

# News Junkie Interviews Himself on Ethics

BY JOHN SEIGENTHALER

**A**ging editors with high blood pressure, low sperm counts, gray in their hair and time on their hands tend, in retirement, to get hooked on the news of the day. We always were journalism junkies, second-guessing ourselves before the first edition rolled and third-guessing ourselves after the final edition was on the streets.

But the over-the-hill-post-maturity-pre-senility news addiction is something different. We aren't on hard drugs, and aren't just popping aspirin. We are somewhere between the heat of passion and the chill of impotency when it comes to reacting to the content of the news, the play of news, or the ethics of how journalists work.

It is a confusing habit, maybe like getting a fix on methadone. A permanent semi-high, without the sheer joy of the editor's kick or the chronic complaint, the reader's kick. In an effort to try to understand the nature of the addiction I conducted the following self-interview:

Q.—Now that you are no longer a working editor, do you think you read and look at news more like an average reader, like Joe and Jane Six Pack?

A.—No. I've still got the daily habit and have to have several fixes a day. But I am not as intense a critic as when I was a questioning journalist. Neither am I as passive a critic as a doubting non-journalist.

Q.—Some of your former editor-peers now think that Joe and Jane Six Pack are going cold turkey on the news because they are convinced that journalists have no ethics. Do you agree?

A.—I certainly agree that many readers and viewers of the news believe that.

It isn't so. Journalists I know have a high sense of ethics.

Q.—You know that some editors want a strongly worded new written code of ethical conduct. Do you think it is needed?

A.—I don't. The problem is not that journalists don't have ethical standards. The problem is that they don't let the public know how highly they value ethics. Or what ethics means to a reporter or editor.

Q.—So what would you propose instead of a new code of conduct?

A.—There are five points every journalist worth his or her by-line believes in: First, serve your readers as the First Amendment gives you the right. Second, be fair. Third, be accurate. Fourth, correct errors. Finally, avoid any conflict or potential conflict of interest.

Q.—I suppose you did a good job of explaining your five points to your readers when you were a reporter and editor.

A.—I did a lousy job. Most editors do a lousy job. When I did get around to explaining the newspaper's ethics, it was usually when I was on the defensive, when the paper was under attack.

Q.—So explaining journalistic ethics to readers has come to you too late to do anything about it—after you are no longer an editor?

A.—With a receding hairline and spreading bald spot comes humility and wisdom. I hope not too late.

Q.—Your five points don't even touch on sticky subjects like confidential sources.

A.—That's because they are sticky. Different newspapers and television outlets have different rules to deal with sticky subjects. Some newspapers, for

instance, won't allow a reporter to grant a confidential relationship to a source without the approval of the newspaper's management. Some news organizations won't rely on any confidential source. Some will allow needless reliance on confidential sources anytime. Some have a two-source rule. Others hold that a single, proven, reliable source is adequate. Some editors have burned their confidential sources after a reporter granted confidentiality.

Q.—How can you solve a dilemma like that?



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A.—I think fairness and accuracy, taken seriously, will cover it.

Q.—Why do people—the news-reading-and-viewing public—have a better feeling about the ethics of other professionals—doctors, lawyers, even accountants—than they do about journalists?

A.—I can explain it to my own satisfaction, but perhaps not the public's satisfaction. Doctors treat patients and try to cure their ills. If they maltreat the patient, physically, emotionally or financially, they may violate their code of conduct. Lawyers and accountants have clients. If they fail to properly represent clients or rip them off they may violate their code.

Q.—And journalists?

A.—Journalists have a duty to readers—not to cure them or represent them, but to inform them; to tell them what is going on in the community, the nation, the world. They must often be aggressive, assertive, even manipulative in order to inform their readers. If a story is controversial, or investigative, or tragic, or personal, some readers may think it unethical to publish it. The truth is that the journalist who informs serves the reader—and his or her own sense of ethics—in the same way as the doctor who cures. Or the lawyer who represents.

Q.—Let me follow up on that. Polls show that the public doesn't want all this personal and political stuff that appears in the media.

A.—Polls show that many—and at times a majority—don't want it. But the journalist has an ethical duty to serve all readers and viewers. Sure, I read a good deal more of it now than I need. Some of the tabloid-excreted news that filters into journalism's mainstream gets there because editors are unwilling to function as filters and keep out the junk. And sometimes editors don't draw a line between gossip and news. So the reader has to take over the function of editor and filter out the junk. That, of course, will diminish the role of the editor.

Q.—But wouldn't it be a mistake to leave it out?

A.—It sometimes is a mistake to put it in.

Q.—You said a moment ago that editors have a responsibility to give readers what they need. That comes close to sounding as if you think editors should give readers what they want.

Q.—I said need. And I meant need. If they need it, or find it informative, enlightening, educational or entertaining, great. But editors do have a duty to constantly evaluate the changing needs of readers.

Q.—What do you mean, changing needs?

A.—For most of my life as a journalist our most faithful and dedicated readers were women who were homemakers. They were in the household and the paper was their all-day companion. Now their daughters are in the workplace during the day and at home at night. They have different news needs—wants, if you will—that the news media now must serve. Many readers don't have as much time to read today. Lifestyles change and the needs of readers sometimes change with them. News professionals can't ignore those needs. Another point—for years newspapers virtually ignored life in inner cities. Readers needed the information. We didn't provide it. In some cases that is changing. It needs to change more.

Q.—Some of that sounds as if you are a refugee from USA Today.

A.—Only because I am. It is a newspaper designed to be different. A couple of million people buy it many days. Obviously it meets their needs. That doesn't mean every damn-fool local newspaper editor should carbon-copy it.

Q.—Can you get all the news you need from it?

A.—Many people obviously can. Many people get all they need from TV. But a news junkie can't. I can't get all the news I need from The Wall Street Journal. Or The New York Times. Or USA Today. Or my local paper, The Tennessean. But I'm an addict.

Q.—Have your news interests become more discriminating since you quit work as a journalist?

A.—I don't think so. I notice that when it comes to national and international news I am extremely interested in every major story, ranging from the

new waves of ethnic cleansing, to the South African elections, to the Haiti protests over administration policy, to Whitewater, to the Bobbitt trials, to Tonya Harding...

Q.—Can you seriously mention ethnic cleansing and Tonya Harding in the same sentence?

A.—Not when you load the question with that blast of moral buckshot. I didn't say that ethnic cleansing is the moral equivalent of a smash on a rival skater's leg. I am interested in both, however, and I think readers and viewers are. And I think editors are right to be.

Q.—One more question about ethics. As you read the paper do you find a merger between the business interests and editorial interests?

A.—I notice it more in television than in the papers. The competitive drive for ratings among the networks sometimes is so obvious that it pains me to watch it. As for newspapers, there is no doubt that in the economy of the last three years the advertisers have exerted more influence. Advertorials are reality. But there are lines drawn that make their use acceptable. Journalists have to protect the lines. As the economy eases, it may take off some of the pressure. But editors can't take that for granted.

A.—Let's wrap this up. What bothers you about the news industry today? Any real concerns?

A.—Well, I still get irritated when I see typos, obvious errors, bad leads, leads in the seventh paragraph, and wrong captions. I recently saw a column on President Hoover and the depression with a head shot of J. Edgar Hoover. Had I been editing that paper I probably would have spoiled some makeup editor's family breakfast. But now I shake my head and move on to the next page.

Q.—Those are common gripes that are always going to occur. I asked for real concerns. Are there any?

A.—A couple. It seems to me that newspapers are surrendering their role as the news agenda-setters in too many situations. The Bobbitt trials and the Tonya Harding story are a couple of

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It was left to Mrs. Clinton to leave the press corps with some words to ponder. Her appearance before a ravenous press corps was the single best White House effort in an otherwise inept defense. There she lamented the politics of "personal destruction" and the fact that no public figure has the right to a "zone of privacy."

"I can't really help it if some people get up every day wanting to destroy instead of build, or wanting to undermine. That's something that I try not to think about or dwell on and try to do what I'm expected to do," she told reporters.

Reporters are far more adept at resolving their own reputation problems and far less scrupulous in pinning down alleged ethical improprieties among their own. Take the strange case of a U.S. District Court Judge Kimba Wood contradicting a front-page New York Times story in which an anonymous source badmouthed the Clinton Administration's handling of her failed attorney general nomination. The source—who claimed to be "involved with her White House discussions and said she had authorized him to represent her"—turned out to be her husband, Time magazine's chief political correspondent, Michael Kramer.

With the exception of Washington Post media reporter Howard Kurtz—who exposed the unseemly decision of a reporter to use another medium to launch an anonymous assault on an individual—the story barely registered on the media's ethical radar screen. "Michael was caught in a conflict...of being the husband of a nominee and a political columnist for this magazine," Time Managing Editor Jim Gaines told The Post. "He was trying to protect his wife, as anybody would do."

The method he chose was trying to force the administration to release the news of Wood's falling victim to "Nannygate" before the network's evening newscasts, a move that would have spoiled the administration's own efforts at news management, which sought public focus on family leave legislation. Comparing his family's non-payment of Social Security taxes to Zoe Baird's hiring of an illegal alien as her

child's nanny, Kramer anonymously chided the White House by saying "If you can't make the distinction between somebody who did something wrong and somebody who didn't, what good is the moral authority of a president?"

The same question could well be applied to the media as it lurches from "crisis" to "crisis" with minimal proof. According to a February 3, 1994 Times-Mirror Center for The People & The Press survey, it is a question that has not been lost on a broad segment of the public. While very few people followed the somewhat bizarre withdrawal of Bobby Ray Inman as a nominee for defense secretary, fully 59 percent said press coverage of the personal lives and ethical behavior of political leaders is excessive. A similar percentage labeled the press fairly responsible while an uncomfortably large 29 percent believe the press was not responsible in its coverage.

These statistics provide cold comfort as the media wait to find out if their verdicts pan out. After all, the media were eventually proven correct after its saturation coverage of Tonya Harding, and the possibility exists that many of the other tales of misdeeds will be borne out. Few people accused of wrongdoing spill their emotional guts to the media. But the healthy skepticism that reporters must bring to their task does not mean they must accept half-truths and self-serving allegations with the reverence given to the tips offered by Deep Throat. Rather we must remember that those offerings did not see print until corroborated by at least two other sources.

Until then, maybe we should adapt the solemn words used to open each episode of the *Dragnet* television series: "The story you are about to see is true. The names have been changed to protect the innocent." Perhaps it's time for a new disclaimer: "The story you are about to read could be true. We don't know who's innocent, but the story was too good to pass up." ■

## News Junkie

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examples. It seemed to me that on many days, when TV was running the Lorena Bobbitt case live, there was no real story that deserved major play. It struck me that editors were saying to themselves, "If television has this story on all day long I can't act as if it isn't important. TV was setting the agenda. I had the same feeling about the Harding story on some days. CBS sent Connie Chung all the way to Portland to stand breathless and live at rinkside to tell us whether Harding fell on her butt that day. She finally got an "exclusive" interview by agreeing not to ask tough questions. I read the papers some days and told myself that CBS was milking the story for ratings. Editors were telling themselves, "if Connie Chung is there live, I can't act as if today's developments aren't important. So, I thought, TV set the agenda on those days. If I am right, that change bothers me.

Q.—For all your second and third guessing, your gripes and real concerns, don't you think the future for the news industry is bright, considering the wonderful opportunities that will be available on the information super highway?

A.—If the method of delivery puts newspapers on a government-regulated superhighway, it will be the greatest ethical challenge print journalists have ever faced. Every time history has given us new technology governments have tried to regulate it—and often have succeeded. The new regulations won't read like the Alien and Sedition Acts. But ultimately they could be that dangerous. By the way, your questioning has gotten softer since you quit reporting.

Q.—Watching Connie Chung live from rinkside will do it. By the way, do you know you are just as opinionated as you ever were as an editor?

A.—Toking the news line will do it to you. ■