SPEECH

In Allegiance to the Truth

News, Ethics and Split-Personality Journalism

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Gannett Center for Media Studies

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remarks by Everette E. Dennis

It is necessary and important to begin these remarks with two acknowledgments—one to an individual, the other to an institution. First, this is the time to remember Carol Burnett's generosity in establishing "The Carol Burnett Fund for Responsible Journalism," which fosters teaching, research and public discussion about journalistic standards, professionalism and ethics. Second, the department of journalism of the University of Hawaii and its chairman John Luter deserve special credit not only for conceiving the several activities that flow from the Carol Burnett Fund, but for having the courage to accept a gift that derived from a judgment in a celebrated libel trial in which Ms. Burnett brought an action against the supermarket tabloid the *National Enquirer*.

In making this gift to the University of Hawaii, Ms. Burnett demonstrated purity of purpose, suing the *Enquirer* simply to recover her reputation. I speak of the courage of the University because accepting this gift might have ignited considerable criticism, since some commentators argue that any association with libel plaintiffs chills freedom of expression. I do not believe this is true and neither, obviously, did the University of Hawaii or Professor Luter. After all, freedom of expression means freedom both for the speaker (that's usually the press), and for the listener (that's the rest of us).

While many of us worry about the consequences of libel litigation over the long haul, it is clear to me that the courts are,

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for now at least, the only effective means for an aggrieved party to get relief. Ms. Burnett got the relief she sought in a case in which she took exception to a scurrilous personal attack. Further, she demonstrated that this suit was neither mean-spirited nor mercenary by making this important gift to the University of Hawaii. So we must acknowledge Carol Burnett and this university for creating a forum that gives consideration both to the speaker and the listener while promoting freedom of expression and an ethical sensitivity in our press.

Today, with thanks to those who invited me to this important platform and with awe for the previous speakers, all of whom I know and admire, I would like to talk about two seemingly contradictory conditions in American journalism that are closely linked to technological innovation and to ethics.

When we look at the condition of American journalism today — and I speak specifically about news reporting — it is sometimes difficult to tell whether the extraordinary changes brought about by the convergence of new technologies, which allow for faster and more efficient news gathering, processing and dissemination, are elevating or debasing journalistic quality. Thus my topic here — allegiance to the truth.

In my job at the Gannett Center for Media Studies, I am often asked to comment on the state of journalism, usually in connection with some controversy. These inquiries from television correspondents, magazine writers and newspaper reporters are concerned with everything from coverage of politics to the ethics of particular news organizations and even particular news people. In recent weeks, for example, I have been asked to comment on the role of network anchors, the Andy Rooney affair, the tabloid tale of the Trumps, and many other topics. Often the questions from media critics and reporters are connected to technology and the changes that have come to American media, especially in the last decade.

As you know, this has been a time when the economics of communication have shifted markedly, growing ever more global and giant; when ownerships have changed and concentration has accelerated; when hundreds of new outlets — some of them cable channels, others magazines and newspapers —

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expanded people's options for information and news. All this was spurred by the satellite, the computer and other devices that gave us instantaneous live news from most points on the globe. Along with new electronic databases, computer graphics, and the beginnings of artificial intelligence, both the look and the nature of the news are changing.

Those who carefully track these changes make one of two conclusions, and it is easy to see why: Some say that journalism is getting worse while others say journalism is clearly getting better, causing us to ask whether journalism indeed has a split personality. Let's examine these two propositions.

First, journalism is getting worse. Only a few days ago the world was treated to the battle of the Trumps, wherein the marital squabbling of America's tycoon of the moment, Donald Trump, a flamboyant, publicity-seeking billionaire, and his equally avaricious wife Ivana, pushed Nelson Mandela, Eastern Europe, Central America and the heavy-weight boxing championship of the world off the front pages of the tabloids and consumed both time and space in our most respectable newspapers, magazines and television programs. This exhibitionistic performance by the tabloids, which spread to other media, came on the heels of the expansion of so-called "tabloid television," which makes it difficult for viewers to distinguish news from entertainment. The Trump affair, many critics argued, was news coverage run amok—news that trivialized our world and debased other more important matters. But what caused it to happen in the first place, especially in the face of such important competing news?

I believe it was, in part at least, technology. In many respects tabloid newspapers — the kind with big, blotchy headlines that scream out from the newsstand — are a thing of the past. Except for the supermarket tabloids like the one that unwittingly funded this lecture program, most big-city tabloids are artifacts of another generation. They were initially born in a period of great newspaper competition, and, while that time has passed, the great expansion in television and cable programs has brought back keen competition for readers, viewers and advertising dollars. This is especially true for television news, where the four broadcast networks and an increasing number of sensational tabloid television shows like "Geraldo,"

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"A Current Affair," "The Reporters," "America's Most Wanted" and others are competing fiercely for essentially the same audience.

In the midst of this intense battle are the last remaining big-city tabloids. The New York *Daily News*, *New York Post*, New York *Newsday*, the *Boston Herald* and a few others are trying to survive in a market where big numbers of attentive consumers are best achieved in television, not print media. In their scramble to outdo local television news and tabloid television, columnists and editors at these papers seized on the Trump story and played it for all it was worth and more. And as a story it worked. All of the "buttons" that foster sensationalism lit up. We had celebrity, wealth, power, sex, a love triangle, even religion and Valentine's Day. This exhibitionistic explosion might have been limited mostly to New York audiences if it hadn't been for a vitriolic battle between syndicated columnists, the clash of high-profile media consultants, and other elements that for a few days made this not only a national story, but an international one as well.

The extraordinary competition represented in the coverage of the Trump affair is not unconnected to new technical devices that more accurately measure television viewing (the people meters) and which have for the first time calibrated the important role of cable, VCRs and other competitive media that are pushing newspapers and news magazines in new directions. Too often that means away from the hard news of economics, government and the environment and toward human interest and gossip.

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Technology has also been a culprit in more direct ways. Two examples from 1989 come to mind. First, one Saturday evening viewers of "ABC World News Tonight" were treated to some remarkably grainy footage that showed an American diplomat passing secrets to the Soviets, dramatic pictures in an otherwise slow news day. There was only one thing wrong: The pictures were a deliberate deception, a video "re-creation." The people depicted were not diplomats and spies, but ABC personnel playing these roles. More importantly, perhaps, the story was based on *allegations*, not proven facts.

This incident and subsequent re-creations or simulations of news events, historical scenes and even projections of the

future became something of a media cause célèbre for several months before most of the networks decided to ban their use. Such re-creations are still common, however, on some of the tabloid television programs and severely confuse viewers who are trying to distinguish fact from fiction. Not incidentally, dramatic re-creations were long ago defended by press lord Henry Luce as "fakery in allegiance to the truth."

There is nothing inherently wrong with the wonderful technological devices that brought us dramatic re-creations— the way they were presented misled the public and impaired media credibility. In fact, a study commissioned by the Times Mirror Company found that a substantial number of Americans could not tell for sure whether some television programs were news or entertainment.

The other regrettable, technology-aided judgment of 1989 was the networks' use of a split screen in their coverage of the U.S. invasion of Panama. On one side of the screen were flag-draped coffins of American soldiers killed in Panama and on the other a jocular press conference with President Bush. The visual effect was what one critic called a "split personality": There was little direct relationship between the two pictures and the President did not know that his press conference was being juxtaposed with the unloading of caskets. Here the split screen, which originally came to us in sports coverage, was so thoughtlessly used as to make both the President and the media look bad. It did nothing to advance news coverage, although it could have.

But look again, beyond these two examples. There is also ample evidence that news coverage is not declining or suffering at all. Thus the proposition that *journalism is getting better.*

We can contrast the negative effects of misused technology with some important and impressive coverage in a year when the news media seemed to celebrate one of their finest hours. Correspondents and anchors captured the turmoil in Tiananmen Square, the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the great changes — subtle and violent — in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. At the same time critical activities in Central America and South Africa also captured our attention. We also got quick, accurate and stunning coverage of Hurricane Hugo

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and the San Francisco earthquake. The same media that brought us these matters of great (and probably lasting) moment, also gave us news of drugs and crime, as well as the environment, government and the economy. Even the harshest critics of the press agreed that this was a laudable performance in a year that may go down as seminal in the history of civilization.

And here the principal helper was technology. Tiny, lightweight cameras and easy satellite up-links took viewers to the scene of great world events as they happened, even if they did exhaust our valiant, globe-trotting network anchors. People here in Hawaii will recall the superb coverage of the Philippine revolution a few years ago at a time when electronic news gathering (ENG) was just celebrating its 10th anniversary. At the Gannett Center we had a demonstration contrasting news from the Philippines a decade earlier with the events that led to the downfall of Ferdinand Marcos. The revolution that deposed Marcos was covered live from the scene, a story that developed minute by minute, hour by hour, visually and dramatically unfolding in living color. Only a decade before, broadcast news had relied heavily on still, black-and-white photographs supplied by the Associated Press. One can only imagine the effects of these stark contrasts on what people know, understand and feel about the great news events of today.

Juxtaposed against these two divergent appraisals of our media is the continuing worry that journalistic performance is necessarily being influenced by the forces of globalism and giantism that are swallowing up our media system and those of other countries around the globe. News organizations that are a part of big business are governed by market forces, and market research is said to determine what America (and the rest of the world) reads, hears and watches.

Thus, we readers and viewers are hearing some quite contradictory things about our media these days. We hear that news coverage is out of control and simply awful as we witness the Trump affair or the use of dramatic re-creations. People who listen closely to these arguments and observe for themselves news coverage that is based on the musings of gossip columnists, rumor and deliberate deception must conclude that there

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is little quality control in the information that reaches us. Not a pretty picture of the state of the news or our news media.

On the other hand, here we have this extraordinary performance by our journalists as they masterfully cover more of the globe than ever before. Having seen both Tom Brokaw and Peter Jennings between globe-trotting assignments, as well as understanding the massive commitment of resources being made by the *New York Times* and other media organizations to deliver what I believe is the best performance on a story that I've seen in my lifetime — that of Eastern Europe and the Soviet bloc — I can't imagine not agreeing instantly that American journalism is getting better all the time.

No matter which interpretation of the news best fits our needs and biases, most of us agree that what we really want is "the truth," however illusory that notion might be. Still, we are confronted by economic movements on Wall Street and in boardrooms around the world that think of the media mostly as machines producing widgets. We are told by some critics that the media more than ever are driven by the greed of a market that values short-run profits over long-term investments. The results for networks and national newsmagazines, we are told, are shrinking staffs and depleted resources. The audience numbers that generate advertising revenues drive news organizations and, in a circular fashion, cause them to court audiences to whom their advertisers can sell their products and services. In a system of communication that is paid for by only two revenue streams — user fees and advertising — how could it be otherwise? Information is for sale to the highest bidder, and the media have organized themselves to court up-scale audiences, paying little or no attention to the underclass and other unattractive and — by market definition — dispossessed communities.

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Any close-up look at the media world today, as well as the news media's special place in it, is both encouraged and alarmed by fragmentation. With scores of cable channels, thousands of magazines and other rapidly fragmenting media, it is clear that virtually every interest and every point of view, no matter how narrow, is being served. At the same time traditional media like newspapers and television are challenged by the pressures of the new media and find it increas-

ingly difficult to serve "the whole community." Instead they serve the "audience" of readers and viewers who actually subscribe, pay cable fees or loyally watch television news. We must continually ask whether the fragmentation that enhances freedom of expression to smaller and smaller communities of interest also promotes the kind of freedom that bonds a nation together. We have not yet begun to ask these questions with clarity, let alone find methods for answering them rigorously and accurately.

Perhaps we need a national endowment to preserve the news — not a government agency or even a political mandate — but a commitment by our news organizations to do more than business as usual, to engage in a national commitment to quality news in a manner that instructs us all about: (a) the operative theory of journalism with which any given news organization guides itself; (b) the resources it has devoted to newsgathering; (c) the ways in which the public ought to assess and evaluate the results; and finally, (d) how individual readers and viewers might "talk back" to or interact with editors and producers of the news.

While I believe that the diversity that brings us Trumpian headlines in the tabloids also brings us serious analysis on the editorial page, we badly need to understand our current theory of journalism. Journalists hate the word 'theory,' but it is the best word I know to describe those commitments, values and organizing principles that explain what they are doing.

Years ago our operative theory in American journalism was "objectivity," which was also known as "the Jack Webb school of journalism" and consisted of a "just the facts, ma'am" approach to balancing "both sides" of a controversy. I was one of many writers and critics beginning in the late 1960s who strongly opposed this simplistic and simple-minded approach to journalism in an increasingly ambiguous world in which there were seemingly 16 sides to every controversy, not just two. Objectivity was also a theory of journalism that almost always valued official sources over ordinary people. I remember writing in 1971 that "the increasing complexity of public affairs made it difficult to confine reporting to the straitjacket of unelaborated fact."

Although editors at first rejected the many assaults on objec-

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tivity, it wasn't long before they, too, retreated from the concept and began to talk about "fairness," which was a vague, fuzzy and somewhat more comfortable euphemism for "objectivity," though it had some complex twists. Unfortunately, in rejecting good old-fashioned objectivity we really did not replace it with any alternative model, and partly as a consequence many in the public are confused about news coverage that gives the same value to the Trump affair as it does to the release of Nelson Mandela.

I believe that with our eyes open we ought to return to a new interpretative objectivity in which central facts can be verified but where matters of interpretation and analysis are identified as such and left to reader and viewer discretion. There are descriptive details and "facts" that can be sorted out and identified in virtually every news situation, ranging from a simple police matter to a complex international controversy. Events arise, people are involved, situations can be observed. This is and ought to be descriptive, verified journalism at its best.

I would pair this kind of descriptive journalism, which would be by definition as impartial as possible, with the yield of modern computer-assisted reporting and database retrieval. We have better and more systematic tools than ever before and can assemble more facts more efficiently, thus greatly enhancing our reporting. Here again technology can be an aid to reporting rather than a hindrance to understanding.

At the same time, we need to pair descriptive journalism with more interpretative and analytic work that tells us what the various forces and vested interests are in connection with a news story. Sometimes, when the media perform particularly badly, as they did in their late and labored coverage of AIDS, they need to publicly fess up to missed cues, bias and less than exemplary coverage. The nation's major media picked up the AIDS story long after it had evolved, and then only because of personal factors, not any sense of objective reality. This sad chapter in American journalism is documented in James Kinsella's new book *Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media.* For a variety of reasons our most important news organizations were late with the story, but in large part it got short shrift because editors believed it affected unattractive

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and unimportant constituencies. Only after the Rock Hudson revelations and some other instances when individual journalists' families were involved did the press begin with any seriousness to cover this critical public health problem. There are angry critics who say the press should shoulder some of the blame for the spread of the disease because of a kind of *de facto* censorship that deprived the American people of important information. Clearly when subsequent coverage — much of it superb — did gain momentum, health practices improved markedly.

The AIDS story demonstrated the hypocrisy of the "journalistic fairness" argument. Not only was a major public health story underplayed or missed entirely for months and years, but it only gained notoriety when there were personal stakes for reporters and editors. This was not impartial journalism, nor was it in any sense fair.

It seems to me that the new interpretative objectivity of which I speak would be enhanced if our media organizations — without being overly self-conscious — told us more about their "methods." How are major stories being covered and with what staffing — both in numbers and with attention to the backgrounds and interests of reporters? In a good deal of international coverage we have had reporters with quite mixed experience, knowledge, credentials and dedication to "impartial" reports. Many I have met readily admit their ideological preferences, some of which are hardly conducive to impartial reporting.

Leaders of media organizations would help their own cause and understanding if they'd step forward and indicate by what standard they want to be judged. In a society where all of us can be critics and analysts if we wish, it would be helpful to have straightforward statements from leading editors and broadcast executives indicating just what their goals, purposes and measures of quality control are.

In a period when we are increasing our capacity for interactive television and other two-way systems, our media need to concern themselves with a better system of public feedback. There are the superb Times Mirror studies of public perceptions of the news media, studies that draw important baseline data. But we need more than that: a chance for readers and

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viewers to be heard, not one by one in every editor's office, but possibly through computer inventories of people's concerns and grievances. Some of these will have to do with access to information and understandability, others will fix on factual errors or differences of interpretation. Some criticisms will be on target, some will be terribly wrong, but collectively they will provide better intelligence with which editors and other media people can determine how well they are doing, not to slavishly please readers and viewers, but to make certain that news is being presented in a coherent and effective fashion. Readers and viewers might themselves be encouraged to suggest approaches to the public dialogue that would be good for all of us, and, as well, advance freedom of expression.

I believe that in general American journalism really is getting better. There are occasional egregious slips, sometimes brought on by overzealous use of technology in instances when new tools are used thoughtlessly or in a trivial way. When used with foresight, as with computer-assisted reporting or electronic news gathering, news can be presented with more dramatic force and more accuracy, and the result will be a better-informed public. To do that, news people need to plan their work with greater vision and at the same time be willing to explain it in an open manner that will sometimes invite public criticism.

Then, I think, we will have both a freer, more responsive and more vital journalism in America and elsewhere in the world. Perhaps it will be even more elevating than the kind Carol Burnett hoped for when she initiated this program, which ultimately provides a creative and effective way to talk back to the *National Enquirer*. We might even have a new allegiance to the truth made possible not just by new technological tools and more thoughtful interactive journalism, but by mutual respect between speaker and listener, between the media and their audience, that we so sorely need today.

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