other. Most of the Mexican press is not responding to the people’s needs and demands, for the press is far from them. The Mexican press has turned itself into a microphone reserved for the powers that be. It’s deaf to ordinary people.

Still, the newspaper business in Mexico is a great business.

## Million in Profits on 5,000 Circulation

Take, for example, the case of a newspaper in Mexico City with a daily circulation of 5,000. The newspaper confidentially reported a profit of almost one million dollars in the first quarter in 1989. How could that be possible? How could that newspaper, calling itself a “national newspaper” with over 250 employees, be a profitable operation?

It is not magic. It is not witchcraft. It is not a very capable administration. It is Mexico.

That newspaper is one of almost 250 newspapers in Mexico that get most of their revenues from government advertising. The government and many Mexican politicians buy space—in the form of news stories—in the newspapers to reproduce speeches or publicize their actions. But the newspapers never advise their readers that what they read is paid propaganda. Readers may think they are reading a

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news story, when in fact, it is not. The government, the politicians, and a growing number of companies and businessmen pay to print propaganda in the disguise of news information. Politicians can buy almost everything they want.

Newspapers even sell space on the front page. They used to call those spaces "100 agate lines," meaning they would sell two paragraphs, plus headlines and subtitles. The average cost for that space is around U.S. \$30,000. Political advertising is more expensive than commercial advertising. If the political ad is placed late at night, it may cost up to 90 percent more.

Mexican readers are continuously cheated by this practice. It is normal for someone to read in a Mexico City newspaper that the governor of a remote northern state dedicated an elementary school. Or that the governor of another state sent the Mexican President a greeting because of his last trip overseas. Or that a top official gave a speech to an unknown organization. Or that the wife of a cabinet minister began the annual Red Cross campaign.

Who really cares? Only politicians, for they work for themselves and their bosses, not for the people. That is part of the unique Mexican political system, where the press plays all roles except to serve the people. Needless to say, Mexicans are reading fewer and fewer newspapers. Ac-

According to circulation figures released by an advertising organization in 1990, the 25 Mexico City newspapers had a combined circulation of 2,916,625 copies a day. Raul Trejo Delarbre, a Mexican media researcher, said in a magazine article in 1990 that the combined circulation was in fact, only 731,000. Both estimates included sports and sex and scandal newspapers, which account for almost half of the total circulation in each survey.

Ten out of those 25 newspapers consider themselves "national newspapers." They are what people call

"major" newspapers. Their news articles and opinion pages are said to shape public opinion. That is not so. Most Mexicans don't read these "major" newspapers. The combined circulation of the largest 10 is 279,000 copies a day, according to Mr. Trejo's survey. Today, only one of those carries almost no government advertisements. In fact, fewer than a dozen newspapers in the country are published with little government advertising.

### Withdrawal of Ads Would Kill Papers

If the government were to withdraw its advertisements from newspapers and magazines, most of them would die. Four of those "major" newspapers have a daily circulation of less than 10,000 copies, and two print no more than 20,000 copies a day. Only two print more than 65,000 copies a day.

Indeed, Mexican newspapers do not really inform the general public. Most of the Mexican people get their information either from the radio or from

the same manner. Newspapers do not have to prove that their circulations are as high as contended because they rely on government advertising. Thus most of them do not rely on commercial advertising for revenues. In the process, newspapers and journalists are vulnerable to coercion and political blackmail.

### Three Presidents Acted Against Papers

Officials may threaten to withdraw advertisements if the newspaper or the journalist refuses to print what those officials want to get in print—or more often, refuses to suppress what they want to suppress. President José Lopez Portillo halted government advertising that was vital to two magazines, *Proceso* and *Critica Política*, because they were critical of his policies, in the early 1980's. *Proceso* managed to survive by getting commercial ads but *Critica Política* folded. President Miguel de la Madrid withdrew all government advertisements from the newspaper *El Financiero* because officials disliked the way the newspaper covered the debt agreement negotiations. President Carlos Salinas de Gortari followed suit and decided not to include a reporter of the newspaper in any of the presidential trips, except one, in October 1989. However, *El Financiero* kept publishing by selling commercial advertisements.

In most other cases, editors and reporters follow the official line. Reporters count on commissions they get for each government ad they bring in. Reporters compete with each other in newsrooms to get the richest beats—rich not in information but in political propaganda, because that is the main source of their income.

Publishers pay between five and 12 percent commission to reporters. That is why they also get away with low salaries for journalists. Commercial advertisements are usually handled by the advertising department.

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**Officials may threaten to withdraw advertisements if the newspaper or the journalist refuses to print what those officials want to get in print—or more often, refuses to suppress what they want to suppress.**

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the TV. What the written press has to say is not among their main concerns. Mexican newspapers do not shape political opinion or build consent. Mexico City newspapers do not even reach six percent of Mexico City's population. Their praises, their criticisms, are largely unknown by many Mexicans. Most of Mexico City's newspaper readers are among the educated elite. The written media in Mexico serve as a form of mail, as a channel the elite use every day to exchange messages. They criticize each other in the print press and they respond to each other in the

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Since the concept of conflict of interest doesn't exist in Mexican journalism, this widespread practice is not seen as unethical by many. Indeed, many journalists think of this practice as a legal way to increase their income. No existing law prohibits it. It is legal, but it is not legitimate. Officials promote and support this practice because they are better able to control the information.

Political ads are not the only way to enforce censorship. Officials favor benefits for journalists. The most widely known is the kickback, called in the Mexican journalistic jargon "embute" or "chayote." Kickbacks are usually delivered to journalists in closed envelopes. Press officers and politicians refer to them as a "help" for journalists' salaries. Those kickbacks may be given on a monthly basis for a reporter covering a beat, or in trips made by Mexican officials. The amounts are different, according to the beat, the reporter, or the news organization he or she represents, but could go from a low U.S. \$20 a month up to U.S. \$1,500.

A presidential spokesman used to boast that his office had cut off that practice and no longer gave money to journalists. He was right only technically. For the Presidential Press Office staffers still ask top politicians to give money to the journalists accompanying the President wherever he goes.

Although it is not known whether President Salinas de Gortari knows about the practice, one can hardly believe he is not aware of it. In any case, high government officials have closed their eyes to this practice.

### Private Companies Give Kickbacks, Too

The same phenomenon happens to editors. They all know about it, but they let reporters take the money as another way to compensate for low salaries. Nevertheless, in several cases editors and publishers have fired reporters when taking the kickback became public. Kickbacks are already institutionalized, and a number of private companies do the same with journal-

ists and they pay for space to promote their product, in the guise of news information.

How much money the government spends every year in propaganda published as news stories or kickbacks nobody really knows. However, some figures might give a slim idea of what we are talking about. The press and propaganda budget for the state of Chiapas, one of the poorest states in Mexico back in 1989, totaled U.S. \$4 million. The fifth largest press and propaganda budget, for the state of Mexico, was U.S. \$11.6 million the same year. Those budgets have since been cut down in the last two to three years, but the uncontrolled kickbacks have not been. Politicians may give new model cars to journalists, or they may pay for a European holiday for the journalist and family. In one case, one state governor paid U.S. \$20,000 to an editor to kill a negative story about him.

Press controls vary in many different ways. Editors and reporters are sought by politicians to help them, and they hire them as public relations consultants, without the journalists resigning their jobs. A former Mexico City General Attorney decided not to give cash to journalists, but his office helped any journalist who asked to get people out jail. Although the help was restricted to minor criminal offenses, the former General Attorney office's provided that kind of service twice a month, so the journalist could charge the prisoner's family for the services rendered. In another case, a top official in the Secretariat of Communications got an eight-column banner on the front page of one of the major newspapers in exchange for a telephone line.

### More Journalists Rejecting Practice

It would only be fair to say that every day there are more and more publishers, editors and reporters who are rejecting this kind of relationship with the Mexican government. The Mexican press was the only institution that did not change after the highly contested presidential elections in 1988. All the

rest of Mexican society was shaken up. Every institution began to move, even the most stubborn to change. The press, as an institution, remained isolated from change. Now, for the sake of its survival, the press has to come to grips with the new Mexico.

Rank and file journalists are pressuring from the inside for changes. Increasingly there are better educated reporters with a different sense of what journalism should be. Still, they are in the minority. A generational change is coming. How fast will that change be? How deep a change can it produce? It is hard to tell.

Those wanting reform face the challenge of the government. Will the government put its house in order? Will the government cancel political ads, favors, kickbacks? Will the government allow a free press as a rule and not as an exception? If the government is to change, it will face a scenario where most of newspapers and magazines will disappear, and the ones that survive will begin a fiery struggle for the market. Journalistic quality will improve as well as independence from the government. Top officials will no longer be able to manipulate the press.

The balance of power would change and the press then could check on government performance. That would be a major step for democracy in Mexico. Unfortunately, I can not foresee that outcome in the near future. I can see the rule of the majority over the will for a change. Moreover, I can see the Mexican press as the last institution that will turn democratic in Mexico. ■

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*Fall 1993*

## Scouts Without Compasses

War in the Balkans is forcing correspondents to rewrite their guidelines.

BY SYLVIA POGGIOLI

In mid-August 1992, I traveled to Northern Bosnia with a group of about 15 foreign reporters. We visited an area where there were no United Nations peacekeepers and which had been up to then inaccessible to relief workers and journalists. By late afternoon, we arrived at Bosanska Krupa. Not all of us in the group had wanted to go that far. We had already seen evidence of massive destruction of Muslim homes, the rubble of many dynamited mosques, and terror-stricken men held in a Serbian-run prison camp and we had spoken to dozens of frightened Muslims who wanted to flee the area. Among us were several freelance photographers and a television reporter who were frustrated that they had not gotten any shots or footage because Serbian militiamen had not allowed them to take pictures. The TV reporter, who had never been in the region before, said to me, "I don't know about you but I don't have a story yet."

Along with the photographers he had been pressing us to go on and on, from checkpoint to checkpoint. It was getting dark, and one of the cardinal rules for reporters in a war zone is not getting stuck at night in a situation they cannot control. We soon realized we had broken the rule when a group of Serbian militiamen wielding Kalashnikovs surrounded us, put a fighter in each of our cars and made us take a narrow donkey path up a steep mountain slope. For the next several hours, the armed Serb in my car sat in the front seat in stony silence, caressing his weapon. He broke the silence only to interrogate us to find out whether we were Catholic, Orthodox or Muslim. We were finally released when we got to the main road where

local Serbian policemen convinced the militiamen it was not in the best interest of their cause to harm such a large group of foreign reporters.

This was only one of many harrowing experiences I had in former Yugoslavia, but I feel that more than any other it vividly underscored many of the problems confronting journalists reporting on this major post-Cold War crisis.

Covering the disintegration of Yugoslavia has often forced reporters to act as scouts without compasses in a completely unknown terrain. The difficulty in covering the physical land is only one problem. Reporters have had to wade through the complex cultural, historical and political geography of these conflicts. And very few had the necessary instruments. With the end of the Cold War, a whole set of principles of analysis had become useless and reporters had to confront new problems that most of them had never explored before, such as ethnic self-assertion, tribalism, religious conflicts, and the rights and limits to self-determination. At times it was more important to have knowledge of anthropology than of political science.

When I arrived in Belgrade in October 1988 for my first assignment in Yugoslavia, I brought with me the latest Western publications on Yugoslav political developments. When war broke out two and a half years later I realized those books were outdated and useless and I had to begin a difficult search for old and out of print books on Balkan history, on the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, and on the Catholic-Orthodox schism—long forgotten subjects which had suddenly re-emerged as the signposts

needed to understand what was happening now.

The Cold War had accustomed generations of reporters to analyze world events almost exclusively in terms of the bipolar confrontation, where good and evil were easily defined and identified. This mindset often proved unsuitable in trying to make sense of the disorder created by the collapse of Communism. And it was an easy prey for the highly sophisticated propaganda machines that have characterized the conflicts in former Yugoslavia.

The wars in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia have not been played out only in the battlefield. They have also been wars of faxes and computer messages. Starting with the 10-day war in Slovenia in June and July of 1991, one of the most difficult tasks for reporters has been to protect themselves from the propaganda offensive.

The Slovenia Information Ministry organized a media center in a modern underground conference hall in Ljubljana. Here troops of young multilingual Slovenes constantly churned out reams of war bulletins. I sat through numerous bunker press conferences held by Defense Minister Janez Jansa while a dozen militiamen pointed Kalashnikovs at the reporters. The reason given was that they believed Serbian "terrorists" had infiltrated the press corps. The effect was to create an atmosphere of extreme tension and alarm. Press conferences were often called as late as 7 p.m. We were supplied with excruciatingly detailed accounts of battles too far away to check personally before deadline. Often we learned the next day that the battles had never taken place.

One morning, neatly printed posters were taped next to hotel elevators listing the various alarms indicating everything from air raids to chemical and nuclear attacks. On another day, violent explosions above our hotel were later explained as anti-aircraft artillery fired by the Slovene Territorial Defense against Yugoslav Federal jets which were said to have dropped bombs on the hill overlooking the center of the city. The official version was

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that television and radio transmitter antennas were located on the hill, but transmissions were never interrupted and reporters who went to look never found evidence that bombs had been dropped there.

Every day the official death count mysteriously decreased. At the end of the war we learned that there had been about 50 killed, the majority of whom were young recruits of the Yugoslav Federal Army. The Slovenes never missed an opportunity to depict the conflict in the bloodiest terms possible in order to win international support for their cause as a “westward-leaning democracy” against the “brutal Communist aggressor.” Those labels stuck and were reinforced as the war moved into Croatia.

cent medieval fortress city on the Adriatic. For months, Croatian media reported that the monuments in the old quarter had been devastated by Yugoslav Army shells and mortars. Western journalists who visited the walled city after the campaign ended reported seeing only superficial damage.

Another striking example of manipulation of facts was the case of a massacre in Gospić, Croatia, in 1991. Film footage showing the mutilated bodies of two young men was aired on Croatian and German TV, which identified the victims as Croats slaughtered by Serbs. The bodies were later recognized by relatives as being those of Serbs. The German network later apologized for the false report. I was reminded of this

hire the public relations firm Rudder-Finn to get its message out, but Croatia could also depend on its large expatriate communities in the United States, Canada and Australia to put pressure on the media in their home countries. Croatians abroad have shown they are much better organized than Serbs, although they have not always been very careful in picking the people they sent out into the field. In the fall of 1991, I received a thick package from a U.S.-based Croatian organization. The propaganda material included—I presume inadvertently—a copy of a handwritten fax sent from Zagreb to the organization. It had been sent by a photographer who, it was clear from the contents, had been sponsored and sent by this organization to the war front. The photographer described his work in enthusiastic terms; he said he was “really” covering the war—not like some correspondents who he said spent their time at the bar of the Intercontinental Hotel—and he voiced disappointment that two European Community monitors who had recently been shot in the legs had not been killed.

Letter writing campaigns by members of both Croatian and Serbian communities in the United States criticizing news coverage have been a constant of the Yugoslav wars. The aim appeared to be to discredit the correspondent in the field, and many reporters told me they were having more and more difficulty in convincing their editors that what they had seen firsthand was the real story, not what was contained in U.S.-originated faxes. The result in some cases was to strengthen considerably the role of the editor at the desk and weaken the position of the correspondent in the field both in the way stories were assigned and in the way events were interpreted.

These have not been wars where the warring factions organize trips and escort journalists to the frontline, or where journalists can depend on independent pool reports. Press conferences by military leaders, other than by U.N. officials, have been rare. Journalists in the war zones have been on their own. The risks have been enormous



“Reporters have had to wade through the complex cultural, historical and political geography of these conflicts.”—Poggioli. French U.N. peacekeepers explain ethnic divisions in central Bosnia, 1990. *Photo courtesy of Gilles Peress/Magnum Photos.*

The Croats soon learned from the Slovenes’ use of propaganda. The Croatian news agency HINA and Croatian radio and TV unremittingly bombarded the outside world with minute details of clashes, most of which were impossible to check. The best known examples of vast exaggeration were reports of the massive damage inflicted on Dubrovnik, the magnifi-

incident—and many similar relabelings of atrocity victims—this spring when my interpreter in Belgrade told me she had been a close friend of one of the young Serbs from Gospić whose dead bodies had been passed off as those of Croats.

The Croats went even further than the Slovenes in the information war. Not only did the Croatian government

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(more than 30 journalists have been killed since the conflicts began), all the more so in a political culture where militiamen of all the warring sides are convinced journalists are spying for the enemy. A Croatian militiaman guarding a prison camp in Southern Bosnia summed up this attitude when he menacingly told an Associated Press reporter who was trying to get into the camp last year, "Reporters are like soldiers, the less they know the longer they live."

The Serbs' deep-rooted conviction that throughout history they have been the victims of foreign powers has put them at a disadvantage in the propaganda war. Little or no effort has been made by the Belgrade government to try to win over the hearts and minds of

sophistication and cosmopolitanism of the city. The Writers' Club, an elegant, glass-enclosed restaurant and jazz bar, was filled with intellectuals, filmmakers and journalists. The skyline of old Sarajevo was famous for the proximity of its Orthodox and Catholic churches, mosques and synagogues (the only unwritten rule was that no minaret or bell tower could be higher than any of the other houses of worship.)

Dealing with Sarajevo's citizens was immediately easy. Nearly everyone I met spoke a foreign language and had traveled widely in Europe. Many were Muslims, because for centuries Muslims lived primarily in the cities and, as representatives of the urban middle class, they naturally became foreign journalists' favorite sources.

Months later, traveling through Bosnian villages just before the outbreak of the conflict, I discovered a reality that was perhaps unknown even to many citizens of Sarajevo. The much touted religious

tolerance and intermingling of Serbs, Croats and Muslims symbolic of the Bosnian capital was often rare outside urban areas.

The impression created by secular, multicultural Sarajevo may have helped overshadow some of the main aspects of the war. The conflict has been variously described as a civil war based on ethnic and religious hatred, as an inevitable explosion after decades of Communist suppression of nationalist differences, or as a simple land grab. But traveling through the countryside another aspect emerged. It is what the former mayor of Belgrade—and Milosevic opponent—Bogdan Bogdanovic describes as a war of the mountain against the city, of rural backwardness against urban coexistence. The cornerstone of the Muslim-led government's appeal for a united Bosnia—and the message it has promoted through the media to the outside world—has been shaped by the cosmopolitan reality of Sarajevo and some other cities, but does not always

correspond to the pre-war tensions and animosities that had long existed in many other parts of Bosnia.

If one went to look at the results of the first free elections in Bosnia in the fall of 1990, it was clear that the harmony of Sarajevo was unique: Throughout Bosnia, the ethnic parties prevailed, and voting results mirrored the map of ethnic population distribution.

But, as the major information sources, Muslim intellectuals and their leaders (often providing inflated statistics on mixed marriages) were very successful in exploiting an image of prewar idyllic coexistence, and the media in turn reduced an extremely complex conflict to a war of aggression from the outside.

It was the sudden and dramatic siege of Sarajevo, that began on April 6, 1992, that drew the international media to the Bosnian capital. And the focus on the continuous bombing and shelling of the city reinforced misperceptions of the war. For months very little or no attention was paid to what was happening in other parts of Bosnia. This past May in Pale, the Bosnian Serb stronghold, a Bosnian Serb official told me that the shelling of Sarajevo had often been intensified on purpose, as part of a specific strategy to distract media attention from the Serbs' military campaigns elsewhere.

It was not until August 1992, when the first refugees from Northern Bosnia arrived in Croatia, that the world learned of concentration camps and of vicious campaigns of "ethnic cleansing." The refugees told stories of harassment, fighting, atrocities and expulsions by Bosnian Serbs that had begun many months before. And it was not until the Muslims and Croats—erstwhile allies—began massacring each other this spring that journalists were forced to deal with the "other war" and discovered that reciprocal "ethnic cleansing" had been going on for months in central and southwestern Bosnia.

In June 1993, two American reporters who had been covering the region for some time were discussing the disastrous role the international com-

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**'Reporters are like soldiers,  
the less they know the longer  
they live.'**

**—A Croatian militiaman**

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the West through its media. And the Milosevic-controlled Serbian TV—the major source of information—has provided Serbs exclusively with the Serbian nationalist version of the conflicts. This has fomented a profound distrust, bordering on outright hatred, for foreign reporters, who are widely blamed by Serbs for their international isolation. And—as in Croatia, where the media is equally under total control of the Tudjman government—distrust of reporters is also rooted in a Communist tradition against freedom of the press.

While there is widespread agreement that the Belgrade government and Serbian fighters have been the major culprits in the conflicts, the Serbs' entrenched attitude toward the outside world may have contributed to their being demonized and perceived by world public opinion as the sole culprits in the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia.

I went to Sarajevo for the first time in September 1991, six months before the war started, and I was struck by the

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munity had played in this tragedy. One of the reporters then said, “But it has been journalism’s finest hour.”

I beg to differ. There have been innumerable instances where those of us who have covered these conflicts have fallen into the disinformation trap. One of the most insidious was the numbers game—number of dead, number of refugees and, especially, number of rape victims. At the end of 1992, the Muslim-led Bosnian government said that up to 50,000 Muslim women had been raped by Serbs in Bosnia. A report by a special European Community commission, which did not include direct interviews with victims, placed the number at 20,000. On January 21, 1993, Amnesty International issued a report based on interviews with victims conducted over months by the organization itself, by women’s and human rights groups working in the region, and by journalists in the field. While it stated that Muslim women had been the chief victims, it said all three warring sides in Bosnia had committed rapes and abuses against women. The report cited several difficulties in assessing the full extent of sexual abuse of women in Bosnia, including the shame and social stigma which discourage many women from speaking of the abuses they have suffered. The report added that the issue of rape has been widely used as a propaganda weapon with all sides minimizing or denying abuses committed by their own forces and maximizing those of their opponents. In Geneva, Amnesty’s legal officer, Nick Howen, said in a news conference there was no evidence to back up the figure of 20,000 Muslim rape victims cited by the European Community report. And in Zagreb, American relief workers I spoke to dismissed that same estimate as highly exaggerated. But still today, the number of 50,000 (and higher) has stuck and the prevailing perception is that only Muslim women have been the victims and Serbian fighters the only perpetrators.

What has been almost completely ignored is that the numbers game has

a long tradition in the Balkans. Even today, there are no reliable figures indicating exactly how many people died in the civil war during World War II or how many Serbs were killed at the Ustasha concentration camp of Jasenovac in Croatia (Serbs claim as many as a million, Croats say as few as 100,000). Nationalist leaders have traditionally manipulated numbers like these as a means to foment ethnic tensions and hatred as well as to cleanse the historical record. As Ivo Andric (born in 1892 in Travnik, Bosnia) described in his novel “Bosnian Story” about the period under Ottoman rule, the selective use of numbers is an old Balkan habit:

“Once, some years ago, when Suleiman Pasha the Skopljak went with an army against Montenegro and burnt Drobnjak, Hamza [the town crier] was ordered to proclaim this great Turkish victory and to give out that a hundred and eighty Montenegrin heads had been cut off. One of the crowd which always gathers round the crier asked aloud, ‘And how many of ours were lost?’ ‘Ah, that’ll be given out by the crier in Montenegro,’ replied Hamza calmly and went on with the announcement set down for him.”

As the conflicts have worsened and international organizations have become more and more divided and impotent, I have felt that as journalists covering former Yugoslavia (at times the only outsiders to be present in a particular area), we have found ourselves bearing an enormous responsibility. Policy in Western capitals—or lack of it—has increasingly been based on news reports, and from my experience I have seen that many times the media have been better at pulling emotional strings than at analyzing facts. The use of good-guy and bad-guy stereotypes often obscured the complex origins of the conflict (something must be wrong when a senator such as Joseph Biden can say self-assuredly that Serbia invaded Bosnia, ignoring facts such as that Bosnia’s pre-war population was 31 percent Serb and that since early in Tito’s regime at least 60 per-

cent of the Yugoslav Federal Army’s weapons and ammunitions have been located in Bosnia). And little emphasis was given to some crucial factors such as the well documented pre-war agreement between the Croatian and Serbian leaders, Franjo Tudjman and Slobodan Milosevic, to carve up Bosnia between them; Milosevic’s long-standing consent to Slovenian independence, and Tudjman’s publicly asserted opposition to the creation of a Muslim state in the center of Europe. I cannot help but think that one reason why the media spotlight on former Yugoslavia dimmed late this spring was that the collapse of the so-called Muslim-Croat alliance in Bosnia made it abundantly clear that there were no innocents in this war.

In his book “The Rebirth of History,” Misha Glenny had predicted that the collapse of Communism and the end of the Cold War would render obsolete an old world order system of analysis. He said it would profoundly change the profession of journalism, which now requires a rediscovery of history, geography and a rethinking of global relationships. Yugoslavia was the first serious test of this need for a new approach. No, I don’t think it was journalism’s finest hour. But it has taught us the clear lesson that journalists as scouts now need new compasses if they are to be a reliable link between facts on the ground and public opinion. ■

*Sylvia Poggioli is a National Public Radio foreign correspondent, based in Prague. She has been reporting for NPR since 1982, covering Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Greece, Italy and the Vatican. This year, she received the Edward Weintal Prize for diplomatic reporting from Georgetown University and the George Foster Peabody Award for coverage of the war in Bosnia.*



*Summer 1997*

# What Happens When the Cameras Leave?

BY ANN K. COOPER

I gleaned a lot of utterly bizarre and sometimes not very useful information in my years as a foreign correspondent. In the Soviet Union I collected lots of statistics. One of the first was on house fires. I don't remember how many there were each year, but I do remember the leading cause of house fires in the Soviet Union: Soviet-made TVs which, it turns out, had cardboard parts inside them and an annoying tendency to spontaneously explode. A small statistic, but a significant clue about the technological prowess of our greatly feared nuclear enemy.

I always kept a too-good-to-check file in Moscow, packed with tidbits about legendary Soviet hoarders who stocked up for fear some good would disappear from the market. My favorite from that file was the woman in Kazakhstan who was rushed, unconscious, to the hospital one day. Investigators found 250 boxes of laundry detergent in her tiny Soviet apartment and concluded she'd been overcome by the chemical fumes.

These are the kinds of wacky stories that foreign correspondents love, because they help illustrate how the rest of the world is different from us.

Lately it seems that the biggest difference is how dangerous the rest of the world is—how so many places seem to be sliding into anarchy.

Remember Somalia? Remember when American correspondents were still reporting on what happened there? Your first order of business when you landed in Mogadishu was to bargain for a car, a driver and two or three guys with AK-47's. That used to run \$100 a day or so—\$50 extra if you went out of

town, because the gunmen would need to add a machine gun and rocket-propelled grenade launcher to their arsenal. I never got into a shootout in Somalia, but I always wondered why I should believe that, for \$100 a day, split several ways, the bodyguards would actually stick around if we were attacked.

The perils of reporting in Somalia make great stories to swap with other foreign correspondents. It's definitely a macho business, and wherever the crisis is, you'll see a lot of the same faces turning up to cover it—the parachute artists, addicted to danger, whose specialty is landing and filing right away. File fast, file often.

That's become a motto for how much of the media covers crises today, like Bosnia, or Rwanda, or Liberia. We call these post-Cold War crises and assign a certain set of characteristics to them. The conflict is often ethnic in nature. It's internal—it's no longer a proxy fight between the superpowers, though it's often fueled by weapons left behind from Cold War days.

There is another common characteristic of these conflicts—the refugees they produce and how we cover them.

This is a hot topic right now in academia. Researchers talk about something called the crisis triangle. In one corner of this triangle you have the aid agencies that move into a crisis region to help the refugees and displaced persons. Another corner—the foreign governments, who decide whether or not to intervene in the crisis. Finally, there's the media, whose coverage, or noncoverage, is believed to have a crucial impact on the other parts of the triangle. If the media are outraged

enough, for instance, Western governments will feel forced to intervene. If the media cover the story, aid agencies get donations. But if the media ignore it, so the theory goes, there's little money for aid and little will to intervene.

I went to a conference on these issues at Columbia University a while back. A lot of what was said had been hashed over in the press already—why did the media spend so much time in Bosnia, while virtually ignoring other places, like Tadjikistan? In the audience there were a lot of relief agency officials, and they were pretty indignant about the seemingly serendipitous nature of refugee coverage—and the fact that so many crises were ignored.

Then one of the panelists, Alex Jones, who does a fine public radio program called "On the Media," threw out a little bombshell. "I don't think there's too little coverage of refugees," said Jones. "I think there's too much."

Well. Imagine saying that in front of people whose agencies make their living off of refugee crises and who depend on media coverage to generate sympathy and contributions. The notion of less refugee coverage is pretty scary to them.

But Jones is right on target. There is too much coverage of refugees. Too many repetitious, numbing pictures of helpless people as they flee, and starve, and fall prey to epidemics. And too little coverage of what pushed them out, what keeps them from going home, what happens to them if, as is often the case, they spend years, and maybe even lifetimes, in exile.

Without some context, the refugee coverage we offer our audiences is really no different from how we cover a hurricane or other natural disaster. It follows a fixed formula. The first stories are always about fear, flight, mass movements of people, the sorrow, the suffering. Then you move into the aid phase—is it coming, is it enough, is it getting to the people in need? There'll always be some outrages in this phase—like the U.S. airlift that dumped pack-

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ages of Camembert cheese for Rwandan refugees. Pretty soon you start working on sidebars: the orphaned kids, the Red Cross tracing program that tries to get them back with their parents, the burnout of exhausted aid workers.

And not long after, reporters and editors (and readers, listeners and viewers) get burned out, too. The cameras are shut down, the satellite phones folded up. Everyone goes home. Everyone, that is, but the refugees and aid agencies helping them.

So what have we really learned from the bulk of the refugee crisis coverage?



Rwandan refugees set up camps outside Goma. *UN [United Nations] photo/John Isaac.*

That there's another group of miserable, displaced people in the world, who make us feel helpless and hopeless. Or maybe just numb, because we've heard it all before.

And we're not too sure how or whether these refugees differ from the last ones. What put them there, what happens to them next, whether the aid agencies made the right decisions about how to help them? These questions will get addressed in some media, the handful of newspapers with a significant foreign staff, for example. But on television, which has the biggest audiences and potentially the biggest impact to tell a crisis story, the refugees

will drop off the news agenda until the next crisis.

We are a crisis oriented business. But lately we seem crisis obsessed. Why is that? I think a couple of factors have had an impact. One is the increased access we have in the world today. You don't have to think too far back to remember totalitarian borders and restrictions that limited our reporting abilities. Less than a decade ago, I was covering the Soviet Union when a fierce earthquake shook Armenia. The next day Pravda ran a back page, one column story about it, maybe

five or six inches long, saying there was an earthquake, and there was loss of life. One of those wonderfully vague Soviet phrases that really meant, this was a biggie.

This was 1988, and glasnost was well underway, but for a few days at least the old system prevailed. You want details? Too bad, we're the Soviet Union, we don't have to tell you. And we don't have to let you go down and take a look at the damage that killed 25,000 people. In the end glasnost won and the Armenian earthquake got covered by media from all over the world. Donations poured in—food, blankets...bathing suits, always a use-

ful disaster item....

Along with our greater access to the world, satellite technologies let us report from the worst hellholes in the world. We can watch people die of Ebola in Africa. We can witness the middle-of-the-night landing of U.S. soldiers on the beaches of Mogadishu. We can land in Goma, Zaire, where a million Rwandan refugees were crushed together in 1994, fighting a cholera epidemic—and start reporting immediately on the horrors.

An hour after I got to Goma I watched a cholera victim deliver a stillborn baby—an aid worker dumped it in a grimy bucket—and sobbed as she carried it away to the trash. I'm not even sure why that moment stood out so much, there were so many other horrors surrounding me. A couple of days later an old woman ran up to me in one of the camps, pleading with me to adopt her newborn grandson, whose mother had died—and the grandmother had neither food nor water to give the baby. I'm going to put him on the ground, she said. If he wants, he can die.

A friend asked me recently, "How do you cover a story like the Rwandan refugees?" I said, "On automatic pilot." I don't mean to be flip, but a million refugees in one place—who can comprehend it? Who can make sense of workers tossing cholera victims into mass graves day and night, stealing their blankets as the bodies slip into the pits? Who can pay attention, on the third or fourth or fifth day when you're driving for hours on roads lined with dead bodies, stacked just like firewood, in their neatly rolled funeral mats?

Keith Richburg of The Washington Post has just published a provocative book about his experiences as a black American reporter covering Africa. Richburg grabbed attention mainly for his argument that black Americans should not idealize Africa, that its problems cannot be explained away as legacies of colonialism and Cold War.

But Richburg has another message familiar to reporters who covered Rwanda, Somalia and other hellish stories where the victims of famine or war

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or genocide were always too numerous to count, or even comprehend. Richburg writes, “It’s not the death itself, although that is bad enough. It’s the anonymity of death...the anonymity of mass death. Does anyone care about their names? Does anyone at least try to count them, to record...that a human being has passed away from the earth and someone may be searching for him? Or is life so tenuous here that death scarcely matters?”

If Richburg is frustrated, imagine our audiences, when we present them, day after day, with more scenes from fetid refugee camps, more nameless people suffering and dying.

You could blame technology, I suppose. When it was harder, physically, to file a story, foreign correspondents had more leeway to do their basic reporting and reflect a bit before delivering the definitive story. Now, with satellite technology, it’s easier to file—but far more costly. A TV network easily runs up bills of \$3,000 a day for one crew covering a foreign crisis. To justify that expense, the crew has to deliver fast and often. And what’s the easiest thing to deliver? More dramatic scenes of refugees and their plight. The details get lost—like the fact that among the one million Rwandan refugees whom we all pitied in 1994, there were thousands, maybe tens of thousands, guilty of genocide.

But let’s not blame technology and its expense for not doing our job. The technology should be neutral.

Now some journalists did do that with the Rwandan refugees. And what they found, by digging, by going back repeatedly to those nightmarish camps, was that the Rwandan refugees were an incredibly complex story. It cost aid agencies about a million dollars a day to run their camps—a million dollars a day, for two and a half years.

A lot of that money was stolen, or wasted. Over time huge markets grew in the camps and supposedly free relief

food was one of the items on sale to refugees. So was homemade beer, and Pepsi-Cola, and imported whiskey. There were video parlors, restaurants, a slaughterhouse, barber shops, tailors, moneychangers—just about everything you’d find in an African village.

But that camp, called Kakuma, was a commercial backwater compared with the Rwandans in Goma. Why? Because on their way out of Rwanda, the refugees looted the country. Many were in government, and they helped themselves to government money and then used that to start thriving businesses in the refugee camp....

Lots of ambiguities here, right? Lots of moral issues that never got explored during the period of crisis coverage,

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**...reporters and editors (and readers, listeners and viewers) get burned out, too. The cameras are shut down, the satellite phones folded up. Everyone goes home. Everyone, that is, but the refugees and aid agencies helping them.**

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when the emphasis was on people fleeing, suffering, dying. I’m not arguing that we shouldn’t cover the crisis. Of course we should. But we need to give it context, to think every day about what is new, or what hasn’t been told. And we need to go back, and back again, and explore issues like those posed by the Rwandans. Those reporters who did go back learned that among the aid agencies working in the camps, there were fierce debates about the morality of helping a refugee population that included genocidal killers.

These were enormous issues, involving a humanitarian project that cost the world billions of dollars. They are hard issues to present on television, perhaps, but they must be presented if news consumers are ever going to understand that refugees are not just helpless people who need food. They are products of complex processes, and decisions on how, or even whether, to

help them cannot be made based on pity alone.

I think the first time this ambiguity really came home to me was in Somalia, on a day when I was traveling with American soldiers doing a kind of hearts and minds project in Mogadishu. The idea was, send some dentists and doctors and other soldiers out to help people at random, who needed a tooth pulled, or a wound treated. It made me a little teary to watch their good deeds—and I guess that was the point. It was a public relations project—not so much for my benefit, but for the Somalians.

But then the project moved on to its last stop of the day, where the soldiers gave out bags of grain. In no time there was a mob, and they were angry and hungry, and completely unaware that this tiny gift of food was supposed to win their hearts in support of the international presence in Somalia.

I asked one of the soldiers if this was what it was always like. Usually worse, he said. Yesterday, the mob broke through and it was chaos. Then he shook his head, puzzling

over precisely what he, and the international community, were trying to do there. He said, we’re helping. But we’re not helping. You know what I mean?

I knew exactly what he meant. We want to help. But we can’t do it if we don’t understand what’s really going on. And we’re not going to understand if the media don’t explain it. ■

*Ann K. Cooper delivered the 1997 Joe Alex Morris, Jr. Memorial Lecture, named for the Middle East correspondent for the Los Angeles Times and Harvard graduate who was killed in Teheran in 1979. These are excerpts from that speech. In 1986 Cooper opened National Public Radio’s Moscow bureau. From 1992 to mid-1995 she was NPR’s correspondent in Johannesburg. Her assignments also included the Rwandan refugee crisis in 1994 and other stories in southern Africa.*

Winter 1997

# One David, Two Goliaths

## The Struggle for Independent Media in Burundi

BY BRYAN RICH

“Don’t trust them. They are killers, liars and completely mad.”

It’s been three years since a Special United Nations representative conveyed that advice to me in Burundi, Rwanda’s lesser known southern neighbor. It was meant, I supposed, as a cautionary word against naive hopes on working for the first time in one of the world’s most violently divided societies.

An estimated 200,000 people have been killed in Burundi since 1993, when extremist elements of the Tutsi military killed Melchior Ndadaye, a Hutu and the first democratically elected president. Mass killing of Tutsis by Hutus followed, and the country immediately split into two deeply divided ethnic-political blocs, Hutu versus Tutsi. The media not only reflected on this division but also actively promoted it. The media in Africa were already haunted by the role that Radio Milles Collines played in the Rwandan genocide as Western-educated Managing Director Ferdinand Nahimana broadcast programming calling for the extermination of Tutsis and moderate Hutus in 1994.

In 1995 Burundi Hutu and Tutsi media continued in this path under the banner of “free speech” to rival each other over calls to kill, or in packaging and advancing their mutually macabre ideologies. A Hutu radio [station] from Zaire broadcast a steady stream of propaganda calling on the population to join an armed struggle against the government. The media generated mutual terror and distrust based on historical fears.

In this context Studio Ijambo was established in May 1995 by a Washington-based nonprofit organization called Search for Common Ground, with a

grant from the United States Agency for International Development. One foreigner, myself, and a committed group of five Burundian journalists, from both ethnic groups, set up Studio Ijambo as an alternative for reporters interested in trying to bring the values of good journalism into play. The premise of the project was that local journalists could make a significant contribution to opening and maintaining avenues of public discourse.

Search for Common Ground, understanding the constraints of the culture, provided specialized training to the local staff. This training combined the basic tenets of good reporting with additional techniques in negotiation and consensus building. These techniques offered a way for journalists to explore different ways of asking questions in an effort to get past postures and to avoid inadvertently reinforcing negative stereotypes.

The challenges in achieving this goal were deeply rooted in the culture of the conflict itself. Burundi has a population of approximately 6,000,000 people distributed, as in Rwanda, in densely crowded agrarian hillside communities. Overcrowding, rigid family loyalty, and regional and ethnic identification mean that journalists must counter incredible pressure to attain even the most basic degree of objectivity. In Burundi, being “independent” is equated with betrayal, and therefore the notion of independence itself is alien and dangerous.

Studio Ijambo evolved against a backdrop of worsening security and increased violence. While I was recruiting and training journalists in May and June of 1995, the ethnic cleansing of Bujumbura, the capital, pushed 40,000 people into exile in Zaire and left hun-

dreds dead. The slide into anarchy seemed to create a crucial point of commonality for the Hutu and Tutsi journalists we had recruited and seemed to be an important motivating factor in their desire to want to join forces as professionals.

The Studio Ijambo reporters began working in multiethnic teams to assure balance and credibility. The Balkanization of Bujumbura had made reporting physically impossible for a single journalist from either side. Tutsis feared for their lives in Hutu neighborhoods, and Hutus were equally terrified in Tutsi neighborhoods. By working together, reporters were able to provide the balance and accuracy that would come to define our programming.

In August of 1995 we convinced The National Radio of Burundi (RTNB) to provide two 45-minute air slots per week. The agreement was part of an attempt by the state media to quell criticism that it was overtly biased and to show that it was open to collaboration with outside producers. Under the terms, RTNB could refuse to broadcast a program but was not allowed to re-edit programs that had been submitted. All programs would be signed with “Studio Ijambo” credit.

In establishing the editorial policy for the studio, I put forward the notion of a “public media” as a model where the primary source of information would be the population. All program topics should emerge out of the needs of the communities, both Hutu and Tutsi, and not the political needs of the ruling elite or the military. In essence this was an inversion of the model that had existed in Burundi since independence. More importantly, getting these programs aired on the state media was an important achievement. A small minority of journalists from the national radio indicated that our programming had pushed the editorial line enough so that they could try to provide more balanced programs.

Our goal was to position the studio as a neutral and independent voice and to be inclusive of all sides. Journalists balanced recorded testimonies from

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communities with roundtable discussions that included policymakers and key political players. The roundtables were highly structured to include at least three positions and were moderated by two Ijambo reporters. This meant long hours of editing but assured that there was enough material from all sides to produce inclusive and original radio. Each program served as a kind of intersection of views, reactions and ideas. This inclusive method of production inevitably challenged prevailing notions and stereotypes....

We worked hard to develop techniques of verifying information in a culture of secrecy. We would cover areas in two teams simultaneously going to hospitals, markets, neighboring communities. We compared times of gunshots, when people passed, how many. If there were wounded, where were they? If there were dead, where were the bodies? We built contacts within the military, and we developed contacts among the civilian population so that stories could be corroborated with sufficient accuracy.

Studio Ijambo was soon breaking stories over the telephone line to Radio Agatashya in Zaire 250 miles away while the Burundian National Radio either didn't have the information or was trying to sit on it until they could put a spin on it. Amazingly, journalists from within the state media started to provide us with information that they themselves couldn't use but knew we would be able to corroborate and send to Radio Agatashya as part of our daily news package.

As anywhere, providing information faster and more in-depth translated into credibility and respect by listeners. Studio Ijambo journalists traveled throughout the country, and by extensive interviewing of local officials and community leaders we built important relationships and sources. We made clear the distinction between "on-the-record" and "off-the-record" and used information carefully knowing it could be traced back to our sources. We were

actually introducing a methodology for independent reporting to Burundi during a war, which had never been tried even in times of peace.

Local officials and administrators respected that we did not manipulate or distort their views. We realized that there were nuances within communities, the military leadership, and even the political leadership that had been obscured by the lack of good reporting. Furthermore, the more the journalists worked and interacted with the different sectors in visibly multiethnic teams, the more viable good fact-based reporting became.

The added exposure provided credibility but also a high visibility that meant increased risk to the staff. We

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**...I put forward the notion of a 'public media'.... All program topics should emerge out of the needs of the communities, both Hutu and Tutsi, and not the political needs of the ruling elite or the military.**

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consciously played down our role in order to avoid being perceived as a kind of opposition voice to one or both prevailing extremes. We used Tutsis to report on the activities of the primarily Tutsi army and used Hutus to report on the attacks by the Hutu rebels. This gave the reports credibility and authenticity since people knew the journalists by their voices.

The only protection we had was to be balanced and persistent and to work with studied transparency. We used phone lines presuming they were bugged; we called the military with any information we planned to use to give them the first option of responding. We constantly called the presidency asking for more information....

In November 1996 Studio Ijambo journalists began regularly filing daily dispatches to wire services such as AFP

[Agence France-Presse], Reuters and the Associated Press. This was an important shift since the presence of a credible team of local journalists in Burundi made the international coverage of the conflict more consistent and more accurate. Subscribers to wire service reports were getting a steady stream of information on Burundi even if it didn't always appear in major newspapers. Nelson Mandela, in refusing to advocate the lifting of sanctions on Burundi, cited "recent news reports of atrocities" as a principal reason. These reports came from Studio Ijambo.

Studio Ijambo continues to operate, providing wire service reports and public affairs programming to the national radio as well as news programming to international radios. In the 24 months of production prior to my leaving in June 1997, Studio Ijambo had produced an estimated 2,500 feature programs, news reports, and wire service reports including the coverage of over 40 massacres involving the national army or attacks by armed rebels. These reports are more than news because they exist as the sole documentation of historical events, many of which would have been conveniently displaced by political interests.

In telling this story I have obviously reduced the complexity of our work to its basic elements in hopes of illustrating how our methods of reporting evolved in a context such as Burundi. I haven't really portrayed the energy and courage of the Burundian journalists who at every point were forced to challenge themselves as journalists, stretching to redefine the concept of themselves in relation to the often tragic stories they had to tell. ■

*Bryan Rich has been Senior International Producer for Search for Common Ground since 1992. A 1998 Nieman Fellow, he has worked in Russia, Liberia, Bosnia and Macedonia and has just returned from two and a half years in Burundi.*

Winter 1998

# Questioning If Guilt Without Punishment Will Lead to Reconciliation

The black press relives its own horrors and seeks justice.

BY MATHATHA TSEDU

In South Africa, the black press is essentially two newspapers, *The Sowetan* and *The City Press*. Unlike their counterparts in the white media, these newspapers supported the truth-seeking aspects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC]. But they bitterly criticized the clause in the document creating the Commission which granted amnesty to killers who testified before it.

Many black journalists had themselves been victims and/or survivors of apartheid's killing machine. They had been victimized in the same way as political activists and had languished in jail just as the others had. So their interest in covering these hearings was more than just a passing fad or a "good story" needing to be written. They brought to their jobs passion, concern, anger and true understanding of the tears that flowed freely once testimony started.

Members of the black press saw the TRC as an institution designed to vindicate their former stories of the horrors of apartheid and an avenue to expose lies of the white press, which either scorned those press revelations or simply trashed them as propaganda. After the media hearing, in which Commission members heard about various roles the press played in propping up apartheid, the editorial staff of the *City Press* wrote the following:

"Claims by representatives of the English-language press that they could have done more to oppose the evils of

apartheid must ring hollow in the light of what happened in their newsrooms. Stories by black journalists of police brutality were routinely rejected—simply because there was an unwritten rule that these black writers could not be trusted with telling the truth. On the other hand, police versions justifying the killings of students and other political activists were most of the time accepted without question."

Following the 1994 elections, many in the black community wanted to see killers of their children tried and sentenced. They wanted to see the political leadership of F.W. de Klerk declared a criminal activity for which he should be tried. But it was not to be....

So as the hearings started, survivors or relatives of victims of criminal activity of the apartheid regime appeared before the TRC and asked Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Chairman, for justice. Many were ordinary people who could not be bothered by the niceties of political arrangements between Mandela and de Klerk and who felt that the law of natural justice should be followed.

Many black journalists who followed the TRC hearings also felt this way, and the reporters' personal feelings spilled over into their coverage of the proceedings, making it distinctly different from what appeared in the white press.

After the first few days of hearings, *The Sowetan's* TRC reporter, Mzimasi Ngudle, wrote with great eloquence of those who had appeared and of the

pain they'd suffered, the indignities they'd endured, and the rawness of current emotion. "The dignity and modesty of the victims brought to the fore the indelible virtues of ubuntu (humanity). All they asked for was a better education for their children, the erection of tombstones, and other basic needs. However, ubuntu cannot be stretched too far. It would simply be presumptuous and reckless to incise old wounds in pursuance of lofty hopes.... [T]here is no proven link between confession on the one hand and forgiveness on the other. The whole exercise could simply end up as little more than a religious ritual...in which a people who are ignorant of their rights will be converted to embrace peace at all costs."

When victims went before the TRC and asked for justice, the black press highlighted their stories, as they did the efforts by the Black Consciousness Movement's Azanian (People's) Organization (AZAPO) to challenge the legality of the TRC in the Constitutional Court. This court challenge, arguing that the TRC should not be allowed to grant amnesty to people who committed gross human rights violations, received front-page treatment in *The Sowetan*. While the black press argued that justice was the only foundation for a lasting reconciliation, the white press rallied around the theme that forgiveness was the beginning of reconciliation.

...[D]iffering racial perspectives among various papers did not emerge only during the hearings; arguments raged even before the hearings began about the composition of the commissioners. *The Sowetan*, the country's biggest black-owned and biggest daily with a readership of more than 1.4 million (99 percent of whom are black) wrote on October 10, 1995: "We cast no doubt about the credibility of the Truth Commission nominees but we must express serious worry about the low number of blacks nominated.... This Commission will be dealing with an important part of our past that affects, by and large, more blacks than whites. As blacks we will be shirking

our responsibility if we do not ensure that our views feature more prominently in the Commission....” Similar concerns were not evidenced in the white press.

...Also, when right-wing whites who were either in prison or coming forward to confess to crimes in which blacks had been cruelly killed, the black media argued against the granting of amnesty.

The case of ANC leader and South African Communist Party General Secretary Chris Hani, who was shot dead outside his home in Johannesburg, amply illustrates what happened. The City Press, the black weekly, wrote: “Granting amnesty to Hani’s killers would also not go down well with the ANC’s grassroots supporters. The ANC must make a decision and soon. It cannot afford to alienate its grassroots support and cause divisions within its members of Parliament while trying to curry favor with a spent force like the ultra-right. Politically, amnesty for the right-wingers would not seem to have any obvious benefits. At their trial, [Clive] Derby-Lewis and [Janus] Walus—the two convicted killers of Hani—were defiant and unrepentant to the end. Thus, even from a moral point it would be difficult to make a case for them. Reconciliation is a noble ideal, but the line must be drawn somewhere.”

Even when some of the white perpetrators of gross human rights violations were prepared to admit to their wrongs, their motive was scrutinized. In the black press the question was asked: Had they come forward out of a genuine wish to apologize, or did they do so merely as a way to either get out of jail or to avoid being put in? Often, even when their testimonies had ended, the answer to this question had not been revealed. ■

*Matbatba Tsedu is the Acting Deputy Editor of the Sunday Independent of Sowetan and a 1997 Nieman Fellow. He spent nearly six years, from 1981 to 1986, under a banning order that prohibited him from practicing as a journalist.*

Summer 1999

## In Yugoslavia, the Consequences of Not Reporting the Truth

Journalists’ failure to report honestly empowers tyrants.

BY CHRIS HEDGES

I first stumbled onto the Kosovo Liberation Army in the small village of Orlane about 30 miles from Pristina. It was February 1997, and a thin crust of snow blanketed the rolling hillsides. The crude wooden houses, all with teetering outhouses, barren dirt yards and braided briar fences, were surrounded by mourners attending the wake for one of three armed militants killed in a gun battle with Serb police. Along the road grim men in nylon sweat suits stood every 20 or 30 feet providing a cordon of security.

The story I wrote for The New York Times from Orlane, and several others, angered the pacifist Kosovo Albanian leader Ibrahim Rugova and no small number of Western diplomats and reporters who insisted that the guerrilla group was a creation of the Serbian state security. It was over a year before the rebellion that gripped the province, and there was still a forlorn hope that a negotiated agreement with Belgrade could be worked out. Rugova, with backing from the U.S. Embassy, was trying to get Belgrade to reopen schools for Albanian elementary students. Such reporting, he told me, was not only inaccurate but unhelpful.

“The Serbs have created the Kosovo Liberation Army to give themselves an excuse to ethnically cleanse Kosovo,”

he said, “just as they did in Bosnia. I know my people and they do not support the use of violence.” How does one cover such a story, one that because of its implications, both real and perceived, erodes the beleaguered forces struggling to prevent a slide to intolerance and war? What does one do when the stories one writes become grist for the Serb propaganda effort, or any effort, to foment conflict? What moral obligations do we, as journalists, have to those we are writing about? It is one of the hallmarks of our trade that stories we report can assist, in the short term, those we would least like to

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empower.

Belgrade was elated with the first reports about the small armed bands, citing them as evidence that there were “terrorists” in Kosovo that they had a right to root out by force. I saw the same reaction from Baghdad when I wrote about the splits between the two main Kurdish factions in northern Iraq that eventually led to street fighting. I sat on floor cushions in a room one night in northern Iraq, thick with the bluish haze of acrid cigarette smoke, as

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armed Peshmerga guerrillas listened to Baghdad's Kurdish-language propaganda radio station read every word of stories I had done on the feuds and growing corruption in the Kurdish safe area set up by the allied coalition following the Gulf War. The bearded Kurdish fighters shifted uncomfortably and glowered at me in disapproval.

In the summer of 1998, during the early stages of the Kosovo conflict, before Slobodan Milosevic ordered his troops to raze villages and drive out tens of thousands of people, burly Serb policemen ushered us through checkpoints towards villages held by armed rebels with unusual courtesy. Clearly the idea was to allow Western reporters to send out stories and footage of the ragtag insurgents in the hopes that the Western alliance would excuse Belgrade when it began to depopulate and raze the rebel zones.

And it was axiomatic that, as in Bosnia, once Milosevic cranked up his machinery of death and mayhem we were expelled, left to lick around the edges of his killing fields, struggling to distinguish rumor from fact in interviews with disoriented refugees, but essentially cut off from firsthand accounting, just as we were during the Serb massacres in Srebrenica. Reporters in Belgrade now get bused around to see civilian casualties, just as they did in Iraq, but are kept far from the muddy fields where perhaps hundreds of Kosovar Albanian men lie in mass graves.

There were few stories out of Kosovo when I began reporting on the rebels, in part because the Bosnia story had cooled and there were few reporters around. It was widely believed that the Kosovar Albanians had no stomach for a fight and conventional wisdom took the place of investigation. It was hard to get anyone to pay attention. When I made the first trip by any reporter inside Kosovo in the spring of 1998 with an armed guerrilla band my paper held the piece for nearly three weeks, only running it after Milosevic launched the spring offensive that triggered the province-wide rebellion.

The lines blur between reporting

and propaganda in such a controlled atmosphere. Yet the consequences of not having such information reported, in the long term, are devastating. It may have been disruptive to acknowledge the rise of an armed militant faction in Kosovo, but it also was true. And it was the last warning light given off before war, one that was sadly ignored by Rugova and his Western backers. Instead of acknowledging these reports as the rumblings of a coming catastrophe, they turned, as often happens, on the messengers.

When it came time to walk three or four miles into towns where the Serbs had butchered women and children in Kosovo our reporting stung, precisely because it had refused to serve any one particular cause. While many diplomats and Rugova supporters chastised us for our coverage, our refusal to consider the implications of our coverage gave us credibility when we wrote of killings by Serb forces. Credibility is a fragile and delicate commodity and once damaged is very hard to repair. Indeed, it is against the credibility of Western reporting that the Serbian regime, like most regimes, has waged war since the fighting began eight years ago. It behooves us not to assist them by bowing to what, in the short term, is politically expedient.

The temptation every reporter faces is to paint the world in his or her own image, or the image we would like it to assume. Thus rebels in Nicaragua, Muslims in Sarajevo or even Serbian opposition leaders in Belgrade have sometimes been portrayed more as we wish them to be, or they ought to be, rather than as they are. This is the disease of our profession, one exacerbated because such reporting allows us to be celebrated by people under siege, people whose adoration we find gratifying.

But by failing to turn with equal ferocity on all sides we distort these conflicts and discredit the values of tolerance and forbearance by ascribing them to people who do not, in fact, share them. Indeed, the failure by many reporters in Belgrade to recognize that the political opposition in Belgrade,

who for three months in the winter of 1997 took over the streets of the capital, was at its core nationalist made it impossible to grasp a fundamental fact about the Serbs. Most Serbs, even those who detest Milosevic, willfully ignore the scope and extent of the atrocities carried out in their name in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo. In this sense they are like the Turks who cling to the fiction that the Armenian genocide earlier in the century never took place. Most Serbs nurture the absurd belief that they are the real victims in the war.

The problem in Serbia is not only Milosevic, but the refusal to come to grips with how the enthusiastic embrace by the Serbs of ethnic triumphalism resulted in the destruction of Yugoslavia and mass murder. Until this is understood, with or without Milosevic, the Serbs are doomed to carry on a dialogue with outsiders that resembles that between Alice and the March Hare.

"Have some wine," the March Hare said in an encouraging tone.

Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. "I don't see any wine," she remarked.

"There isn't any," said the March Hare.

It is not for us to decide what people should or should not know. This kind of manipulation is the work of advertisers and propagandists. Lies, including the lie of omission, do work briefly, but once uncovered sully the values they may have been employed to protect. The failure to report honestly erodes the concept of dispassionate truth and ironically empowers tyrants like Milosevic, who seek to avoid its scrutiny by denying its existence. ■

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Fall 1999

# Reporting Stories in Russia That No One Will Publish

Those who own and control the media want to secure political influence, not uncover political corruption.

BY YEVGENIA ALBATS

After Watergate and the work of The Washington Post's Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein that led to President Nixon's resignation, young reporters dreamt of emulating this kind of investigative journalism featured in the movie "All the President's Men."

However, quite often in many other countries—including Russia, where I work as an independent, investigative journalist—the situation can turn out very differently. The upcoming movie "The Insider," rather than "All the President's Men," often turns out to be true. "The Insider" tells the well-known story of CBS's famous "60 Minutes" correspondent Mike Wallace, whose bosses refused to broadcast a piece on Big Tobacco. Those who owned the media outlet were fearful of losing advertising revenues and of getting embroiled in a costly lawsuit with tobacco companies. In short, an investigative scoop was held because of the owner's fear about consequences if the story was broadcast.

In my recent experience, unfortunately, this is a very familiar script. The reasons for this reside in Russia's history and its current political situation. Despite the new democratic elections, Russia has failed to create strong democratic institutions, but succeeded in becoming one of the 10 most corrupt countries in the world, according to the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index. This ought to provide plenty of fertile ground for investigative reporting. However, at the

same time, the notion that "free speech" and "uncensored media" create the foundation for the practice of democracy is still not well understood. So what happens is that media outlets become controlled by the elite and powerful who don't want their power and prosperity to be threatened.

Let me share a few examples of what I've experienced in my reporting:

November of 1996. It was just four months after Boris Yeltsin's overwhelming victory over his Communist competitor, long-time Communist party apparatchik Gennady Zyuganov. *Izvestia*, then the biggest and the most respectable national paper which I worked for, asked me to write a piece on my long-time "heroes"—the KGB, the Russian secret police who were notorious for their violations of human rights. The essence of the Russian secret service had changed little after the Soviet Union ceased to exist. I wrote the piece—but 15 minutes before the paper went into printing, the article was called back from the page. Two hours later, my story somehow found its way to my "heroes" on Lubyanka (the place in Moscow where KGB headquarters are located). What had happened became clear a couple of months later. *Izvestia* had been put up for sale. (In the Soviet Union the paper had been owned, as all media were, by the state; since autumn of 1991 it had been owned by its own journalists.) One of the major investors in *Izvestia*, for some reason, did not want to attack the secret police. I went public about the

case, because when one writes stories such as this on the KGB publicity is the only protection a journalist has from a contract killer. *Izvestia* fired me. I filed a lawsuit and won, but the newspaper's pages were closed to me.

May of 1997. I am the anchor and author of the TV magazine on press and politics produced by NTV (non-government television), Russia's best independent network owned by MOST-media. A person I interviewed spoke harshly of the chief lieutenant of one of Russia's most powerful media moguls, Boris Berezovsky, who was then an ally of the owner of NTV. Six days later my show was cancelled. I was out of a job.

September of 1997. I did an investigative series on the Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, who is currently a presidential candidate in the upcoming 2000 presidential election in Russia. The series, written soon after American businessman Paul Tatum was killed in Moscow, was far from complementary of the mayor. In my reporting, I dug into Luzhkov's connections with some Russian businessmen who were subjects of Interpol's interest. (My investigation of this aspect of the case was made with the help of colleagues from two other countries.) I took my story to four major Russian newspapers and weeklies before I was able to get it published in a then-new and independent weekly, *Novaya Gazeta*. The reaction of the editors at the four other publications was almost hysterical: "Are you crazy? The day after we publish some negative story exposing Moscow's mayor or his closest entourage, our bills on electricity, water, office rent will double or even triple. We are not suicidal by any means!" They were being brutally honest. *Novaya Gazeta* did get into trouble as a result of publishing my series: The renovation of its new office space was stopped, apparently under the order of the Moscow city government. I also received a letter in my mailbox—"You deserve a bullet"—along with some nasty phone calls.

March of 1998. I was trying to publish a story that was the result of a three-month investigation I'd done that exposed Russian government and semi-

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government bodies' scandalous and dirty deals in trading highly sensitive technologies to Iran. I called it "Our Men in Teheran." Three major newspapers rejected this story. Their arguments can be characterized in this way: "This story is against Russian national interests." "Why?" I would ask. And the editors would say, "Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin, during his 1998 visit to the United States, said publicly that Russia was not and is not involved in any illegal technology trading with Iran and Iraq." Yet my investigation presented hard evidence that the Prime Minister either didn't have proper information or just lied, I argued. "Never mind, the story is damaging to the Russian interests." "Whose interests do you have in mind?" I would then ask, in what was becoming an obvious failure to get any newspaper to publish my story. "Are they the interests of bureaucrats who are putting big bucks into their own pockets because of these deals? Or the interests of the Russian people who are about to lose \$50 billion as a result of sanctions that might be imposed by international financial institutions because of those illegal trades?" There was no response.

September 1998. January 1999. April 1999. I produced stories about different investigations. I took them to the same publications. I had many of the same conversations, resulting in the same outcomes.

I tell these stories not to be pitied, but to offer specific examples of what investigative journalists are up against in Russia these days. But the sad fact is that even exposure of this situation likely does no good. My colleagues recognize that journalism is a highly corporate industry that dislikes—if not to say, rejects—those who expose such details of our profession. After my lawsuit against *Izvestia* was publicized, executives at other news outlets told me the following: "You are dangerous to deal with. You write the story and you want to publish it." "Oh, really?" I would say. "What about other reporters? Don't they want to publish their stories?" Their answer: "Others know the rules of the game and obey them."

The price for such candidness is well-known: You become the only reader of your stories. As a popular saying among Russian journalists goes, "He (she) is the author of unread and unseen (by anyone but the author) famous stories."

I have, however, made my choice: I choose to seek my freedom as an independent journalist.

To me, the continuing erosion of independent media outlets means I am free to do my investigations and to write stories but I am likely to become their one lonely reader.

As much as it sounds paradoxical, the Russian media lost the freedom they had long been seeking as a result of the 1996 presidential elections. This was the election when Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first democratically elected President, beat his Communist opponent and Communism, as the ideology of the totalitarian state, was pronounced forever dead in Russia.

Officially censorship was abandoned in the Soviet Union as early as 1989, during glasnost. However, in reality, the press remained under strict control of the weakening totalitarian state until late autumn of 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed. The chaos of those first years of the reforms made journalists poor but gave them unprecedented freedom. Both print and electronic media, while struggling for survival, were admired by the public, which itself was seeking freedom from the constraints of a totalitarian state. Reporters did a decent job in exposing dirty deals of the collapsed Soviet state and of the new/old Russian bureaucracy that inherited both the wealth and the troubles of the no longer existent "evil empire," as President Ronald Reagan once called the Soviet Union.

By 1995, however, the first of Russia's new rich had started to invest in media. It turns out that these new owners were looking to make both financial and political profits out of their investments in the Russian media. In 1996, the presidential campaign clearly showed that those who had dared to invest in media were gaining power and political influence. Thus, by late

1996 and into 1997, Russia's so-called "oligarchs"—a half dozen or so super-wealthy tycoons who, before last year's financial collapse, dominated the country's economy—went hunting for newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations to buy.

By late 1998, independent national media accounted for 1.42 percent out of all national print and electronic media. Now, one year later (and a year prior to the next presidential election and six months before the parliamentary elections), independent media (those media institutions owned by the public, predominantly journalists who work there) account for a very tiny 0.7 percent.

Since 1996, the Russian oligarchs who acquired the major national media and concentrated ownership in just a few hands have learned how to use their newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations to undercut competitors and further their influence in the Kremlin circle, which is led by the sick and unpredictable Boris Yeltsin. Political influence in Russia leads to money: big money, very big money. It allows these powerful people to acquire profitable companies, to receive low-interest credits from government-owned banks, to get insider deals and commercial breaks, i.e. privileges that others without access to the media do not get. In general, political influence that is gained because of media ownership brings millions, if not billions of dollars, that are often channeled into offshore accounts outside of Russia. And maintaining control of the media has become a powerful instrument in obtaining such political influence.

Meanwhile, the price journalists and their profession must pay is a clear one: Journalism, as it is known and respected in democratic countries, is now on death row in Russia. ■

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### **Acknowledgments**

For their help in locating images and for the courtesy of allowing us to publish them, we extend thanks to those who worked behind the scenes on our behalf:

**Ann Bertini**, Publications Assistant, Corporate Communications at the Associated Press;

**Leanne Burden**, a photo editor, The Boston Globe;

**Christine Chinlund**, Focus Section Editor for The Boston Sunday Globe;

**James Hill**, Audio-Visual Archivist, John F. Kennedy Library;

**Tim Kenny**, Director of Research and News History, Newseum;

**Andrea Nemitz**, Photo Editor, Portland (ME) Newspapers;

**Peter Prichard**, President, The Freedom Forum;

**Joyce Rosenblum**, Photo Librarian, United Nations; and

**Karen Wyatt**, Graphics Resource Manager, Newseum.

Our thanks also go to **Adam Reilly**, Editorial Assistant at Nieman Reports, for all of his help in assembling this issue.

## **U.S. Postal Service** Statement of Ownership Management and Circulation

Title of publication: Nieman Reports. Publication no. USPS 430-650. Date of filing 9/28/99. Frequency of issue: Quarterly. No. of issues published annually: 4. Annual subscription price: \$20. Complete mailing address of known office of publication: One Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138-2009 Middlesex County. Complete mailing address of the headquarters or general business office of the publishers: One Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138-2009. Full names and complete mailing address of publisher and editor: Bill Kovach, One Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138-2009; Melissa Ludtke, One Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138-2009. Owner: Nieman Foundation at Harvard University, One Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138-2009. Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders: none. The purpose, function and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for Federal income tax purposes has not changed during preceding 12 months. Extent and nature of circulation (first number is average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months, and second is actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date): Total number copies: 5240; 5822. Paid circulation, sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales: none; none. Mail subscription: 388; 377. Total paid circulation: 388; 377. Free distribution by mail, carrier or other means, samples, complimentary and other free copies: 4752; 5345. Total distribution: 5140; 5722. Copies not distributed, office use, left over, unaccounted, spoiled after printing: 100; 100. Return from news agents: none; none. Total: 5240; 5822. I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete: Bill Kovach.