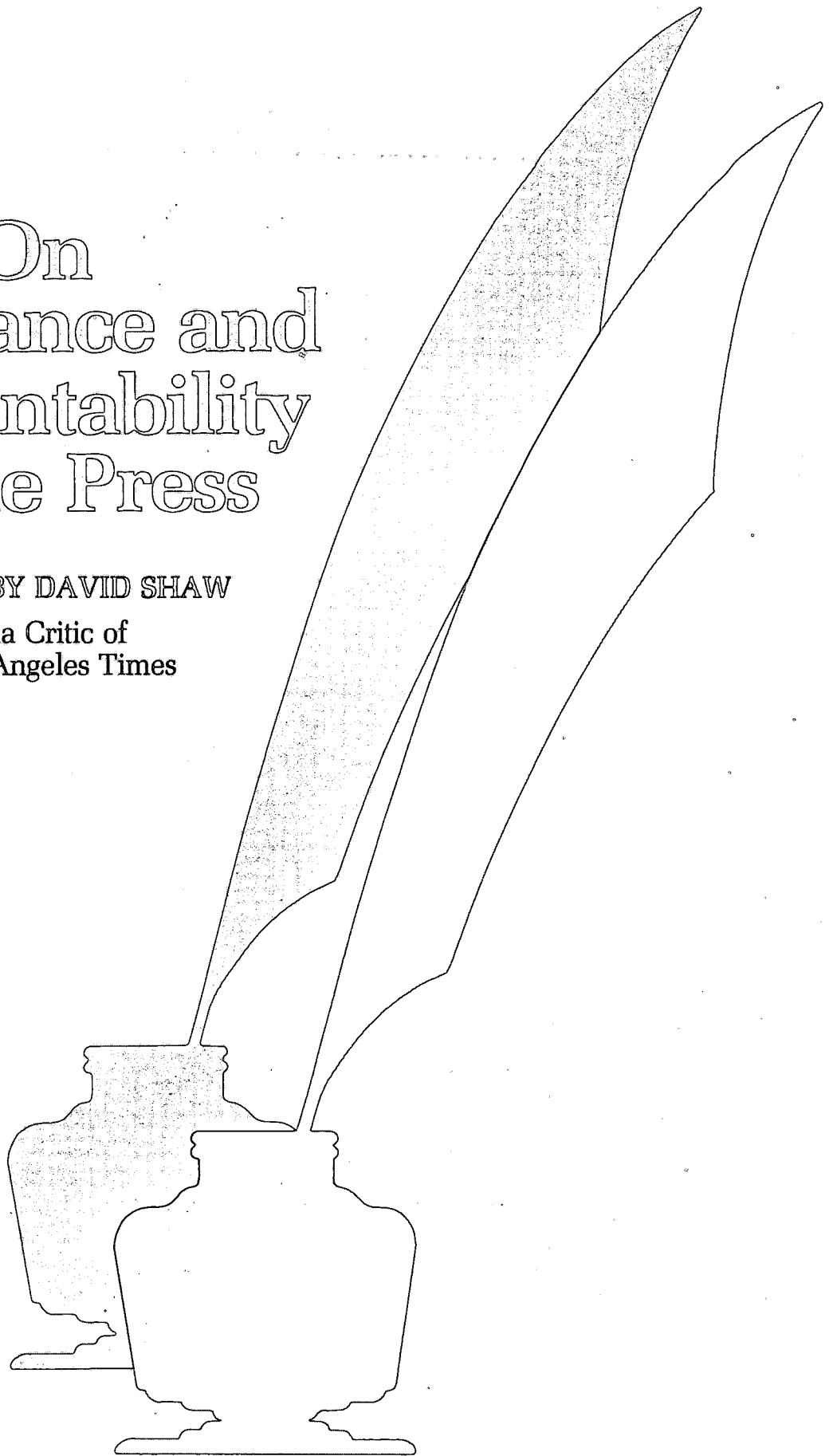


On Arrogance and Accountability in the Press

ADDRESS BY DAVID SHAW

Media Critic of
the Los Angeles Times



Sponsored by the Carol Burnett Fund for Responsible Journalism
University of Hawaii/March 8, 1983

On Arrogance and Accountability in the Press

ADDRESS BY DAVID SHAW

Media Critic of the Los Angeles Times

I've spent quite a bit of time in airplanes the last few weeks. In one 11-day stretch, just before coming to Hawaii, I made two round trips from Los Angeles to New York, with side trips to Boston, Philadelphia and Washington thrown in, just to keep me from getting into a rut. Since the only thing worse than trying to sleep on an airplane is eating on an airplane, I tend to carry a lot of books on board—along with my own food and wine.

On one of these recent cross-country trips, I took along Irving Wallace's latest novel, *The Almighty*. Wallace is not my normal fare by any means but my wife, Ellen, who is here with me today—and whose own writing includes a staff job at *TV Guide* and book reviews for the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*—has substantially loftier literary tastes than I do, even at my loftiest (which isn't always terribly lofty). She tends to prefer the journals of Lord Byron and the diaries of Virginia Woolf and the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu—whoever that is—to what she calls the “vulgar” popular novels that are written, she insists, by “hydrocephalics” for “dental hygienists.”

When Ellen saw me unobtrusively slipping Irving Wallace's *The Almighty* into my suitcase last month, she gave me the sort of scornful glance that she normally reserves for people who scrawl graffiti on the walls of buildings or cut in front of her on the freeway—the sort of folks she kindly refers to as “original protozoic slime.”

But I took the book with me anyway. And I read it. And it was even worse than Ellen had predicted. But it was not altogether a waste of my time—just as I hope this perhaps over-long prelude to my remarks today will not be altogether a waste of your time.

I read the book primarily because I knew from the reviews that it was about a newspaper publisher, and I knew from the book jacket that Wallace is “one of the five most widely read authors in the world today” (the others, I assume, being Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—although I'm not quite sure where that leaves Benjamin Spock and Harold Robbins). As a newspaper reporter—and particularly as a newspaper reporter who specializes in writing about the men and women who own, edit, write and read newspapers—I figured that when one of the world's most popular (if least skillful) novelists writes about a newspaper publisher, I'd better see what he has to say on the subject.

Who knows how many millions of dental hygienists will learn all they ever know about newspapers from Irving Wallace? Who knows when I might bump into a dental hygienist at a cocktail party and have to explain to her that, no, neither Otis Chandler nor Tom Johnson nor Phil Gialanella nor even Al Neuharth is one bit like that guy in *The Almighty*.

This eminently rational, and practical, explanation did not convince my wife—who nodded knowingly and muttered something about my “baser instincts” as I simultaneously packed and explained.

So out of deference to those of you who share my wife's literary taste—and those of you who just have weak stomachs—I won't provide a detailed plot summary of *The Almighty*. Suffice to say, Wallace recounts the story of a power-mad, megalomaniacal, second-generation newspaper publisher who makes such observations as, "There's not enough hard news around, exclusive news. Usually, my competitors have the same thing to sell that I have. But we here want our news alone. Since it's not around, we might have to invent some of it."

This publisher (Edward Armstead by name) decides that the best way to attract attention to himself and his newspaper, the *New York Record*, is to hire a band of European gangsters, arm them, finance them and give them various "assignments" over a period of weeks. The assignments are not stories, of course, but crimes. Incredible crimes.

Armstead promises to pay these gangsters millions and millions of dollars to steal the Dead Sea Scrolls. And to kidnap the king of Spain. And the Pope. And the secretary-general of the United Nations. And—finally—this brilliant newspaper publisher has his personal gang engage a Japanese pilot, a man whose life has been filled with shame because he didn't have the courage to complete a kamikaze mission during World War II, and arrange for this man to crash a stolen Cuban jet fighter into Air Force One over the Atlantic, thus killing the President of the United States and all his fellow-passengers.

Since Armstead himself plans these terrorist acts, he can write the story of them exclusively, for his paper, even before they actually happen. Then, the instant they do happen, *voilà*, an exclusive for the *New York Record*. Needless to say, this stunning series of exclusives lands Armstead on the cover of *Time* magazine and—well, I promised you I wouldn't give away too much of the story so I'm not going to bore you by talking about

Armstead's affair with his father's ex-mistress—she of the (and I quote) "flawless, peach-colored skin . . . lissomely curved body . . . and moistening vulva."

I realize that the portrait of a newspaper publisher drawn by Wallace in this dreadful little book is not a very realistic one—to put it mildly. But I don't want to react as defensively to that portrait as most journalists tend to react when it is suggested that not all the giants in our profession are candidates for sainthood.

Surely, no profession whose pioneers include the names of Hearst and Pulitzer and McCormick can recoil with horror when it is suggested that the power of a newspaper publisher is sometimes used to advance something other than the common good. Their frequent good work—and their even more frequent encomiums to each other—notwithstanding, newspaper publishers are not invariably paragons of virtue, universally beloved and and respected for their commitment to the commonweal.

Indeed, I remember reading that Hiram Johnson, the governor of California from 1911 to 1917, once said of Harrison Gray Otis, the founder/publisher of my own newspaper, the *Los Angeles Times*:

"He sits there in senile dementia with gangrene heart and rotting brain, grimacing at every reform, chattering impotently at all things that are decent, frothing, fuming, violently gibbering, going down to his grave in snarling infamy . . . disgraceful, depraved, corrupt, crooked, putrescent—that is Harrison Gray Otis."

This description, although a bit more richly written than Irving Wallace's portrayal of Edward Armstead in *The Almighty*, is probably just as hyperbolic. But as I was reading Wallace's novel last month, I suddenly realized—somewhere over Utah, as I recall—that Wallace was mining familiar ground; since the heady, halcyon days of *All the President's Men*—when Jason Robards played Ben Bradlee playing Jason Robards, and two young reporters named Woodward and Bernstein

became household names, as familiar as Ajax and Cheerios, fictional journalists have been depicted in one outrageous, compromising, unethical situation after another.

Journalists have often been the subjects of movies and books and plays in generations past, of course, but the recent characterizations of which I speak bear little resemblance to the rogues and romantic figures of *The Front Page* or *Foreign Correspondent* or *His Girl Friday*.

Journalists depicted on the silver screen today are more likely to be rotten than roguish or romantic. Wallace's Armstead is certainly the most despicable of these characters, but just before reading that book, my wife and I had seen *That Championship Season*, a movie in which a newspaperman who has photographic evidence of a campaign fiasco and a coverup perpetrated by the mayor of his town is shown giving the mayor the photos and agreeing not to publish the story. Why? Because the mayor had helped the newspaperman's cousin beat a criminal rap and save his family some embarrassment, and the newspaperman was repaying the favor.

A few weeks earlier, Ellen and I had squandered a couple of hours over the New Year's Day weekend watching *The Verdict*. A number of lawyers I know were enraged by what they saw as the absurdly unrealistic portrayal of the legal profession (and the legal process) in that movie, and I agree. But I was also dismayed by the fleeting portrayal of the journalistic profession (and the journalist process) in the movie—that is, by the movie's suggestion that a major, big-city newspaper could easily be manipulated into publishing a full-page photo and a puff piece on a local hospital on the eve of a spectacular trial in which doctors at that hospital are facing malpractice charges.

I don't know how many of you saw either of these movies, but I suspect that most of you—at least most of you

interested in journalism—saw *Absence of Malice* last year. I also assume that many of you remember reporter Megan Carter in that film. Carter, as you may recall, engaged in so many unethical activities that the script for the movie could almost be used as a hypothetical case in one of those provocative and valuable media seminars Fred Friendly organizes around the country.

Carter illegally wore a concealed tape recorder during an interview. She had a love affair with a man she was writing about for her newspaper. She betrayed the confidence of at least one of her news sources and callously invaded the privacy of another. And she was so eager to rush into print with a story about a murder investigation that she blindly allowed herself to be used by a ruthless prosecutor to blacken an innocent man's reputation—without making the slightest effort to investigate the prosecutor's story or to learn his motive (and without making more than a token effort to get the alleged suspect's side of what was actually a phony story).

All this, not surprisingly, made the alleged suspect—Paul Newman—very mad indeed. And the movie made a lot of journalists even madder. Even though the movie was written by a former newspaper editor, they thought it was egregiously unfair to journalists.

No reporter would do what Megan Carter did, they said—and if she did, no editor would let her get away with it. Well, I agree that the character played by Sally Field—like the character of Edward Armstead in *The Almighty*—was a bit overdrawn. I can't imagine a newspaper the size of hers in the movie not having at least one reporter or editor or even copy messenger who would have at least suggested, however tentatively and perhaps even unsuccessfully, that she might be doing something wrong.

But I think most journalists overreacted to *Absence of Malice*. I found their "It can't happen here" protestations

almost as hollow as I found similar protestations in the aftermath of the Janet Cooke affair at the *Washington Post*. And I wondered, with Janet Cooke then still fresh in our minds—and with the resignation of a *New York Daily News* columnist who was accused of fabricating a story about a battle between a British army patrol and a gang of youths in Belfast equally fresh in our minds at the time—why we in the press were so determined to insist on the unassailability of our virtue.

The answer, I think, is fairly obvious. Like lawyers—and doctors and politicians and athletes and movie stars and everyone else I know—we don't like to be criticized.

We don't like to be criticized explicitly or implicitly, in print or on film, in truth or in fiction, anywhere or anytime by anyone. And when we are criticized—or when, as in *Absence of Malice*, we are depicted in a bad light—we become even more sensitive, even more defensive, even more insistent that the portrayals are unfair, the criticism inaccurate.

The press—individually and collectively, personally and institutionally—is fond of saying that what separates us from other institutions in our society is the First Amendment. And we are quick to wrap ourselves in the protective cloak of the First Amendment at the first hint of criticism. I sometimes think that the phrase “chilling effect”—as in “This will have a ‘chilling effect’ on the ability of the press to fulfill its First Amendment obligations”—is routinely administered to all journalists, by injection, along with their first press cards. Or maybe these days, it's automatically programmed into their VDTs.

But the First Amendment guarantees only that we are free to publish, not that we will be free of criticism for what we publish. The press is a powerful institution that, at its best, acts as a surrogate for its readers, shining the light of public scrutiny on those other powerful institutions (and powerful individuals) who occasionally

abuse and misuse—or just misconstrue—the public trust.

We observe. We monitor. We report. And by so doing, we sometimes hold others accountable for their errors of commission and omission. But who observes us? Who monitors us? Who holds us accountable when we abuse or misuse or misconstrue the public trust? Or when we make simple—or not-so-simple—errors of commission or omission?

In other words, who watches the watchers? The brief, oversimplified but honest answer is that no one does. And no one should. But we should watch ourselves. Carefully. Constantly. Critically. Publicly. And we don't do that—at least not in the sense I think is necessary. And that's one reason—a big reason—that characterizations like those I've described in *Absence of Malice* and *The Verdict* and *That Championship Season* and probably even *The Almighty* often find such a receptive audience.

My wife and I, like many other journalists, were invited to a preview screening of *Absence of Malice* before it was generally released in late 1981, and I can still vividly remember a conversation we had immediately after the screening, at a dinner party for the screening guests.

Everyone, naturally, was talking about the movie, and my wife and I were both busy deploring the unethical behavior of Megan Carter. But the first non-journalist we spoke to at the party—a young woman not otherwise noticeably bereft of her senses—asked us, quite ingenuously, I thought—“But don't all journalists do that?” This exchange took place perhaps six or seven months after the Janet Cooke affair first came to public attention, and I've often wished that I had had the presence of mind to ask the young lady at the dinner party what she knew—and what she thought—about that particular journalistic scandal.

I personally think the Janet Cooke affair did a great deal to damage the credibility of the journalistic profession,

and I would not have been surprised if a little probing had shown that some measure of my dinner partner's attitude was influenced by the news reports on Janet Cooke. In fact, I suspect that one reason it has become commercially viable in the last couple of years to depict journalists as villains is that Janet Cooke helped create a climate in which that characterization is entirely credible.

But Janet Cooke did not do that all by herself. And today, almost two years after she was exposed, I don't want to spend too much time on her case. She and her newspaper paid dearly for their mistakes. Besides, I think the Janet Cooke affair only confirmed what many of our readers—not too many, I fervently hope—have long suspected about us: that we cannot altogether be trusted.

In 1963, when I took my first full-time reporting job, I worked for a small daily newspaper that had a feature similar to many of the time—a daily "Man in the Street" interview. Every day, the paper's lone photographer and its newest reporter would visit one of the nearby shopping areas and interview (and photograph) several shoppers and passersby on some issue of current concern. The next day, six one-paragraph interviews (and six one-inch-square photographs) would be published in the newspaper.

The first few times I drew the "Man in the Street" assignment, I was excited by the friendly, ego-gratifying reception we invariably received. People would spot us in the distance and come racing toward us, virtually begging to be interviewed and photographed. They would squeal with delight about their good fortune—and mine.

"Oh," they would often screech in tones of awe and reverence, "you're a newspaperman."

You bet I was. Twenty years old and a NEWSPAPERMAN. But all this was before Selma and Watts, before Berkeley, before Tet and My Lai, before Martin Luther King and Mario Savio and Bella

Abzug, before free love and free choice—in other words, before the press began to report, on an almost daily basis, all the civil rights marches, antiwar protests, campus demonstrations, feminist rallies, sit-ins, teach-ins, love-ins.

It's become almost a cliché to say it now, but the young people of that time were challenging the values and standards and traditions of the establishment generation, and most members of the establishment generation not only resented the challenge, they resented the press for reporting the challenge. Time and again, we in the press heard that if only we would go away, deny the demonstrators our front pages and our cameras, they would shut up, go home and start submissively listening to mom and dad and the teacher and the preacher once again. We didn't go away, thank God. Neither did the protestors. Nor, alas, did the issues they raised—as witness the continuing threat of nuclear war and the continuing problems facing the poor and the black and the brown and the continuing (if, in some cases somewhat diminished) discrimination against women in our society.

But I don't think our readers came to resent us—and, in many cases, to dislike us and mistrust us—solely because we were messengers bringing them bad news. That was a big part of it, yes. But not the only part. I think they also resented and disliked and mistrusted us—because of the arrogance with which we brought them the bad news (in fact, any news). And that arrogance, too, is still with us today.

Indeed, I think the arrogance of the press may be one of the greatest ethical problems we, as an institution, face today.

There are many other, extremely important ethical problems that individual reporters and editors must deal with every day, and I have written about a number of them—the continuing over-reliance of the press on unnamed sources; the willingness of some reporters to lie, steal and misrepresent themselves in the pursuit of

a story; the use and abuse of political polls; the rush to get a story first rather than to get it right; conflict of interest; invasion of privacy; checkbook journalism; blatant oversimplification; plagiarism.

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.

Having said all that, I must return to my statement of a moment ago—that I think one of the gravest ethical problems confronting the press today is our own arrogance—our hypocritical resentment of questions and criticism, our insularity, our solipsism, almost-giddy rush to envelop ourselves in the sacred mantle of the First Amendment, our refusal to be held accountable for our shortcomings, large or small.

Too many members of our profession seem to agree with a *Wall Street Journal* editorial of almost 60 years ago which said:

“A newspaper is a private enterprise, owing nothing to the public, which grants it no franchise. It is therefore affected with no public interest. It is emphatically the property of its owner, who is selling a manufactured product at his own risk.”

I feel I should make clear at this point that I am, as Norman Isaacs, your speaker last year, said of himself, “a devout believer in the press being totally independent.” I think the First Amendment is the best guarantee America has against tyranny and totalitarianism. The Bible says, “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make ye free,” and I am convinced that a vigilant, independent press is the best—the only way—for a people to know the truth, the only way for them to be free.

I believe wholeheartedly in the First Amendment assurance that the press must not be held legally accountable to the government; that way, ultimately, lies tyranny. But I also believe wholeheartedly that the press must be held morally accountable to itself and to the society it serves. As with all privileges, the First Amendment privilege of freedom carries with it a First Amendment responsibility.

That responsibility is multi-faceted, but most journalists respond only to the most visible of those facets, their responsibility to report the news fairly, impartially and comprehensively, “without fear or favor,” in the words of Adolph S. Ochs, the former publisher of the *New York Times*.

That is an honorable and by no means modest objective, and I quite frankly think more journalists—and more newspapers—are performing this basic, essential job better today than ever in our history. There are not nearly as many good newspapers in this country as there should be—I often think, in fact, that most newspapers are not very good at all when judged by the varying standards of excellence that virtually all papers could strive for, regardless of size. But I still think that for all our flaws, newspapers collectively (and, in particular, the half-dozen or dozen best newspapers individually) are more accurate, more insightful, more complete, more ethical—in a word, better than ever.

They are also more responsible. And more responsive. But they are not nearly responsible and responsive enough. Too often, they remain—as I said earlier—arrogant and unwilling to be held morally accountable, even by members of their own staffs and their own profession.

For far too long, journalists have operated on the assumption that we don't owe anyone anything—except, of course, The Truth. If we do our job, we figure—if we report, write, edit and publish accurate stories—that's all anyone can ask of us.

Wrong.

People—our readers and our non-readers—have every right to ask much more of us. They may ask us, for instance, why we published a certain story on a certain page on a certain day. And why we didn't publish another story. And why certain information and certain photographs and certain headlines were or were not handled in a certain way. But I have a better idea. Why wait for them to ask us? Why not tell them first? Now.

I am constantly appalled anew by how little most otherwise intelligent, well-informed people know about how a newspaper actually functions, about what its objectives and limitations and traditions are, about its structure and its processes and decision-making procedures.

I am confronted by this ignorance time and again at parties, when guests learn I am a journalist and begin asking well-meaning but utterly ignorant questions about the most fundamental aspects of newspaper work. Even worse, I hear these questions often when I speak informally to college journalism classes.

I have actually encountered senior journalism majors, at large, respected universities, who think the chairman of the board of the company that publishes the *Los Angeles Times* comes to the city room each day and dictates the tone, selection and play of every important story, based on his personal, social, political and financial interests at the time.

The *Lou Grant* television show compounded the ignorance problem in some areas—especially that of direct publisher involvement—by its frequent departures from journalistic verisimilitude. But for all the misconceptions born of this dramatic license, *Lou Grant* probably also provided a good education, the best continuing, “fictional” look at a legitimate newspaper operation in contemporary society; on balance, I think it probably saved me from having to answer a lot more ill-informed questions. Of course, CBS—in its characteristic and infinite wisdom—canceled *Lou Grant* last year, so

I assume those questions will resume.

But why, as I asked a few moments ago, don't newspapers explain themselves? They don't need *Lou Grant*—or anyone else—to do that for them. I don't mean that every newspaper should run a five-part series on how it gets published. That would be too easy. I think the job should be done implicitly, not explicitly—continually, not on a one-time-only basis.

Until relatively recently, about the only time newspapers wrote about themselves was when they won a Pulitzer Prize or when the publisher's son got married or his wife was placed in charge of one important social group or another—or, heaven forbid, when the newspaper was sued for libel and the paper's attorney said, in effect, “You better print a retraction or the other guy's going to wind up owning your house, your car and your newspaper.”

Anything short of that, of course, and the paper would bury the correction back on page 37, among the ads for corsets, jock straps and athlete's foot powder. We felt we didn't owe anyone an explanation or an apology, so we seldom explained or apologized. Worse, perhaps, we never wrote about ourselves the way we wrote about anyone else.

In part, this was arrogance; in part, it was the social graces of the gentleman's club. As William Randolph Hearst once said, in ordering his editors in San Francisco to be sure that “nothing unpleasant” about a rival publisher was printed in his paper, “whether it is news or not”:

“I think it would be a good policy to adopt not to print any unpleasant things about any newspaperman.”

Thus, for too many years, the press was a powerful institution dedicated to the critical examination of every other powerful institution in society—except itself. There were rare exceptions, of course. After the 114-day newspaper strike in New York in 1962-63, for example, Abe Raskin wrote a lengthy, evenhanded

report on the strike in the pages of the *New York Times*. But that, as I said, was an exception, and Raskin himself wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* four years later, "The press prides itself—as it should—on the vigor with which it excoriates malefactors in government, unions and business, but its own inadequacies escape both its censure and its notice The real long-range menace to America's daily newspapers lies in the unshatterable smugness of their publishers and editors, myself included."

For the most part, that complaint is as true today as it was in 1967. By and large, the press is still a powerful institution dedicated to the critical examination of every other powerful institution in society but itself. The difference is there are now more exceptions. There's the National News Council, an independent body that monitors and reports on media performance. There's a statewide news council in Minnesota and a community news council right here in Honolulu. There are formal, written professional codes of ethics—not only at the organizational level of the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Society of Professional Journalists, but at an increasing number of individual daily newspapers. And at about 25 American newspapers—including the *Advertiser* here in Honolulu—there are ombudsmen, newspapermen and newspaperwomen whose job it is to listen to and evaluate and write in their own papers about criticisms that readers make of those papers.

Big goddamn deal.

The National News Council? Most newspapers don't bother to publish its findings, and most people outside the profession (and a great many inside it) don't even know it exists. The *New York Times*, the best and most authoritative newspaper in the country, doesn't support the news council financially, and doesn't respond formally when the council has a complaint against it (although some

individual editors and reporters at the paper have responded to the council). Worse, the *New York Times* prints only brief stories (or no story at all) when the council issues its findings.

When Abe Raskin joined the National News Council several years ago, after a distinguished career with the *New York Times*, he says his own publisher told him he had "gone over to the enemy."

Twenty-five ombudsmen on American newspapers? Is that the number I gave you? Sensational! That means there are only 1,700 daily papers without ombudsmen—and the editors of most of those papers, if they've thought about the ombudsman issue at all, probably feel much as one prominent editor told me a couple of years ago, after firing his ombudsman and deciding there would be no replacement:

"An ombudsman is just window dressing. Any editor who can't make value judgments on his own and make them correctly is in the wrong job."

But suppose the editor, an excellent editor—intelligent, ethical, a good judge of news and people alike—just makes a mistake. Suppose further that he doesn't think he made a mistake.

Tough. You don't like it? Write a letter to the editor. Same guy, right? Too bad. Case closed. As Abe Raskin wrote in 1967, "Of all the institutions in our inordinately complacent society, none is so addicted as the press to self-righteousness, self-satisfaction and self-congratulation."

If you want proof of that, all you have to do is read the newspaper trade publication, *Editor & Publisher*, every week. Or virtually any week. The week I was writing this speech, for example. *Editor & Publisher* printed a half-page cartoon that perfectly illustrates this attitude of perpetual self-congratulation. The cartoon showed a skier—labeled "Press"—skillfully and determinedly weaving his way downhill, between flags labeled "Attacks on Confidential Sources" and "Hard Line White House News

Policy” and “Press Abuse in Poland” and “Pressure on 1st Amendment Rights” and “Freedom of Information Cutbacks.”

Just in case some reader with a room-temperature IQ missed what the cartoon was supposed to be saying, the artist had drawn in an admiring couple at the bottom of the slope, with one saying to the other, “There’s a guy with guts!”

So what can be done to overcome this attitude—to effect the changes necessary to make the press see that it is in its own best interest to be more responsible, less arrogant, in a phrase, morally accountable for its actions?

I yield to no man (or woman) in my respect for those reporters and editors who have had to struggle with subpoenas and demands for confidential notes and names—often at great personal and professional sacrifice. Theirs is a valiant and invaluable struggle, and all of us—as journalists and as citizens—have benefited from it.

I’ve already said I don’t want any legal pressure exerted to make the press more responsible. Nor do I think news councils or ombudsmen or codes of ethics or any similar devices should be mandatory—not mandated by the government and not mandated by any professional associations and not mandated by anyone else. But I do think it’s about time—long past time—for newspapers to take action themselves, individually, as they always insist they like to act.

About eight years ago, Bill Thomas, the editor of my paper, decided to act. He had decided, he told me, that the press was the one uncovered story of our time, and he wanted *The Times* to begin writing about the press as it did about the other important institutions in our society. He asked me if I would like to write full-time about the press the way I had written about a wide variety of other subjects over the years.

I was initially quite reluctant, but after considerable discussion, I said I’d

take the job on a six-month trial basis. Bill asked me to make it a year. I agreed. Although much of what my job is today has gradually evolved, without either Bill or I talking much about it, the basic structure of the job has remained relatively stable from day one. Bill said he did not want me to be an ombudsman. An ombudsman, he said, is just one voice, speaking for himself or herself, on the editorial page or the op-ed page. He wanted a reporter, writing in the news columns of the paper—as it’s turned out, almost invariably on the front page of the paper—carrying the full weight of the paper.

So I am not an ombudsman. I do not write exclusively or even primarily about my own newspaper. Sometimes my paper figures prominently in a story, sometimes not; it depends on the story.

In my job, I am a reporter first and a “critic” second—and I am not a “critic” in the sense that someone is a “book critic” or a “film critic” or a “restaurant critic.” I don’t write that something is good or bad just because I, David Shaw, think it’s good or bad. I do the kind of reporting I have always preferred to do on any subject: I interview 80 or 100 or 150 people; I read every relevant article or document or publication I can find; I spend whatever time the story requires; I travel wherever the story takes me; then I synthesize and analyze what I’ve found and I try to write a comprehensive story, including my own judgments, on the subject at hand.

Working in that way, I’ve been able to write on a large number of issues in this assignment. Some of the stories involving ethical questions I mentioned earlier. But I’ve also written about the coverage of violent crime, about the Pulitzer Prizes, coverage of the courts, how newspapers miss important stories, newspaper chains, front pages, libel, restaurant critics, film critics, police-press relations, best-seller lists, the comics, obituaries, editorial cartoonists, science writing, sportswriters, op-ed pages—well, you get the general

idea. I try to select subjects both light and heavy, to point out our flaws (and, on occasion, our strengths) and to give the reader some sense of just how and why a newspaper does what it does.

My pieces are generally more critical than explanatory in tone, and I freely admit that I am more likely to do a story on something I think the press generally does poorly than I am on something the press generally does well, if only because—as I think I’ve made clear here today—I think there’s already too much self-congratulation in the press. But I do include in my stories examples of and comments on good work done by the press, and I hope the criticisms and the responses to them contribute something, however slight that may be, to increasing both public understanding of the press and public confidence in the press.

Public reaction to what the *Los Angeles Times* has been publishing on the media has generally been quite good. At least, I get a lot of nice, thoughtful letters. Response inside *The Times* hasn’t always been so good, though. When I took my job, Bill Thomas promised that I would have the freedom to do the job as he and I agreed it should be done. He has kept that promise. And many other editors and reporters at the paper have been very supportive.

But some editors—and some reporters—have taken loud (or silent) exception to much of what I’ve written. One editor complained to the publisher about one of my stories and then didn’t talk to me for a year, even when we passed in the hallway. Another editor wadded up one of my stories, threw it in his trash basket and asked me if I thought the paper ever did anything right.

Two *L.A. Times* reporters have refused to be interviewed by me for stories. A few have put nasty notes about my work on the office bulletin board. Others have refused to speak to me after certain of my stories were published. In fact, when one of these sulky reporters

subsequently said hello to me in the hallway, she retracted her greeting a few minutes later and said, “I didn’t mean to say hello to you. I didn’t realize it was you. I’m not talking to you.”

These personal experiences have demonstrated anew to me the acute sensitivity—and rampaging hypocrisy—of many in the press. It’s OK for us to criticize other people, they clearly think, but no one should be allowed to criticize us.

Despite these minor, periodic problems, though, I am enjoying my job enormously. That’s why I’ve kept it seven years longer than I originally agreed to. And I have no plans to give it up soon.

Is the *Los Angeles Times* approach the best way to address the problems I’ve been discussing here today? I don’t know. But it is one way. I’d be delighted if there were other newspapers with reporters doing the same thing—or different things—just so long as they were doing something. But they’re not.

Oh, there are those 25 ombudsmen out there all right. And a few papers have people who write periodically about the press. And a few alternative weeklies write critically and intelligently about the press from time to time. And every once in a great while, a daily newspaper will do a long press story of some consequence.

But it’s not enough, not nearly enough.

Public opinion polls consistently show that people trust us less and less, and our own personal experience should tell us that they like us less and less. There are many complex reasons for this, but I think our refusal to be more forthcoming about our shortcomings is one of these reasons. An important one.

The *Washington Post*, as badly as it handled the original Janet Cooke story and its immediate aftermath, was subsequently forthright and thorough in its ombudsman’s report on the entire affair, and I think many newspaper editors and

publishers could learn as much from what the *Post* did right after that time bomb exploded as they can learn from what the *Post* did wrong in all the time leading up to the explosion.

Will they learn? Is there hope for a more open press—in every sense of the term? I am not optimistic. But there was also a time, not so very long ago, when I despaired of seeing fair, reasonable corrections policies in most newspapers. The *Louisville Courier Journal*, which was the first American newspaper to have an ombudsman, was also among the first to adopt such a policy. Now many newspapers have begun to publish regularly—indeed daily, in a prominent or consistent position in the paper—various corrections and clarifications of (and apologies for) their errors and oversights, whether of omission or commission.

The *Boston Globe* even monitors and evaluates its corrections policy annually. About a year ago, S. J. Micciche, who was then the *Globe's* ombudsman, found that 37% of the corrections the previous year had been published without any explanation of how and why the various errors had occurred. Micciche wrote at the time that such explanations are essential, since, "Given today's skepticism regarding the press, simple inadvertence becomes suspect." The *Globe* editors must have listened to Micciche; in 1982 only 10% of the corrections were published without explanations.

About 18 months ago, when I wrote a story on journalism ethics, I remember being very critical of the *New York Times* for what I saw as its overly narrow corrections policy. In one particular instance that I wrote about, the paper had made a big mistake, and its brief "correction" had not even come close to making whole the man it had wronged. Now—as of last month—the *New York Times* has a new corrections policy, which will attempt to "amplify articles or rectify what the editors consider significant lapses of fairness, balance or perspective." In the

first implementation of this policy—under the rubric "Editor's Note," the *Times* acknowledged that a headline in the previous day's paper had "summarized only (the) . . . opening paragraphs" of a column and had "failed to reflect the column's overall theme." This "Editor's Note" also pointed out that, "in editing to fit available space, two balancing paragraphs had been omitted." Those paragraphs were printed that day.

That was a small but significant step toward what I have called here today the necessary "moral accountability" of the press. There are signs of other small, tentative steps in the same direction. The Hastings Center in New York is conducting a study of journalism ethics. Officials at the Modern Media Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida, have discussed the development of a program in journalism ethics there. There were conferences on related subjects last year at the University of Nevada and the University of Notre Dame. Journalists have been involved in all these programs.

Even television has shown some small inclination toward increased candor about its shortcomings. CBS News now has an ombudsman, and ABC periodically broadcasts its "Viewpoint" program that contains criticisms of its own news programs.

I hope I am correct—and not just indulging in wishful thinking—when I call these signs hopeful. The press, like most other institutions, is very good at ignoring any recommendation that it change itself. The Hutchins Commission on the Freedom of the Press recommended the creation of a national news council in 1947, and it took 25 years—and a second such study and recommendation, this time by the Twentieth Century Fund—before such a council was finally established in 1972. Frankly, I'm not sure it would even have happened then had not many in the media feared that the Nixon Administration might follow all Spiro Agnew's fulminations against the press by

trying to enact coercive, anti-press legislation if the press did not make some effort to monitor its own performance.

Many of us in the press still worry about that, no matter who is in power in Washington. I wish we didn't have to worry, but since we do have to, we should worry. Worry makes us vigilant. And that worry is still a good argument in favor of news councils and codes of ethics and ombudsmen and more honest correction policies and better, more candid and complete coverage of the press by the press. But it's not the best argument. Coercion—or the fear of coercion—is never the best reason, only the most practical, for doing something. The best reason for doing something is because it ought to be done. Period.

Many of us in the press are fond of quoting Thomas Jefferson's famous line, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

But some of us forget that Jefferson also said, "The man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them, inasmuch as he who knows nothing is nearer to truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods and errors."

We in the newspaper profession also tend to overlook another pretty fair writer and social observer, Dr. Samuel Johnson, who wrote in his own newspaper more than 200 years ago:

"A newswriter is a man without virtue, who writes lies at home for his own profit. To these compositions is required neither genius nor knowledge, neither industry nor sprightliness; but contempt of shame and indifference to truth are absolutely necessary."

The vast majority of the newspaper reporters, editors and publishers I know are not lacking in either virtue or industry; they are not indifferent to truth but rather dedicated to the pursuit of it. Most have knowledge. A few may even be geniuses.

But not one of them is perfect, and not one of their newspapers is perfect, as they would be the first to admit. Privately. But it's time we all began to admit that publicly. And not just admit it. That's easy. Do something about it.

Rebuild the bond of trust that once existed between newspaper and newspaper reader. The only way to do that, I am convinced, is by replacing arrogance with accountability, by voluntarily making the newspaper morally accountable to its readers. And the simple way to do that is to quit acting as if what we do every day is either an arcane secret, too complex for the reader to understand, or a state secret that's none of the readers' business. It is their business. It's their newspaper. Let's tell them, in as many different ways as different editors can devise, how we function and why and how we sometimes malfunction and misfunction. And let's start doing it now, while they still care.

Thank you very much.