

CAROL BURNETT FUND FOR RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM

presents

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on

QUALITY NEWS VS. JUNK NEWS

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by J. Edward Murray

QUALITY NEWS VERSUS JUNK NEWS

I broke in as a reporter for the United Press in Chicago in 1938. Gang murders by the Capone mob still elicited screaming banners on street-edition EXTRAS. Black murders didn't count. The Chicago Tribune called social workers "sob sisters." And newspaper publishers worried mainly about the increasing competition from radio.

Then, as now, newspaper critics were demanding that newspapers become more responsible. That is, that they follow the high road of significant news and commentary instead of the low road of sex and sensationalism.

Well, newspapers have improved immeasurably since then. But only the best ones have been equal to the pace of change.

Society has grown more complex. News and information have moved to center stage. The printed press has blossomed into the multi-layered news-media.

On television, presentation of the news now threatens to deteriorate into a show-business, glamor competition.

And on the fringes of the established news media, there are enough new competitors to make the newspaper publisher long for the days when there was only radio to worry about.

To mention only the latest entries in the list, they include Cable TV news, hundreds of new target-audience magazines and newsletters, and the new USA Today. In the wings, are a host of computerized new data bases which will be accessible in the home. Knight-Ridder's pioneering service called Viewtron has already begun to deliver news on demand on home TV terminals.

It seems obvious that newspaper publishers, even though they enjoy a virtual print monopoly in 98 percent of American cities, must realize that they can't afford to stand still in today's fast-changing communications milieu.

Publishers, however, have something even more serious to worry about than the fierce competition.

The Press in the Doghouse

The press generally is held in such low esteem by the people that the First Amendment itself could be endangered by the unwillingness of the citizens to defend it against ever-present enemies.

The latest Harris poll shows that only 19 percent of the American people have high confidence in newspapers. That's up from the all-time low rating of 14 percent in 1982, but it is still not much comfort.

On the libel front, journalists have lost 90 of 106 major verdicts by juries since 1976, and almost a quarter of the damage awards have been \$1 million or more.

Since 1972 the Supreme Court has ruled against the press in all of the four libel appeals it has heard.

As this evidence that the people don't trust the press accumulated, the Reagan administration climaxed its own long campaign against the Freedom of Information Act and other press freedoms by allowing the military to muzzle the press for the first 72 hours of the Grenada invasion.

Because of my experience as a war correspondent in World War II, I am positive that this news blackout on a military operation was imposed solely for the purpose of managing the news in case it turned out to be unfavorable.

And how did the people in this free and open society react to the fact that their own watchdog, the press, had been kept away from a questionable military operation that might easily have led to a wider conflict?

The people cheered, that's what. By margins of 3 to 1, or 5 to 1, or some other substantial majority, depending on which poll you looked at.

Some of the people were even in a hostile, vengeful mood, saying it was high time that an arrogant, adversarial, unpatriotic press got muzzled for a change.

The press itself reacted with shock. The American Society of Newspaper Editors issued a rare "Press Alert," calling on editors to mount educational campaigns on the critical importance of a free press.

Time magazine ran a 10-page cover story entitled "Accusing the Press - What Are Its Sins?"

And the trade magazine Editor & Publisher called for a summit meeting of leading journalists to figure out how the press can recapture the understanding and appreciation of the public.

How indeed?

In an effort to respond to that challenge, I would like to discuss two related suggestions:

-- that publishers and editors reexamine and reemphasize a fundamental ethical approach to newspapering;

-- and that newspapers invest in a higher quality of editorial content.

What It Means to Be Ethical

Ethical journalism begins with the First Amendment.

Implicit in that original guarantee of a free press is an unwritten covenant that the newspaper will do its best to furnish its readers with the news they need concerning public issues in order to function as informed citizens.

Unfortunately, in our time, the profit response to the First Amendment is often much stronger than the journalistic response.

I am thinking of both print and electronic media which trivialize and bastardize the news.

Newspapers do this with acres of so-called soft news, or fluff about life-styles, food, real estate and other come-ons for good-income consumers between 18 and 49 years of age.

The underlying purpose is to create an uncritical, permissive buying mood for the benefit of advertisers.

And television deliberately perverts the news for its entertainment value in a fierce battle for Nielsen ratings.

Obviously, the public can see that such use of the First Amendment to make money has little or nothing to do with providing the real news and the background to make it meaningful.

To illustrate just how difficult it is in this so-called Information Age to give the readers of any newspaper the news they need, let me quote from The Third Wave by Alvin Toffler.

In a chapter entitled "The Political Mausoleum," he writes:

"It is impossible to be simultaneously blasted by a revolution in energy, a revolution in technology, a revolution in family life, a revolution in sexual roles, and a worldwide revolution in communications without also facing -- sooner or later -- a potentially explosive political revolution . . .

"Today, although its gravity is not yet recognized, we are witnessing a profound crisis not of this or that government but of representative democracy itself, in all its forms."

The challenge for the editor, then, is to report the news and background of all of these revolutions, and to try to pave the way for political evolution that will preserve representative democracy.

But even if the average editor is tempted to give up in despair at the magnitude of this task, I would cite another sobering fact.

It is that an uninformed electorate in an age of nuclear weapons is a grave threat to all life on the planet.

The Diversity of Voices

There is a second, and more subtle journalistic responsibility implied in the foundational theory of the First Amendment. It is that the truth, that is, all of the important news, not only will, but should, emerge from the free-press guarantee of a diversity of voices.

Well, as our premier press critic, Ben Bagdikian, points out in his latest book, The Media Monopoly, that supposed diversity of voices is fast giving way to the acquisition mania of the media conglomerates.

The 20 largest newspaper chains now control well over half of the 61 million daily circulation in the U.S.

What should concern us even more, according to Bagdikian, is that a mere 50 corporations already control over half of what America sees, hears and reads in its newspapers, magazines, radio, television, books and movies.

And these same 50 corporations are controlled by interlocking directorships which enable them, if they wish, to quietly control news and information, when necessary, to foster each other's large scale commercial interests.

The corporate rebuttal comes in three parts.

First, that only big, financially powerful entities like themselves are strong enough to guarantee independence against each other and against big government. Second, that they, as 50 corporations, guarantee a diversity of voices, and that there is a multitude of smaller voices besides.

And third, in the case of newspapers at least, that local editors have editorial autonomy.

There is partial truth in each of these answers.

But, Bagdikian argues, and I agree, that the profit motive is stronger than any of these partial truths. Among other things, that means the main goal of the news media conglomerates must be mass advertising.

Therefore, to create the non-analytical, consumer-shopping mood that mass advertisers prefer, these corporate voices all sing in the same key, which is the key of bland, make-no-waves, pro-business establishmentarianism.

The off-stage musical directors for this bottom-line, dollar-sign chorus are the stock analysts on Wall Street who give advice on which news media stocks to buy and sell.

The fallout from this scenario is two-fold. The First Amendment's seminal theory of a diversity of voices is being dangerously undermined. And the public sees the news media more as absentee-owned, big-business money machines than as watchdogs on government.

Consequently, the people find less reason to rally to the defense of a free press.

The Ethical Thicket

To continue with the ethical dimension, it also has a more mundane aspect.

This involves a veritable thicket of specific ethical violations which still occur in spite of the written codes of ethics of professional journalism organizations.

My own list would include these:

- Inaccuracy and unfairness in reporting and editing.
- Overly aggressive investigative reporting that creates innocent victims.
- Overuse of unnamed sources.
- Misusing the right-to-know to invade privacy.
- Predetermined mindset of reporters that causes bias.

And, there are at least another dozen fairly common infractions.

For his lecture on this occasion last year, David Shaw, the respected media critic of The Los Angeles Times, centered on the arrogance and lack of accountability in the press.

But Shaw also made this basic point:

"And, of course, there is the biggest ethical problem of all, the one that presupposes all else -- the unwillingness of so many publishers to sacrifice even a small measure of their large profits to produce quality newspapers, with quality staffs and newsholes large enough to provide the reader with the information and insight he or she needs to function as an intelligent, informed adult in today's increasingly complex society."

That is the precise theme of my second suggestion, which is that newspapers need a higher quality of news content!

I'm talking about the kind of expensive quality that the electronic competition would find difficult to match. And I'm referring here, not to the top 15 or 20 of the most prestigious big newspapers, but rather to the middle range of papers from about 30,000 circulation on up to 250,000 and beyond.

The Anemic Budget for Hard News

Most of these newspapers, I believe, suffer from insufficient space for hard news and from a poor use of the space they have. They also suffer from a lack of competitively paid news staffs. And finally from a virtual absence of the necessary experts to deal with complex news.

In recent years, progressive newspapers have concentrated on several kinds of improvements: smarter packaging that stresses better design, graphics, makeup and color; better coverage of business, sports and life-styles; and sharper marketing through special sections aimed at target audiences.

In most cases, much of the newsprint space for these improvements has been taken from the former hard news budget, leaving it woefully anemic.

As to the caliber and the pay of the average newspaper editorial staff, both leave much to be desired.

Listen to the opinion of Irving Kristol, a distinguished professor at the NYU Graduate School of Business and co-editor The Public Interest magazine.

In the November 1983 issue of The Bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Kristol had this to say:

What is so fascinating about the media today is their mindlessness. One reason . . . is that the quality of the people now entering the media is very poor. . . . of course, we have schools of journalism. Most publications these days -- not all, thank God -- recruit from schools of journalism. This means they are recruiting from the bottom 40 percent of the college population since, on the whole, bright students do not go to schools of journalism.

Kristol explains that the best students, depending on how bright they are, go first into the sciences, then into law or medicine or graduate school, then into business schools. It's mainly fourth level students, he says, who go into the journalism schools. And even sadder, the fifth level go into schools of education.

He concludes:

. . . from schools of journalism, they (the media) are recruiting young men and women who don't think very well and who don't have the habit of thinking.

That's a harsh assessment. But even if there are obvious exceptions, I think it is generally true.

The problem feeds on itself. Most of the news media are so shallow and simplistic in their treatment of complex news that the best young minds are not attracted to journalism as a career.

Nevertheless, there are scores of applicants for every entry level job in journalism.

So publishers, who are constantly losing their best people to higher paying jobs in related fields like public relations or television, replenish their staffs from the bottom.

That's been the story for as long as I can remember: a brain drain of the most competent and experienced people on the staff, and an influx of minimally paid recruits to replace them.

I'm not forgetting that, thanks to the Newspaper Guild, progress has been made in raising salaries. And the profession generally has begun to support an increasing number of training programs to update the expertise of mid-career journalists.

But the fact remains that the level of knowledge and the caliber of thinking on most newspaper staffs are seldom equal to the task of presenting the serious news.

Setting the Public Agenda

The result is an inadequate grasp by editors of the broad scope and depth of meaning in the total news budget on any given day. This impacts most negatively at the pivotal level of the gatekeeper, that is, the news editor who decides which of a relatively small number of stories get into the paper from the hundreds of stories available.

As a directing editor of newspapers for 35 years, I watched the problem of insufficiently informed news editors grow steadily worse as the complexity of news was compounded exponentially by the continuing explosion of knowledge.

During that long period, two influences were at work. Enrollments skyrocketed in journalism schools, which meant that journalists got more technical training in reporting and editing techniques but less basic liberal education in terms of literature, history, philosophy and the all-important natural sciences.

Secondly, the scope of human knowledge kept expanding dramatically in many fields, but most noticeably it seemed, in quantum physics, astrophysics, chemistry, molecular biology, linguistics, and anthropology as it traces the earliest roots of religion.

The resulting advances in science and technology have changed the way humans live in hundreds of ways, changed the way they govern themselves in scores of new countries, changed the way they see themselves in terms of cosmic and biological evolution, and, most ominously, changed the way they threaten each other with destructive weapons in insane armament races.

All of this means that the volume and the complexity of available news have also expanded, often beyond the capacity of most newspaper editors to understand the news properly and to present it intelligibly to the average reader.

Meanwhile, the newest 1300-word-a-minute computerized technology brings oceans of news to every news editor's desk. On some newspapers, in fact, the very volume of the available news from press associations and supplemental wire services is all but self-defeating. No one has time even to look at all of it.

Nevertheless, the beleaguered news editor, sometimes with help from more senior editors but more often not, must ask himself or herself each day:

What is really significant, really interesting, really useful, and really new for the readers of my newspaper?

The news editor's answer to that question determines the all-important agenda of public issues for any given community.

Now, the answer, of course, will vary somewhat for each newspaper's mix of readers. So there will be some diversity in newspaper content, but not nearly enough in my opinion, to invalidate my earlier indictment against bland, non-controversial content in the growing media monopoly newspapers.

It is also true, in most communities at least, that the news editor still does a fair job of setting the public agenda for the most obvious local issues of the day.

But the average news editor's judgment on the rest of the serious news -- especially foreign news and the whole rich range of non-political national news -- is often inadequate.

This can be easily established by a comparison between almost any local newspaper and the excellent national newspapers which are now available in most cities: The New York Times, The Christian Science Monitor or The Wall Street Journal.

The average news editor's judgment tends to be shallow and uninformed, because of a lack of catholic interests.

Outdated Definitions of News

It is also beset by the inertia of out-dated newspaper traditions, of moldy old habits which defraud the reader and hurt the newspaper competitively against the electronic media.

Thinking for a moment in computer language, all too many of the news editors I've known, and their bosses, the managing editors and executive editors, have been figuratively programmed with outworn definitions of news.

In obedience to this programming, the gatekeepers seem to function almost like automatons in responding only to news that meets at least one of three sets of requirements or preconceptions.

First, is it a recent event or development?

Second, is it catastrophic, confrontational, aberrational, negative, violent, lurid, glamorous, or otherwise entertaining?

Third, does it involve quick, episodic, once-over-easy politics, economics, law enforcement, or human-interest novelty of any kind?

Unfortunately, all of this outdated programming is guaranteed to miss much of the important serious news, which is already available to news desks from their wire services.

What may be even worse competitively, such old-fashioned orientation concentrates on just that simple, surface news which television can present more dramatically than can newspapers.

The Bad Influence of TV News

In fact, television, which is doing its utmost to degrade news into glamorized vaudeville featuring hot film footage and million-dollar celebrity announcers, tends to seduce many newspaper editors into inferior imitations of this tawdry formula of news as entertainment.

Instead, for their own survival, newspapers should concentrate on doing what TV scorns because it is not visually exciting, that is, presenting and explaining the significant, serious, useful news.

Local news editors face another temptation which is closely allied to network TV news. That is to allow their judgment on national news to be dominated by the Washington press corps.

The members of this elite coterie are highly paid, highly competent, and often highly visible on television.

Unfortunately, they frequently distort the national perspective on the news by resorting to pack journalism. This concentrates massively on a few exciting, but not necessarily significant, stories that are often politically juicy.

Chronically neglected are the kinds of probing and perceptive stories which are needed to show what the big government agencies are really doing, or how the special interests literally buy legislation through political contributions and expensive lobbies.

The NOISE of Junk News

Again excepting the local news budget, the remaining non-local news menu in most communities, tends to be overwhelmed with extraneous news of various kinds: useless negative news swept up with a global vacuum cleaner; sleazy sensational stuff; gossipy news about celebrities; repetitive confrontational news about politicians.

In information theory, all of these excuses for news would come under the heading of noise, which is to say that degree of entropy or chaos in the news which prevents the legitimate news message from getting through to the citizen.

So, what gets left out of the newspapers as a result of this shallow, scatter-gun handling of the news?

Too many things to list, of course. But examples come to mind.

The nation has no immigration policy and virtually open borders because the press failed to expose in detail the egregious political cowardice which kept the latest control legislation from even coming to a vote in the House.

There has been almost no definitive coverage of why America's image is so bad in the Third World that many of the less developed countries, along with the USSR and its puppets, have ganged up on the U.S. in UNESCO, so much so that we have served notice that we are going to pull out of that global body.

Even coverage of the early jockeying for the Democratic presidential nomination has been shallow.

Basic issues have been mainly ignored in favor of the horse-race handicapping of candidates on the basis of popularity polls. Such polls are self-fulfilling and so falsify the true worth of all contenders.

On many other fronts, in fact, there has been insufficient in-depth coverage:

-- for instance, of the difficult national ethical problem of who gets the available human organ transplants, rich Americans, rich Arabs, or the most worthy recipients in terms of maximum human value thus preserved.

--or, again, of the economic damage of import quotas and other trade barriers to protect our inefficient industries at the expense of American consumers, and often at the expense of hard-pressed Third World exporters trying to pay off huge debts.

Unfortunately, although much of this serious news is already available, it tends to be ignored or to get lost in the computerized data-base caverns at most newspapers.

Or, if these topics are covered occasionally, they suffer from the lack of positive, reinforcing redundancy, which information theory now realizes is the determining factor in whether the message really gets through to the recipient or not.

For instance, to illustrate this problem in newspaper communication, essentially the same James Watt story, or John De Lorean or Larry Flynt story, or the routine local murder story all get the redundancy of dozens of repetitions to make sure the message gets through.

But the shocking story on the abysmal state of American education gets at best only two or three chances to be seen by the busy reader, and then only amid the thunderous "noise", the blip-culture bedlam of untold repetitions of junk news.

Will Quality Go Over the Heads of Readers?

However, I am not recommending an elitist editorial product for a non-existent egghead newspaper clientele.

Some of my former colleagues may think I have not read the latest research findings which say that readers like a lot of short-short stories about everything -- a la the flashy new USA Today.

Well, the research also says readers want foreign news, hard news and useful information.

Especially relevant is an excellent piece of research completed in 1982 by Judee and Michael Burgoon and Charles Atkin of Michigan State University.

Entitled "The World of the Working Journalist," the study documents a number of false attitudes among journalists which militate against quality in newspaper content.

These include: a smart journalist/dumb public mentality; cynicism about the public's intelligence; underestimation of the public's demand for news; and overestimation of the public's desire for titillation.

I am also reminded in this connection of a recent New York Times story (September 8, 1983) based on a careful survey of present reading habits. The headline said, "Americans in Electronic Era Are Reading as Much as Ever."

Among the conclusions were these:

- Non-fiction is holding its own or going up.
- People are reading less for recreation and more for information about special topics. .

Science and Foreign Affairs

My concluding recommendation is that newspapers add more staff specialists to upgrade the quality of their news content.

The categories of complex news in which most newspapers need help, in my judgment, are science, medicine, and foreign affairs.

Science and medicine, obviously, because that's where the exciting breakthroughs are coming.

Then there is the challenge of toxic wastes, acid rain, oil spills and other damage to the environment.

Even one staff expert doubling in science, medicine and the environment could begin to make a positive difference.

And the device of a Science Page or an Ideas Page, even if it is only once a week, is a good way to make sure that at least the most interesting news in these areas gets into the paper. .

As regards the key category of foreign news, there are at least two basic problems.

One is the old-fashioned negative news formulas that I've already mentioned. These result in what the Third World sneeringly refers to as the West's obsession with "coups and earthquakes."

I got a lesson in this regard a year ago while giving seminars for mid-career journalists in Nepal and Bangladesh. Using UNESCO research findings, I showed that coverage of the Third World by the Western agencies is not overloaded with disaster, crime and exotica, despite the undocumented charges to this effect by the advocates of a New World Information Order.

But the members of the seminars complained bitterly that just such negative stories about their countries were the only ones that Western editors chose to print.

They pleaded, in effect, for new definitions of news for the coverage of developing countries.

They wanted process-oriented news of their slow progress in education, agricultural productivity, health and sanitation; stories on reducing child mortality, increasing longevity, liberating women.

And less event-oriented news of famines, earthquakes, military coups, and communal violence. Such violence, incidentally, is only triggered by religious prejudice. It is almost always caused by economic desperation.

The second foreign news problem involves the indifference or inattention of directing editors, who simply haven't caught up with the fact that much global news has local reverberations.

Because of this lack of perspective by their bosses, the staff people who select and edit the foreign news usually have had neither training for the job nor working experience overseas.

As a result, they often present a one-dimensional, culture-blind, cowboys-and-Indians view of foreign affairs.

They select foreign news that tends to be both misleading and unreadable. First, because it leans heavily on dust-dry economic and political concepts which are fully valid only in their American context. And second, because it ignores the richly human realities in individual foreign countries.

This deplorable situation underlines yet again my conclusion that newspapers need a basic transformation, a deep-structure change in their news-handling.

Such an overhaul would increase the space for hard news. And it would upgrade the gatekeepers and their news formulas as well as the generalists and specialists on the reporting and editing staffs.

Does it sound too ambitious?

I can think of two better questions.

Will a more responsible newspaper journalism help to restore the faith of citizens in what is really their First Amendment and their free press?

And will it help to save humankind in a world of two nuclear armed camps which are flirting like macho maniacs with mutual extinction?

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