

**COURAGEOUS JOURNALISM
TO BOTH COMFORT AND AFFLICT**

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**10th Annual Carol Burnett Fund for Responsible Journalists
Ethics Program**

University of Hawaii at Manoa

November 12, 1991

Good afternoon everyone. Thank you very much for the nice reception you have accorded me here at the University of Hawaii. I'm truly enjoying my visit to the campus and to the islands.

My only other visit here was a quite brief stopover at the army base back in 1971, on my way to duty in Viet Nam. This journey is, I assure you, much more pleasant.

I am honored to be invited to join your university community as part of the Carol Burnett Program for Responsible Journalism. It's significant that Ms. Burnett supports this venture ~~is~~ such a substantive way. I have been particularly impressed over the years by the annual Carol Burnett Prizes, awarded to student journalists here at the University and around the country for writing outstanding papers on ethical issues in journalism. I had the pleasure of judging some of those papers earlier this year, and I was impressed by the level of exploration journalism students were applying to ethical issues.

I am humbled by being asked to deliver this lecture and to be included in a list of journalism luminaries the likes of Eugene Patterson, Howard Simons, David Shaw, Burton Benjamin, and Norman Isaacs who have presented here in years past.

Indeed, my journalism career and my professional credentials pale in comparison to those individuals. I'm just a run-of-the-mill, small-town journalist, albeit one who has had the good fortune to specialize in journalism ethics and to now work for a terrific organization. The Poynter Institute is strongly committed to the study of and professional training in media ethics.

In fact, my main claim to fame in recent years, or claim to infamy as the case may be, was not so much what I did as a journalist, but rather why journalists sought me out. Being the only person in the land who went to both high school and college with Dan Quayle, I was besieged by inquiring reporters when he was nominated as Vice-President. It's worth noting that even though Dan and I were schoolmates and golfing buddies, we were not and still are not on the same end of the ideological spectrum. The fact that I was willing to share some thoughts on that matter is probably what led packs of journalists to my doorstep.

So, "why IS Bob Steele here?" you say. Well, perhaps it's because I spend my time these days as one deeply involved in the issue of journalism ethics, as a teacher and leader of seminars on this issue for print and broadcast journalists from around the country and sometimes from around the world. I also write a bit about ethics issues and I talk about ethics a great deal with journalists and with the public. Hopefully, I have something worthwhile to share on the subject based on my experiences and my observations, and by virtue of having my finger on the pulse of journalism as it relates to responsibility and ethics.

When I agreed to present this speech a couple of months ago, I was asked to give a working title to the lecture, for promotional purposes I suppose. I'm sure John Luter and Tom Brislin from the Journalism Department wanted a title that was snappy and sexy, something to lure folks into an ethics talk at noontime. I mean, we're competing with sunshine out there, and great food, and beaches and surfing, and even other classes folks could go to.

A title? "Sure," I said. "How about something like "Courageous Journalism: To Both Comfort and Afflict." Well, as I started writing and then rewriting my speech a number of other titles came and went. Titles like these: "The thoughts of a run-of-the mill journalist." Or, "Dan's old buddy tells a few tales out of school." Or, "Journalism ethics: an epistemological analysis into the phenomenological genesis of moral reasoning." I knew you would love that one. You'll be happy to know I ruled it out. Finally, I just decided to write the darn speech and not worry about the title.

Let me begin by expressing a couple of beliefs, ones that I hold strongly. I believe that journalism is a noble calling. That those who choose this profession or craft are taking on a role unlike any other in society. Informing the public. It is a mission with great worth and tremendous responsibility.

Furthermore, I believe that media institutions are among the most important in our society. And they are among the most powerful. The level of influence and the potential for impact can be and often are tremendous. Because of that, the importance and the power, the influence and the impact, I believe the media should hold itself accountable to very high standards. These should be even higher ethical standards than those imposed on other powerful and influential institutions in our society, like government, or private business, medicine or law.

That said, let me frame my thoughts by suggesting several major concerns I have about the current state of journalism ethics, concerns that are reflective of a variety of seminars and workshops I have been involved in over the past year or so, at The Poynter

When athletes become players, do they drop standards to those of a politician?

Institute, in newsrooms, and at conventions of journalists. While I am generally a fairly positive person in my outlook, I must admit some deep concern regarding the following matters.

Let me phrase these concerns as individual statements, and then I will share a few thoughts on each matter.

✓ I am concerned about the erosion of the truth telling principle as part of the journalistic mission.

✓ I am concerned about the failure of news organizations and individual journalists to truly recognize and to honor the principle of independence.

✓ I am concerned about the shortage of courage and the abundance of restraint and timidity among American news organizations.

✓ I am concerned about the unwillingness or inability of media organizations to openly and clearly conduct a dialogue with the public about how and why journalism does what it does in our society.

✓ I am concerned about the lack of skill displayed by news organizations and journalists at ethical decision-making.

First, my concern about the erosion of the truth telling principle. Let me start by returning to that working title for this lecture: "Courageous Journalism: To both Comfort and Afflict.

I borrow those words from an age-old expression relating to the news business. The full expression, many of you have probably heard it, goes like this: "Journalism's mission is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. To comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable."

I like that concept a great deal. It comes, I believe, from a turn-of-the-century phrase used by a Mr. Dooley, a character in Finley Peter Dunne's writing about journalism in Chicago.

While it potentially could mean a good many things, I take this phrase as symbolic of the essence of journalism. It embodies such notions as the "watchdog" role of the media, the "righting of societal wrongs," "the challenge to the powerful and concern for the powerless." It speaks of compassion as an essential element in journalism ethics. It speaks of conviction and commitment as essential elements of news gathering and reporting.

To afflict the comfortable. It's all about hard-hitting, aggressive journalism, holding the politically powerful and the financially influential accountable for their actions. It's about challenging the elected powers that be, and about skepticism for official lines from official sources. It's about revealing the chicanery of "fat-cat," corrupt politicians, scheming corporate executives, "on-the-take" public servants, hypocritical televangelists, or haughty pro athletes.

And, to comfort the afflicted.

It's all about being a human being as well as a journalist, about not using people merely as a means to an end, about preventing unnecessary revictimizing of those who are already suffering, about being sensitive to those who are most vulnerable, about empathizing with the feelings of those who are unwillingly thrust into the public spotlight.

Let me tell you that I am not very encouraged about how well the American journalism is doing in meeting these dual responsibilities.

I worry that we are not fulfilling the journalistic mission as it might be interpreted as a commensurate responsibility that goes with our First Amendment freedoms.

I worry, too, about the ability of news organizations and individual journalists to comfort the afflicted. It's not a matter of bad intentions. No, I think journalists want to be compassionate and fair in covering and reporting the news. Rather, I would suggest that the capacity of news organizations and individual journalists is not as high as it should be. One reason, for that is the failure of news organizations to place a premium on sound ethical decision-making skills. While newspapers and broadcasters place a premium on and spend money for marketing surveys and "new looks" to appeal to broader demographic audiences, few news shops conduct any systematic training in ethical decision-making.

Now, back to the journalistic mission issue. What is the mission of journalism? To inform the public in a complete and accurate and timely manner. Certainly. To be fair. Certainly.

I worry, I worry greatly, that journalism in our country is failing to fulfill its mission because it is so often falling short of honoring the essential principle of truth telling.

And, I should tell you that I always use a small letter "t" when I use the words truth telling, not a capital "T," for I believe truth is always somewhat subjective. Furthermore, information approaching a greater level of factual accuracy only emerges over time. Someone recently told me that we might better use the term "story telling" instead of truth telling, but I'm not ready to make

that concession. While the notion of truth isn't perfect or pure, it connotes a more solid ethical principle, one based on honesty. It is a principle worth striving for. Truth telling implies informing the public, providing facts and insight and interpretation and analysis so citizens can best function in our democracy.

And, a small "t" also applies to the word "telling" since a major part of reporters' and editors' days involves selecting what information will be told. Journalists eliminate, because of time or space, or considered judgment or various personal beliefs, a great deal of information, thus limiting the telling role.

Even given this limitation on the notion of truth telling, I would suggest newspapers and television and radio stations are often falling short of adhering to the truth telling principle. I'm afraid that there is a rapidly growing number of examples of journalists "pulling their punches" when it comes to informing the public.

This happens in several ways for several reasons. Too often news organizations fail to even gather the necessary information in order to carry out the telling. In this bottom-line conscious era, where strident bean counters often rule, many media owners are failing to provide the necessary resources for reporters and photojournalists to seek out and uncover vital information. I'm talking here about "an ethic of resources."

Poynter Institute President Bob Haiman spoke directly to this the other day, asking, "How do you maintain basic journalistic values within institutions that have increasing commitments to the counting house and to Wall Street?" I had no simple answer for him

then, and I have none now. The closest I can come is to propose that news organizations must recommit themselves to the integrity of their basic mission. Indeed, unless journalists subscribe to and carry out the values and principles inherent in the informing the public mission, journalism's future is a scary one.

When a television network closes a number of its foreign and domestic news bureaus, when a newspaper cuts back on its coverage of national and international events, the truth telling principle is eroded. When a local television station decimates its investigative reporting staff, when a newspaper imposes a long-term hiring freeze, truth telling suffers. When those things happen, news organizations are failing to meet an ethic of resources commitment necessary to fulfill the journalistic mission. You can't come close to honoring the truth telling principle when you cut bone and muscle out of newsroom budgets.

Journalism falls short in the truth telling mission for other reasons. I am quite troubled about what I would call an "over-emphasis" that news organizations place on worrying about offending their readers, viewers, or listeners. It happens in several ways. Television stations decide not to show graphic footage of war out of fear that it might upset viewers or might seem unpatriotic. Newspapers decide not to publish the lyrics of controversial songs by Two Live Crew or explicit photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe for fear that readers will be offended by the words or visual images.

When that happens, journalism is not fulfilling its truth telling mission. It is restricting the flow of important information. Citizens cannot make informed decisions about matters of public

policy, from our country's involvement in a war to issues of censorship in the arts.

When print and broadcast journalists shy away from meaningful stories about incest and homosexuality and AIDS for fear of reader or viewer backlash, then journalism is falling short of its mission.

Pulling punches on truth telling occurs in other ways as well. Too many editors and news directors are failing to put stories in the paper and on the air because they don't want to upset their advertisers.

In recent months I have heard of cases where television stations backed off on consumer stories about automobile dealers and banks, fearing such stories would lead to the loss of advertising from those businesses. I also know of cases where media managers directed coverage to certain businesses to cultivate more positive relationships that could lead to advertising revenue.

Truth telling does suffer when news organizations create coverage in order to raise revenue. Rather than devoting newsgathering efforts to revealing important social issues or uncovering the wrongs of the powerful and comfortable, news organizations are creating special newspaper sections and special news program segments geared to advertiser sponsorship. It's a matter of misplaced priorities and short-sighted resource allocation. Whatever you call it, it depreciates truth telling.

True, journalism is a business. That fact is inescapable. But it should not be, it must not be, a business that is driven by the mere quest to make money. A good newspaper or a good broadcast

operation, makes money not for the primary goal of stockholder returns, but in order to put out a good product. To fulfill that truth telling mission.

And it is a unique mission in our society. No other profession, no other institution, has the same role as the news media. Lawyers, and doctors, and architects, and nurses, government workers and bankers, and ministers, and salespeople, and contractors and artists. None of them have the mission of journalists; to inform the public, to tell the truth, as best as is possible, in a highly public manner, on a regular basis.

Simply put, if the news media does not fulfill that mission, nobody else, no other profession or institution, is equipped to fill the void, to fulfill that essential information brokering responsibility that is central to the workings of a true democracy.

My second major concern, as stated earlier, is that news organizations and individual journalists seem all too often to be incapable of recognizing and honoring the journalistic principle of independence. Freedom is an essential element of our democratic society. It is inherent in our basic constitutional protections. Freedom of the press is embedded in our Bill of Rights.

But in order to carry out the responsibilities that are commensurate with that pivotal right, journalism must exercise a great degree of independence. News organizations and individual journalists must scrupulously avoid any conflict of interests that might deter the truth telling mission. Reporters must not become so close to their sources that they cannot fairly report on issues and events. Editors must protect that autonomous role of the news.

organization, a long, arm's-length status in the community in relation to business and government leaders. Newspaper publishers and broadcast station owners must not become so involved in partisan community activities that they cannot lead their organizations in the quest to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

In recent weeks I have heard of numerous examples where this journalistic independence was being eroded and compromised. Item: a newspaper publisher who sits on a local development council, generally holding back his paper's reporting on certain stories in order to give community development a boost. Item: a television sportscaster who regularly "borrows" the condominium owned by the basketball coach at the major university in town. We are talking about a coach and a basketball program being challenged for various N-C-double-A infractions. Item: the newspaper upper management that killed a column that was critical of the city's sports promotional ventures. An example of community boosterism by omission. Item: the well-known television anchorman who insists on getting discounts on merchandise from the businesses that he is reporting on. Item: the newspaper publisher who is chairman of the governing board of a major institution, then parochially controls the flow of information about major institution activities. Item: the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of media folks from around the country who took the free trip offer from Disney World to spend several days in Orlando celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Mickey and Minnie and Epcot scene. Item: the newspaper publisher who kills a story on

the spending habits of the local United Way agency. That publisher is on the United Way board.

Where I ask you is the principle of independence? How can journalists, from publishers, to editors, to reporters honestly say they are willing and able to fulfill the truth telling mission when they have such conflicts to their role as impartial observers and reporters.

And, this isn't just about being able to inform the public about local agencies, amusements, sports, and community development. It goes to other levels. I consider myself a patriotic individual, one who believes in my country and who went to war once before. Yet, I was saddened, personally and professionally, when I saw television stations and newspapers waving the patriotic banner with such fervor during the Persian Gulf War. It was clear these journalists had lost their sense of perspective. They had given up some of their independence. These were often the same news organizations who decided not to run graphic pictures of the ravages of war. These were often the same news organizations who became government and military puppets by failing to independently and aggressively report on public policy and military strategy elements of the war.

In those cases, journalism failed to uphold the principle of independence. By co-opting themselves in one way or another, the news organizations were not able to honor the principle of truth telling. The mission of journalism, to inform the public, was not fulfilled.

In those cases, and many more of the same genre, it's clear that journalism, in the cloth of news organizations and journalists, lacks the courage to do what they are supposed to do.

Too often we fault journalism for being too aggressive, too invasive, too exploitative. Sure, there are instances of such ethical digressions. But what I'm talking about here today is another brand of ethical indiscretion. I'm talking about journalistic timidity and restraint. I'm talking about sins of omission rather than sins of commission.

My Poynter Institute colleague, Roy Peter Clark made an impassioned speech on just this subject a year or so ago. He called for a much more courageous style of journalism ethics, an approach that emphasized positive duties like truth telling and the revealing of social ills. Clark said journalism ethics in recent years has been marked by a red light mentality that restrains reporting and emphasizes indiscretion and vices. A green light ethics, said Clark, focuses on virtue and informing the public.

By hedging on the truth telling mission, by chipping away at the principle of independence, journalism is failing in a profound way to uphold its responsibility to our society. Nobody else will take over that role. Not the government. Not other professionals.

Lest I fall prey to the same brand of red light mentality that I discourage, let me cite several examples of strong, courageous journalism that reflect the true spirit of independence and truth telling. Take for instance the Greenville (S. C.) News. The paper conducted a four year legal battle seeking public records from the fund-raising agency of the University of South Carolina. The News

finally won the suit to get the records, only to find out many documents had been dumped in a landfill years earlier during the court battle. The paper hired bulldozers and its staff literally dug through the huge landfill. They succeeded, uncovering many of the buried files. The paper's reporting led to significant disclosures of mismanagement by the University foundation and the resulting resignation of top University officials.

That, folks, is courageous journalism. In an era when many news organizations are practically in bed with the universities they are supposed to be covering, the Greenville News demonstrated strong independence and the tenacity to carry out its truth telling mission for its public. They "liberated" the public records to inform the citizens.

There are other examples of courageous journalism I can cite. Take the fine reporting in Minnesota by WCCO-TV reporter Trish Van Pilsum on generational sex abuse. Take the superb photojournalism essays by Orange County Register photographer Paul Kuroda on Asian gangs and on the plight of Mexican immigrants who steal across the borders. Take the work of the Clarion-Ledger in Jackson, Mississippi, a paper that is unearthing untold racist events from past, including the paper's own conspiracy in this ugly chapter of the region's history. Take the award-winning investigative journalism of Detroit News reporters John Wark and David Farrell. They overcame monumental bureaucratic roadblocks and antagonistic officials to reveal corruption within the city's police department and mayor's office.

These are examples of courageous journalism. They reflect the comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable spirit in the best sense of that mandate.

The last concern that I raised at the beginning of my talk here today deals with a different aspect of journalism. I am frustrated by the unwillingness or inability of media organizations to openly and clearly conduct a regular dialogue with the public about how and why journalism does what it does. Simply put, I believe journalism is terrible at examining itself and at explaining itself.

I am troubled for two reasons. First, I consider it hypocrisy for journalism to report on the other powerful institutions of society without reporting on itself, in an informative and explanatory manner. Second, I really believe that citizen support for the First Amendment has been and continues to be eroded because the public does not understand nor appreciate the role of journalism in our society.

It was nearly fifty years ago now that the Commission on Freedom of the Press examined the state of American journalism. In making its recommendations on what responsibility the press should assume in the society, the commission said, "We recommend that the members of the press engage in vigorous mutual criticism. Professional standards are not likely to be achieved as long as the mistakes and errors, the frauds and crimes, committed by units of the press are passed over in silence by other members of the profession."

To be sure, American news organizations are not significantly better at reporting on themselves in 1991 than they were in 1941.

Few organizations have reporters who cover the media beat. And one does not have to look far to find a newspaper or broadcast station that ignores a story about a competitor because they don't want to "trash the competition" or appear to act "on sour grapes."

I recently talked with a television reporter in the Midwest who said his station had decided not to do a story on a very public and very controversial issue relating to allegations of criminal activity by a candidate for governor. The local newspaper had done the original story while the television station had not, with the paper basing its story on key confidential sources.

There was an important follow-up story to be told to the public in this case, a story about how one news organization decided to use confidential sources to help inform the public while another organization decided to withhold the information because it did not trust the sources. This was a classic case in which journalism needed to explain itself.

To be sure, sometimes the news media does explain its process for how it makes decisions and why it does what it does. Back on September 20th, The Honolulu Advertiser editor Gerry Keir wrote a letter to the readers of his paper explaining why the paper handled a particular story as it did. Keir was responding to strong reader criticism of coverage of court and police cases involving the just crowned Miss America, Hawaii's Carolyn Sapp and her former boyfriend, ex-football star Nu'u Faaola. It's commendable when editors do this, especially when they admit some mistakes as Keir did in that case, agreeing that the top of the front page story was overplay.

However, the dialogue between journalists and the public must not be restricted to responses to criticism. News organizations must be proactive in regularly explaining the modus operandi of the news gathering, reporting, and decision-making process.

I'm just idealistic enough to believe that the American public would have greater respect for journalism if it better understood the journalistic process. Furthermore, if journalism were to regularly engage in a meaningful conversation with its citizens, the news products themselves, the newspapers and the news broadcasts, would likely be more inclusive of diverse opinions and diverse ideas.

And, if I you will allow me to come full-circle on my thoughts, a diverse marketplace of ideas is certainly an essential element of the informing the public mission of journalism.

Oh, yes. I did say I would write this speech first before deciding on the title. Let's just stick with that one from before: "Courageous Journalism: To Both Comfort and Afflict." Dan Quayle stories aside, I can't improve on that.

11/12 - Q+A

* Publisher involvement ref: Hal Advertiser

* Editorial Endorsements

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