

# NIEMAN REPORTS

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

VOL. 55 No. 2 SUMMER 2001 (ABRIDGED SPECIAL ISSUE)

Digital Reprint

*Essays About*

## *'The Elements of Journalism'*

*The Nieman Foundation is pleased to offer this teaching resource in the belief that the nine principles that form the foundation of 'The Elements of Journalism' and discussion by journalists about them will be a valuable text for students in basic writing and editing courses as well as in seminars that explore theories of journalism and the role of the press in society.*

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“... to promote and elevate the standards of journalism”

—Agnes Wahl Nieman, the benefactor of the Nieman Foundation

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“... to promote and elevate the standards of journalism”

—Agnes Wahl Nieman, the benefactor of the Nieman Foundation

# Creating a Road Map for Journalism's Mission

Journalists reflect on nine core principles.

By Bob Giles

Journalism students learn in a different environment today. The influence of the new media and the potential it offers for diverse career paths disrupt the old patterns of learning about reporting news. Convergence of various media and the technologies that support it also influence changes in curriculum. But in too many places where journalism is taught, such core values as the role of the press in a self-governing society and the responsibility that First Amendment protections require can start to seem disconnected from future endeavors.

Such disconnection is worrisome, since the burden and privilege of preserving the special role of the press in our democracy and of restoring the trust of citizens who depend on it will reside with those now preparing to become journalists.

There is, of course, much students learn from journalists who have preceded them. Such an exploration ought to involve the discovery of how the day-to-day work of journalism has been altered by the speed and capabilities of new technologies. But it also should leave an indelible awareness about what in journalism has not changed—and should not change—including some core principles that are an essential road map for journalism's mission.

It is with this journey into journalism's past and present in mind that Nieman Reports has published this special issue. In it, we examine nine principles of journalism as set forth by Bill Kovach, former Curator of the Nieman Foundation, and Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, in their new book "The Elements of Journalism."

These principles were distilled from a series of discussions among journalists and with the public, and from surveys and content studies. Taken together and applied to the job that journalists do, these principles comprise a theory of a free press.

"Society expects journalists to apply this theory, and citizens to understand it, though it is seldom studied or clearly articulated," Kovach and Rosenstiel explain in the book's introduction. "This lack of clarity, for both citizens and news people, has weakened journalism and is now weakening democracy. Unless we can grasp and reclaim the theory of a free press, journalists risk allowing their profession to disappear."

Such a stark warning strongly suggests that a renewed dedication to teaching about the standards, values and theories of journalism should have a central place in the education of students preparing for careers in the news media.

How might the principles and commentaries set forth in this little volume help accomplish that?

To begin, Kovach and Rosenstiel remind us that the important standards in journalism tomorrow will be the same core values of today and yesterday. No matter what the technology, journalism will involve monitoring those in power; researching a topic so as to ask probing questions; gathering information and identifying to consumers, as much as possible, where it came from; examining critical documents, and verifying what sources reveal.

In response to these nine principles, journalists from throughout the world contributed reflections, grounded in their personal experience, to exemplify how these standards operate in the daily routine of collecting and distributing news. Their experiences offer students vivid and compelling evidence of why understanding and applying these principles to one's work is so important.

The Nieman Foundation is pleased to offer this special issue in the belief that the principles and discussion of them will be a valuable text for students in basic writing and editing courses as well as in seminars that explore theories of journalism and the role of the press in society. ■

# Introduction

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## **Telephone:**

(617) 496-2968

## **E-Mail Address:**

[nreditor@harvard.edu](mailto:nreditor@harvard.edu)

## **Internet Address:**

[www.nieman.harvard.edu](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu)

## ‘The Elements of Journalism’

Four years ago, 25 of this nation’s most influential journalists came together at Harvard University with a shared sense that something was seriously wrong with their profession.

“They barely recognized what they considered journalism in much of the work of their colleagues. Instead of serving a larger public interest, they feared, their profession was damaging it,” write former Nieman Curator **Bill Kovach** and **Tom Rosenstiel**, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism in the introductory chapter of their book, “The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect.”

By day’s end, the group had a plan. Soon, they’d have a name. The plan: “to engage journalists and the public in a careful examination of what journalism was supposed to be.” The name: The Committee of Concerned Journalists. During the next two years, the committee organized “the most sustained, systematic, and comprehensive examination ever conducted by journalists of news gathering and its responsibilities.” In 21 public forums, 3,000 people attended and more than 300 testified. In-depth interviews were also conducted asking journalists about their values. Surveys were done and content studies of news reporting undertaken.

“The Elements of Journalism,” published this spring by Crown Publishers, is the “fruit of that examination,” and in it the authors set forth the nine principles to emerge from this intensive analysis. In this issue of Nieman Reports, we are highlighting these nine principles because we think there is great value to be gained by conversing about them. We asked journalists from the United States and other countries to address a specific principle through the prism of their experiences. After an introductory article by **Michael Getler**, The Washington Post’s ombudsman, each principle will be articulated in the authors’ words (excerpted with permission), then reflected upon in two essays written by journalists.

Following the book’s publication, Kovach and Rosenstiel began speaking about these nine principles with journalists, civic groups, and educators, igniting essential dialogue about journalism’s future course. As Kovach noted recently, “We’ve got to make sure that as the public dissatisfaction grows, it doesn’t grow the wrong way, towards censorship that says, ‘Stop this. Stop that.’ We want a public that is more aware about what quality journalism means to them and their lives and what they’ve got a right to expect and how to recognize it.”

A curriculum based on the book has also been developed and is now being used by news organizations in workplace settings. “A number of news organizations have invited us to talk with new staff members,” Kovach said. “The young kids I’m seeing out there are on fire. They almost mob us when we go in and start talking about these things. They’re so hungry to talk about this kind of journalism. They didn’t get this in journalism school nor in newsrooms because newsrooms don’t mentor their young anymore. . . . And part of what we’re telling editors with whom we talk is that they have an obligation to talk with groups in their community about who they are, what they are, why they do it, so they also become part of the teaching corps.” ■

# ‘The News Has Become the News’

Influential voices spotlight failures and remedies for today’s journalists.

By Michael Getler

Like the good journalists they are, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel have that proverbial nose for news. So, too, does Nieman Reports exhibit a good sense of timing by focusing its summer 2001 edition on the new book by these two keen observers of the nation’s press. “The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect” arrives at an opportune time. The news has become the news.

On one hand, the spring season is awards time for the country’s newspapers and magazines, and that has a restorative effect on many of us. It reminds us of the range and depth of good journalism being practiced by many journalists and news organizations, large and small, around the country. Experienced editors and writers who sit on scores of competition juries often remark upon how extraordinary the entries are, how hard it is to pick winners out of dozens of submissions. Along with that comes a sense of well-being about the state of this craft.

But this spring also has brought about a very public combination of challenges—some new, some old with a new head of steam—to producing serious journalism.

A slowing economy has meant cutbacks in staff and space at many news organizations, two commodities that have proven tough to restore once they are lost. Dramatic first-quarter reversals in the stock market wounded a number of new dot-coms and even killed a few. Newspaper-owned Web sites, although benefiting from the removal of advertising revenue competitors through the demise of some Internet rivals, now face the challenge of maintaining operations—that, in some cases, lose tens of millions of dollars annually—in a down market rather than in the midst of a 10-year boom.

The latest circulation statistics show fractional gains for some of the top 20 newspapers, but the overall decline of the past several years continues.

Editorial standards are under pressure. They are challenged by the increase in tabloid-style revelations that have unfolded in the past few years, the growing usage of previously unacceptable language on television and in print, and the acceptance by some of what is called attitude and edge in the way stories are presented to readers.

The quality and scope of network TV news seems to continue declining. The U.S. networks—except for CNN—long ago abdicated any claim to seriously covering global news, although arguably it has never been more important for American audiences than in this era of globalization. Unless American troops are in action somewhere, what coverage there is of conflict abroad will usually involve a British reporter on the scene, with pictures by German or Japanese camera crews.

The trend to greater conglomeration in the media, in which more and more journalistic enterprises are no longer owned by companies whose main business is journalism, and whose main commitment is to journalism, continues. The conflicts of interest inherent in reporting on these conglomerates can only become greater.

The demand for higher profits or for maintaining already high short-term earnings by shareholders, corporate managers, boards of directors and Wall Street, shows no sign of abating, nor is it likely to. Spreading in newsrooms is the

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sense that the obligation to the news-consuming public is being eroded by the primacy of uncompromising financial goals, well beyond the common sense belt-tightening that goes with any economic contraction. There is also the proliferation of non-journalistic talk shows (that viewers often confuse with journalism), an emphasis on “infotainment,” a confusing mix of professionally gathered news and

ever-increasing outlets for unreliable chatter.

Something else happened this spring. Jay Harris, publisher of Knight Ridder’s San Jose Mercury News, found himself at odds with the parent company’s profit goals and plans for coping with declining advertising revenue, and he resigned. This surprising event brought into sharp focus the combination of factors creating a sense that something is wrong in a way that feels different from what has come before. Addressing the American Society of Newspaper Editors [ASNE] in April, Harris said he now found himself “at the symbolic center of a debate that extends in substance and consequence well beyond the specific circumstances surrounding my resignation.

“The drive for ever-increasing profits is pulling newspa-

pers down," Harris said. "What troubled me," he said of the company's strategic planning meetings, "was that little or no attention was paid to the consequences of achieving 'the number.' There was virtually no discussion of the damage that would be done to the quality and aspirations of the Mercury News as a journalistic endeavor or to its ability to fulfill its responsibilities to the community. As importantly, scant attention was paid to the damage that would be done to our ability to compete and grow the business."

It might seem odd that Harris, a publisher, resigned, rather than a top editor. Yet it might be that Harris's action has greater impact precisely because he combines the credibility of a knowledgeable business executive with journalistic arguments that few editors could better articulate.

My sense of why Harris's resignation and reasoning is so important also extends to the fact that it involves a good newspaper, and newspapers remain at the core of American journalism. They provide the local, national and international reporting and analysis that are central to an informed public and to a sense of community. They drive much of the coverage by other media. People talk about what they read in newspapers. Newsrooms have the trained staffs and resources to cover the news comprehensively, in depth, aggressively, and to stick with stories that matter to citizens. They have the best chance of upholding standards, of sorting out news from hip-shooting opinion or entertainment, of informing in a way that is durable and reliable.

Another important speech this spring fits into the rich collection of refreshing journalistic thought exemplified by the new Kovach and Rosenstiel book and Harris's address to the ASNE. This was an address Nieman Curator Bob Giles made to the Inland Press Association conference in Chicago in March. In that speech, Giles noted that "the plea to redefine financial success" being made by some editorial commentators—asking management and Wall Street to set more reasonable profit goals—"runs against two hard realities: We're still a business, and markets rule." But newspaper executives are themselves blameworthy, Giles reported, since they "have little to say about the value of news when they are making their pitch to the market analysts" on Wall Street. This is a simple yet important point that rarely is made.

Using a transcript of a presentation Gannett executives made to the Credit Suisse First Boston Media Conference in December, Giles pointed out, "the word 'journalism' does not appear. Newspapers are spoken of as products and stories as content. There is no mention of investments to improve coverage...no mention of how newsrooms are serving readers." Yet, as Giles's words remind us, "News is why advertisers find newspapers so attractive. News is what sells newspapers to most buyers. News drives market share."

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**'Newspapers are spoken of as products and stories as content. There is no mention of investments to improve coverage...no mention of how newsrooms are serving readers.'**—  
*Bob Giles, Nieman Curator*

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Giles and two journalism magazines—the American Journalism Review and Editor & Publisher—also noted that at least one publisher—Donald Graham of The Washington Post—did speak to the financial analysts about the relationship between the values of journalism and the business of newspapers. "Our journalism, which I know is not the focus of your interest but is the focus of mine, is better than ever," Graham said.

In "The Elements of Journalism," Kovach and Rosenstiel make a related point about what happens when journalism strays from news and toward infotainment. They focus on local television but their point is applicable to print. "The evidence suggests that attracting audiences by merely engaging will fail as a business strategy for journalism over the long run," they report. Studies show that "of those who do watch local news, more than half those surveyed no longer care which station they watch." Also, they report, "five of the top seven reasons that people are no longer watching local TV news are that it lacks substance." Finally, when news gets turned into entertainment, it plays to the strengths of other media. Although such a strategy might build an audience in the short run, it's an audience whose loyalty is shallow and will easily switch to the next most enticing thing.

So news is central. That is the key message. Newspapers, which drive coverage of news, are also central. And strong editors are critical in challenging forces that threaten to weaken the vigorous journalism that has been, and remains, vital to our democracy. Although Jay Harris took a bold step, one that threw a much-needed, high-profile spotlight on the problem, top editors need to stay inside and fight, fairly and responsibly.

Of course, a news organization needs to be profitable to produce good and frequently expensive reporting, hire the best talent, and withstand threats from advertisers or lawsuits. And sometimes the budget has to be trimmed and cuts absorbed.

But right now journalists are working in a new environment. The ascendancy of market forces is more pronounced. Ownership, in too many places, is more diffuse and less committed. And boards of directors and financial managers might need a refresher course about the value of news, the concept of a public trust, and the obligations and role in a democracy of a free and aggressive press.

Top editors must be educators, too. They must remind and educate. And mid-level editors must make sure their bosses assume this role by making sure they know that reporters and desk editors expect them to defend vigorously what they do and why they choose to do it. Today's top editors must also choose the next generation of editors wisely, seeking out those who hold the same commitment to strong, no-punches-

pulled journalism that brought them into the business years ago. As non-journalistic corporations gather more and more control over news outlets, they’ll likely strive to place in key editorial positions those who have that conglomerate mentality and allegiance. So hiring decisions made now assume an importance they might not have had in the past.

In today’s business climate, demands on executive and managing editors are substantial as they devote more and more of their time to business matters. That is not necessarily bad if that time includes the education of their business colleagues on the value of high-quality news reporting and enterprising journalism. Yet this increased attention to non-news matters can also mean losing control of a newsroom by unintentionally suggesting there are things other than journalism driving it and the news organization. Reporters are trained to sense shifts; they can sense that kind of diffusion as well.

Newspapers seeking to extend their reach onto the Web and television can also alter the quality of news the public receives. Top editors on many newspapers spend a lot of time these days helping to define and develop new outlets for their papers. This is important to the future of the organization because it is a way to reach the young people who are not reading newspapers.

But it can also divert the attention of editors and reporters away from the kind of focus on, and pursuit of, both comprehensive daily reporting and the in-depth reporting that grows from strong daily coverage. Adding layers of different media coverage eats into valuable reporting time. And barring big increases in staff size, this has to have an effect on the quality of news that reaches the reader.

Allow me a brief detour here to mention what to some has become discredited news, while to others it is just what the doctor ordered for sagging circulation and ratings. These are the big and sensational stories—the O.J. Simpson murder case, the death of Princess Diana, the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, the Elián González custody saga, and many others that have a strong tabloid flavor. I am not among those in the press who are critical of this coverage. Although these episodes certainly diminished politics and the press at times, they were all powerful, multi-dimensional stories with enormous reader interest; stories that cannot be covered gently or with one reportorial hand tied willingly behind ones back. For the most part, I thought the major newspapers and networks handled the coverage well. The overwhelming sense of discomfort was the mind-numbing repetition of the most salacious details by 24-hour cable channels.

Newspapers have survived challenges from the telegraph,

radio, television and, at least for now, the dot-com invasion. And as Kovach and Rosenstiel remind us, sensationalism, ultimately, has always given way to a national demand for, and understanding of, the need for serious news. “As the immigrants of the 1890’s moved into the middle class in the 20th century, the sensationalism of Yellow Journalism gave way to the more sober approach of The New York Times,” they write. As the Roaring Twenties gave way to the Great Depression, again gossip and celebrity was swept aside by the public’s need for serious news that lasted through the cold war. Big newspapers survived and flourished.

It has always been interesting to me to speculate on what the stature and stock price of The New York Times or The Washington Post would be today if these papers—and their committed publishers—had not pursued the Pentagon Papers and Watergate. In each instance, adherence to their journalistic obligation beat back resistance from some of their top business advisers. Perhaps

we can’t point to any similar decision-making juncture in recent times. But the kind of slow erosion being experienced today can, over time, make those kinds of bold decisions even harder.

Newspapers have been declining in numbers and in circulation for several years now. As Kovach and Rosenstiel note, “when the newspaper industry in the 1980’s

began to try to address its readership losses, it emphasized layout, design and color.” Prototypes of new sections had designs with boxes that read, “Text will go here. Text will go here. Text will go here.”

Maybe what they should have written in those boxes was “News will go here.” Perhaps it’s not too late to scratch out one word and replace it with another.

Journalism, like all pursuits, needs to evolve and grow with the times. But as Kovach and Rosenstiel’s book attests, there are roles and principles that have guided successful journalism since its beginnings, and these retain the power to restore trust with citizens who depend on the press to help them maintain a democratic society. ■

*Michael Getler is the ombudsman at The Washington Post. He was formerly the executive editor of the International Herald Tribune. Before that he was deputy managing editor of The Washington Post.*

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**As non-journalistic corporations gather more and more control over news outlets, they’ll likely strive to place in key editorial positions those who have that conglomerate mentality and allegiance. So hiring decisions made now assume an importance they might not have had in the past.**

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## 1

# Journalism’s first obligation is to tell the truth.

“ On this there is absolute unanimity and also utter confusion: Everyone agrees journalists must tell the truth. Yet people are fuddled about what “the truth” means....

This desire that information be truthful is elemental. Since news is the material that people use to learn and think about the world beyond themselves, the most important quality is that it be useable and reliable....

Truth, it seems, is too complicated for us to pursue. Or perhaps it doesn’t exist, since we are all subjective individuals. There are interesting arguments, maybe, on some philosophical level, even valid....

So what does a journalist’s obligation to the truth mean? ...journalists themselves have never been very clear about what they mean by truthfulness. Journalism by nature is reactive and practical rather than philosophical and introspective. The serious literature by journalists thinking through such issues is not rich, and what little there is, most journalists have not read.... Rather than defend our techniques and methods for finding truth, journalists have tended to deny they exist.

Whether it is secrecy or inability, the failure by journalists to articulate what they do leaves citizens all the more suspicious that the press is either deluding itself or hiding something.

This is one reason why the discussion of objectivity has become such a trap. The term has become so misunderstood and battered, it mostly gets the discussion off track. ...originally it was not the journalist who was imagined to be objective. It was his method. Today, however, in part because journalists have failed to articulate what they are doing, our contemporary understanding of this idea is mostly a muddle....

[T]his “journalistic truth” ... is also more than mere accuracy. It is a sorting-out process that develops between the initial story and the interaction among the public, newsmakers, and journalists over time. This first principle of journalism—its disinterested pursuit of truth—is ultimately what sets it apart from all other forms of communications....

It is actually more helpful, and more realistic, to understand journalistic truth as a process—or continuing journey toward understanding—which begins with the first-day stories and builds over time.... The truth here, in other words, is a complicated and sometimes contradictory phenomenon, but seen as a process over time, journalism can get at it. It attempts to get at the truth in a confused world by stripping information first of any attached misinformation, disinformation, or self-promoting information and then letting the community react, and the sorting-out process ensue. The search for truth becomes a conversation.

Rather than rushing to add context and interpretation, the press needs to concentrate on *synthesis* and *verification*. ”

— Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel,  
“The Elements of Journalism”

# Making Truth an Idea That Journalists Can Believe in Again

‘Every journalist knows that truth can make nonnegotiable demands.’

By Jack Fuller

**B**ill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel accurately call truth the “first and most confusing principle.” These days it sometimes seems as though we’re embarrassed to be caught talking about the truth, as if doing so were a kind of sentimentality. Our skeptical age has rediscovered that truth just isn’t something you can be sure about. Moreover, in the history of the 20th century, too many people who have said they know The Truth have ended up committing barbarities in its name.

Yet journalists intuitively know that they owe their first duty to truth (or at least to reality), and they also know that they have to exercise strict self-discipline to satisfy the obligation. This discipline is so exacting that it can require the sacrifice of financial self-interest, of friendships, even of personal safety. So while the concept of truth may lack clarity, every journalist knows that truth can make nonnegotiable demands.

Erosion of confidence in the idea of truth has unfortunate effects on society at large, not the least of which is that it invites people to lie. If the truth is unknowable anyway, what is the difference? At times it seems that everything “depends on what the meaning of ‘is’ is.”

But as unpleasant as these large social consequences might be, the effect on journalism of our lack of confidence in our ability to know the truth is nothing less than disastrous, negating its very reason for being. Journalism not moored with the discipline of truth might look like Pravda. Or it might look like Lewis Carroll.

Something must be done to make truth an idea we journalists can believe in again. How can we ask the public to believe what we say if we are unsure ourselves?

Kovach and Rosenstiel make a real contribution in this difficult area by fundamentally redefining the problem. The difficulty has been that we can’t believe that flawed, subjective human beings can know the truth, let alone communicate it. Kurt Gödel has shown that even mathematical logic is imperfect (or at least incomplete), so what chance do emotion-colored perceptions of human beings have? As for communicating to other people, philosophers observe that you cannot even know if the red you see looks the same to you as the red I see looks to me.

Kovach and Rosenstiel turn our attention away from this problematic idea of truth as an outcome and turn it toward

the process by which we might approximate the truth. “Objectivity,” the word we once used to naively define journalism’s aim, is really not best thought of as an attribute of the story at all, still less an attribute of a hopelessly subjective human being who writes it. Objectivity, they say, is a method, a discipline, a habit of mind. They are too modest to appropriate the idea as their own. They point to early work by Walter Lippmann that called for a scientific method of journalism. “In the original concept, in other words,” they write, “the method is objective, not the journalist. The key was in the discipline of the craft, not the aim.”

Of course, it is impossible for subjective individuals, locked within the prison of their own perceptions, to produce objective accounts of reality. But it is possible for subjective individuals to use rigorous methods, just as subjective scientists do. And it works. We might not be able to say what the truth is, but we can reach deep into space, play billiards with subatomic particles, and manipulate the very helix of life.

Another way of putting it is that, while we might all agree that it is epistemologically naive to think we can know and communicate The Truth, some accounts of reality are closer approximations than are others. Seen this way, what journalists do is to arrive at their judgments in a careful and disciplined way and make their claims confidently but provisionally, subject always to revision.

I would have liked a deeper examination in Kovach and Rosenstiel’s book of the alternatives to “balance” or “fairness” as a discipline for journalists. Since the truth we tell can be no more than approximate, modesty alone requires that we properly represent other points of view, even if in the end we explicitly favor one over another. The trouble with truth is not that it has become a sentimental and outmoded notion. We can have knowledge and communicate it. What we cannot have is certainty. Perfection is not possible. But we knew that all along, didn’t we?

Remembering this should not make us despair nor free us to throw off all our truth disciplines. It should just keep us humble. ■

*Jack Fuller is president and CEO of Tribune Publishing Company and the author of “News Values: Ideas for An Information Age” (University of Chicago Press).*

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**Objectivity, they say, is a method, a discipline, a habit of mind.**

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# The Pursuit of Truth Can Be Elusive in Africa

Independent journalists are branded unpatriotic and anti-government.

By Gwen Lister

**J**ournalism in Africa has to be engaged in the *pursuit* of truth. I emphasize "pursuit," since we neither attain it always, nor is it always within our grasp.

Truth is a very elusive concept. In the act of pure reportage, the journalist is often simply the carrier of a message. By probing deeper, investigative journalists have more of a chance of uncovering at least some of the truth, but still not necessarily all. The reader, listener or viewer must finally make a judgment about its veracity.

All of us surely know what truth is or what the word aspires to be. Yet it would be unwise to give this most weighty of journalistic principles a simplistic definition. For example, when considered in the African context, journalists contend with a variety of factors that fail to take into account whether a report is truthful. Many people, especially among those who serve in our governments, often don't care if what we publish is true; when we write about opposition parties, we are viewed as "trying to promote the aims of other political parties," and when we pursue our watchdog role, "truth" is characterized as disloyalty if it falls into the category of criticism. Recently, the government imposed on its ministries an advertising ban of my independent newspaper, *The Namibian*, on the grounds that it is anti-government (i.e., performing its watchdog role).

One might argue that here truth is very much a secondary thing. For many journalists on the African continent, particularly those who are "independents," their struggle is also against forces of intolerance. In an attempt to silence and intimidate reporters, attacks are made on journalists, and our integrity is constantly questioned not only by government officials—including the president—but echoed by rabid elements of the political party.

For many Africans, democracy is a new concept. In nations that have recently emerged from oppressive regimes, some governments guarantee freedom of speech and of the press, in principle. In practice, the situation is much different. Until very recently, most television and radio stations and many newspapers in Africa were government-owned and -controlled. There was little critical, independent reporting. Journalists acted as the transmission belt to convey government's thinking to its people. They were not expected, in turn, to convey the people's thinking back to government.

This is why the emergence of an independent, critical press is so important. That we need to name this entity must seem odd to journalists in older democracies. What on earth is an "independent press?" But in 1991, in a historic conference in Windhoek, Namibia, African journalists adopted the Windhoek Declaration. It said, "the establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is

essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation, and for economic development."

The meaning of "independent" was hotly debated. In some ways, the "alternative" press (alternative to mainstream, primarily government-owned media) had transformed itself into the independent press. The Windhoek Declaration defined "independent" as meaning free "from government, political or economic control," but journalists argued that media also must be editorially independent, regardless of ownership.

The adoption of the declaration was a significant step forward for journalism in Africa. It told the world that African journalists were tired of echoing words of political leadership and wanted to actively pursue the truth of what was happening. To a large extent it gave a moral boost to free up journalists to utilize their watchdog role over state and society.

In many African countries, governments paid lip service to the declaration but did little to facilitate the media's transformation. Today, the African independent press remains very fragile and vulnerable. It operates amid varying degrees of hostility, notwithstanding the continent's "winds of democratic change." The winds that blew in constitutional gains (guaranteeing press freedom) represented a change of mind, not of heart.

The independent press continues to pursue the truth. It is a quest with consequences. Many in our governments perceive and accuse the independent press of being the Trojan Horse for the forces of imperialism and capitalism; often, we are portrayed as "the enemy." In Namibia, despite our difficulties, we are better off than many other independent press in Africa which encounter large-scale violations of press freedom, even death for journalists and truthseekers in the vanguard of this struggle for the independent press.

Our democracies are evolving. They remain as vulnerable and fragile as the independent press itself. Perhaps it is too soon to expect the majority of people will support the pursuit for truth in journalism. But while we wait, as independent African journalists we must pursue the truth no matter how unpopular or unpalatable, and at whatever price we are forced to pay. ■

*Gwen Lister, a 1996 Nieman Fellow, is editor of The Namibian, which she founded in 1985. She was recently named one of the 50 World Press Freedom Heroes by the International Press Institute.*

## 2

## Journalism’s first loyalty is to citizens.

“ A commitment to citizens is more than professional egoism. It is the implied covenant with the public.... The notion that those who report the news are not obstructed from digging up and telling the truth—even at the expense of the owners’ other financial interests—is a prerequisite of telling the news not only accurately but persuasively. It is the basis of why we as citizens believe in a news organization. It is the source of its credibility. It is, in short, the franchise asset of the news company and those who work in it.

Thus people who gather news are not like employees of other companies. They have a social obligation that can actually override their employers’ immediate interests at times, and yet this obligation is the source of their employers’ financial success.

This allegiance to citizens is the meaning of what we have come to call journalistic independence.... As journalists tried to honor and protect their carefully won independence from party and commercial pressures, they sometimes came to pursue independence for its own sake. Detachment from outside pressure could bleed into disengagement from the community....

A second factor in the growing isolation was a change in journalism’s tone. After Vietnam and Watergate and later the advent of 24-hour cable news, journalism became noticeably more subjective and judgmental. More coverage was focused on mediating what public people were saying, rather than simply reporting it....

Rather than selling customers content, newspeople are building a relationship with their audience based on their values, on their judgment, authority, courage, professionalism, and commitment to community. Providing this creates a bond with the public, which the news organization then rents to advertisers.

In short, the business relationship of journalism is different from traditional consumer marketing, and in some ways more complex. It is a triangle. The audience is not the customer buying goods and services. The advertiser is. Yet the customer/advertiser has to be subordinate in that triangle to the third figure, the citizen....

Five key ideas about what we should expect from those who provide the news...[are:]

1. The owner/corporation must be committed to citizens first....
2. Hire business managers who also put citizens first....
3. Set and communicate clear standards....
4. Journalists have final say over news....
5. Communicate clear standards to the public....

To reconnect people with news, and through the news to the larger world, journalism must reestablish the allegiance to citizens that the news industry has mistakenly helped to subvert. ”

— Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel,  
“The Elements of Journalism”

# Inviting Viewers to Enter the Newsroom

With its Viewers' Bill of Rights, KGUN9-TV in Arizona broke new ground.

By Forrest Carr

When I first became a television news director I used to get calls from colleagues and media reporters asking me what I am doing to increase ratings. Two years ago, the question became "What are you doing to hang on to viewers?" The reason: Viewers have begun to abandon local TV news.

It's no mystery why. Viewers I've encountered during two decades have not been coy about their feelings. To them, we are arrogant, shallow, career-climbing cretins with no respect for anyone's rights, feelings or human dignity. They're tired of our stupid little ratings ploys. They're fed up with the endless parade of body bags on the evening news, weary of shallow, out-of-touch news anchors and reporters, and sick of misleading, over-hyped teases. Certainly new media and demands of modern life play roles in the audience erosion, but the fact is many viewers have just had it with us.

So two years ago, at KGUN9-TV in Tucson, Arizona, we did something we believe no one else has done. We solicited the public's input for a statement of principles. We weighed that input with our own notions of journalistic duty, then published the Viewers' Bill of Rights. It provides a product guarantee, a warranty, and a return desk. We appointed a viewer ombudsman, one of only two we know of in the United States, and we invited our viewers to keep us honest through regular viewer feedback segments.

Some news professionals find the idea that viewers should be involved in the journalistic process to be profoundly disturbing. We're the pros, not viewers. We know what information is good for the public because we're trained to figure it out. Viewers should trust us to lead them through this complicated and bewildering endeavor called news.

Why do so many of us seem to feel that journalism is the only commercial enterprise with no need to learn from consumers and respond to their demands? In fact, responding isn't nearly enough. As journalists, we should join forces with viewers to ensure the responsiveness of government and business, to bring the public's voice into the process of setting public policy and to hold the powerful accountable, and that includes us. In my view, the best TV journalists are viewer advocates who fight with passion and vigor for people's right to be heard. Now I've done it, I've used that "p" word, "passion," a word which journalism's thought-police too often silence. KGUN9 is passionate about its viewers and community, and I have a hard time believing that acting

this way is wrong.

These changes have led to improvements in KGUN9's journalism. The station is doing a better job of breaking the kind of stories that often lead to changes in public policy. In 2000, the Project for Excellence in Journalism noticed and gave KGUN9 the highest quality score it has awarded to a half-hour newscast. Coincidentally, the station's share of the news audience has been increasing, and the station now poses a serious threat to the city's long-time market leader.

The reason this works is simple. When an important personal relationship goes south, what do you do? Open a dialogue and talk it out. You might even get a counselor. With its Viewers' Bill of Rights and Viewer Feedback segment, KGUN9 created a dialogue with its community. Now they're talking it out. There's even a counselor in the form of Viewer Representative Heylie Eigen.

In the movie "Network," a crazy news anchor incited frustrated audiences to scream, "We're mad as hell, and we're not gonna take it anymore!" His peers promptly judged him insane. But if KGUN9's experience is any guide, inviting audience feedback—even angry

feedback—is not a sign of journalistic lunacy. How crazy is it to imagine a world in which every city has at least one TV news outfit willing to state publicly what it stands for and then provide an ongoing mechanism for accountability? The viewer in me hopes news consumers in other markets will rise up as one to demand this. Such accountability might hold the key to our future.

If this concept troubles some journalists, an increasing number find it appealing. Many reporters express support, and some inquire about jobs at KGUN9 specifically because of the station's unique news philosophy. Recently one candidate told me that when he first read the document he was shocked. "I couldn't believe they'd let anyone get away with that," he said. The truth is, I'm a little surprised myself. Now that it's come this far, who knows where it might go? Maybe it's the beginning of a beautiful friendship—or, at very least, the start of a more productive and satisfactory relationship—between journalists and the viewers they serve. ■

*Forrest Carr is the former news director of KGUN9-TV. He recently joined WFLA-TV in Tampa, Florida, in the same capacity.*

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**...the best TV journalists  
are viewer advocates who  
fight with passion and  
vigor for people's right to  
be heard.**

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# Loving and Cussing: The Family Newspaper

It's a place where community and citizens come before big profits.

By Brandt Ayers

In Alabama patois, for the publisher of a family paper to comment on Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel's principles is like hunting on a baited field. It just ain't fair. Put another way, we'd feel out of place in Tony Ritter's ritzy neighborhood.

We struggle to make a 10 percent profit. But in terms of community leadership and serving our citizens, by and large—given a few dumb mistakes and omissions here and there—The Anniston Star gets it right.

Kovach and Rosenstiel are certainly right that something has been lost in the passing of family newspaper owners. "Benevolent patriarchs," they call us, a title that suggests more deference than we get at the courthouse barber shop. But we have an advantage. We're not Camp Swampy. We're headquarters. The defining qualities of family ownership are rootedness and a passionate commitment to a place and to the people who live there.

The ideas that thoughtful journalists are now underscoring as they think anew about the relationship between news and business are bred in family owners like an instinct. We're committed to citizens first. Our business managers also put citizens first, and clear standards are set and communicated to everyone who works at the paper.

A city founder, Sam Noble, who envisioned Anniston as a model post-Civil War "new town," put it this way: "Instead of dissipating our earnings in dividends, we have concentrated them here...." The bond that links the founding families with the family which has owned The Anniston Star for parts of three centuries is easy to understand. We live here. We want "our town" to grow in beauty and prosperity.

Unfortunately, the family-owned paper is an endangered species. At the end of World War II, families owned almost all daily newspapers. Today, only about one-fifth of the 1,500 dailies are home-owned. What is lost might not be obvious to readers who don't read other papers. Our critics here cuss us hard and often—naming names—for our liberal views, but if we sold to a chain, you can be sure they'd miss us. You can't cuss a distant corporation; it doesn't hear or care.

Here's how we obey the Kovach-Rosenstiel commandments about putting citizens' needs above company profits: Grandfather, father, son and brother-in-law Phil Sanguinetti, we've never let an obsession with profits dictate news or editorial policy. Don't take our word for it. Jim Risser, a double Pulitzer winner, studied us for a book and reported, "Ayers is obviously willing to settle for earnings well below the 20 percent or more expected of papers owned by public companies...." We have more reporters and charge less for ads than papers our size, Risser discovered. Vice President for Operations Ed Fowler, who has been a reporter and editor as well as a busi-

ness manager, says our commitment to quality rather than just maximizing profit "is one reason I'm here."

And our clear standards about our editorial product are written at the top of the editorial page daily. It quotes my father, Col. H.M. Ayers: "A newspaper must be the attorney for the most defenseless among its subscribers."

The human dynamic between a family paper and a community is unusual. This solitary human being, the publisher—if he's lucky—develops a sense of humor and calluses to cover his tender ego. Equipped with ego-shield, the publisher undertakes his task: cheerleader for and critic of every community enterprise. Those on the receiving end of his judgments are not always grateful for his advice.

On rare occasions, a publisher with guts will stir things up. We did in 1967-68, and voters threw out a mayor and the whole form of city government. Earlier in the 1960's, we ran a front-page crusade that helped capture and convict a white thug for the nightrider murder of a black man. We also ran a series aimed at obstacles to black voters that showed more African Americans were registered in our county than Birmingham or Huntsville.

Not all white readers or advertisers were happy with our coverage during the civil rights movement. We lost some readers and advertisers. We didn't win a Pulitzer Prize, either. We didn't try. In recent years, black political and civil rights leaders have criticized some stories. But even our severest critics would regret our catching the plague of corporate mediocrity that has swept most papers into a pureed and neutered mass. For them, the Kovach-Rosenstiel principles might be too late.

My family, however, hopes we can keep The Anniston Star from being stirred into the pot of homogenized sameness that describes most chain papers. We want to maintain the passionate commitment of an owner to a city. The emotional strings of such a meaningful relationship are tuned more like a cello or violin than, say, a Pete Sampras tennis racquet. The anger, joys and sorrows a publisher and community share are acutely sensitive. It is precisely that sensitivity that gives a family newspaper its unique character.

A family-owned newspaper is less detached than a chain-owned newspaper—more caring: scolding and loving; hurting, being hurt and loving...

Like any slightly dysfunctional family. ■

*Brandt Ayers, a 1968 Nieman Fellow, is chairman and publisher of The Anniston Star in Anniston, Alabama.*

# 3 | The essence of journalism is a discipline of verification.

“ In the end, the discipline of verification is what separates journalism from entertainment, propaganda, fiction, or art.... Journalism alone is focused first on getting what happened down right....

Perhaps because the discipline of verification is so personal and so haphazardly communicated, it is also part of one of the great confusions of journalism—the concept of objectivity. The original meaning of this idea is now thoroughly misunderstood, and by and large lost. When the concept originally evolved, it was not meant to imply that journalists were free of bias. Quite the contrary.... Objectivity called for journalists to develop a consistent method of testing information—a transparent approach to evidence—precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work....

In the original concept, in other words, the method is objective, not the journalist. The key was in the discipline of the craft, not the aim.

The point has some important implications. One is that the impartial voice employed by many news organizations, that familiar, supposedly neutral style of newswriting, is not a fundamental principle of journalism. Rather, it is an often helpful device news organizations use to highlight that they are trying to produce something obtained by objective methods. The second implication is that this neutral voice, without a discipline of verification, creates a veneer covering something hollow. Journalists who select sources to express what is really their own point of view, and then use the neutral voice to make it seem objective, are engaged in a form of deception. This damages the credibility of the whole profession by making it seem unprincipled, dishonest, and biased. This is an important caution in an age when the standards of the press are so in doubt....

A more conscious discipline of verification is the best antidote to the old journalism of verification being overrun by a new journalism of assertion, and it would provide citizens with a basis for relying on journalistic accounts. ...we began to see a core set of concepts that form the foundation of the discipline of verification....

1. Never add anything that was not there.
2. Never deceive the audience.
3. Be transparent about your methods and motives.
4. Rely on your own original reporting.
5. Exercise humility.

The willingness of the journalist to be transparent about what he or she has done is at the heart of establishing that the journalist is concerned with the truth.... Too much journalism fails to say anything about methods, motives, and sources. ”

— Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel,  
“The Elements of Journalism”

# Accuracy Must Be Our Journalistic Grail

Editors at The Oregonian make writers pause and verify before publication.

By Michele McLellan

**M**y copy editor colleague was blunt: “I’m going to need proof that these people exist and that this is how they spell their names.”

Ouch. Was he questioning my integrity? My work mentioned dozens of people. Did he think I had unlimited time to prove the obvious? I took a deep breath and settled in with this reaction: gratitude. This editor, Jake Arnold, put our readers and our credibility with them first.

Accuracy is our journalistic Grail. At least we say it is. But, as members of the public remind us, we often fail to practice what we preach. In surveys, we learn that people are becoming more skeptical of the accuracy of our reporting, and many think newspapers run a lot of stories without checking them—not because we know they are true—but because other outlets have published the information.

We do fail our readers too often, from typos to oversimplification to factual mistakes to assumptions. When in doubt or in a hurry, we assume it’s right. What if we always assumed it is wrong?

Journalism demands a deliberate process of reporting, writing and editing which pauses at every step to examine rigorously whether the story is in danger of making a wrong turn. It requires high skill and commitment in negotiating minefields between confidence in journalistic principle and arrogance in practice.

Good writers and editors have systems, usually simple ones. Therese Bottomly, a managing editor at The Oregonian, marks anything in a story that causes her to pause—perhaps it’s not clear or doesn’t seem accurate. She reads on, then goes back over her marks with the writer. The key, Bottomly says, is to listen to her instincts and not drift into letting her small questions pass.

Another managing editor, Amanda Bennett, practices “prosecutorial editing,” adopting an attitude of skepticism that drives reporters to great distraction before publication and to great appreciation afterwards. Bennett emphasizes the importance of scrutinizing the “connective tissue” of stories—phrases that belie assumptions about motives or causes and effect—as closely as looking at facts.

Others seek out devil’s advocates, colleagues or members of the public who will question assumptions that underlie a story. They read portions of stories to experts, checking not only the facts and the accuracy of quotes, but also the way they’ve chosen to arrange them. As an editor, I’ve used a method I alternately call “the idiot treatment” or “the editor from Mars.”

I ask reporter colleagues to treat me as if I know nothing

about journalism or the topic at hand and to explain how they’ve gathered and checked information and how they decided what to emphasize and what to leave out. I ask them to imagine what they might have learned if they’d asked a different question or found a different source.

My analogies are imperfect. After all, I do not believe readers are idiots or Martians. Still, it brings humor to a difficult process and acknowledges that I don’t have any greater claim to wisdom than the writer does. The system allows us to scrutinize the thinking and assumptions that shape the reporting, as well as what the reporter found and wrote. And it gives a name to a deliberate effort to test the work against the standards of the people who matter most and who are in the best position to judge us—the public.

It also helps to have an emotional connection to accuracy—fear of career failure, competitiveness, or experience in how wrong information disappoints and even harms. When I started in journalism nearly three decades ago, my connection derived from fear. I lay awake nights after writing or editing a story, at once excited to see my work in the paper and fearful I’d missed something or changed something for the worse. As I gained experience, I became jaded. Then, when I was public editor at The Oregonian, I saw how much accuracy means to readers.

One case hit me hard. The newspaper featured a local high-school band member in a photo on the local news cover. The picture was tailor-made to brighten the family scrapbook. And it might well have been the only time Julia Carr would see herself in her local newspaper.

But we misspelled her name in the caption. I cringed that we had failed a young person in such a basic way. The bandleader provided the wrong spelling, but our photographer accepted responsibility. In our newsroom, we discussed ways we could more carefully check names and spellings. I was proud we didn’t just shrug, blame the source, and move on.

In “The Elements of Journalism,” Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel cite humility as the last of five “core concepts” embedded in journalists’ obligation to verify their work. I would list it first. ■

*Michele McLellan, a 2002 Nieman Fellow, is special projects editor at The Oregonian and author of “The Newspaper Credibility Handbook: Practical Ways to Build Reader Trust,” published in April by the American Society of Newspaper Editors.*

# Determining the Line Between Fact and Fiction

In broadcast news, compelling TV and good journalism can coexist.

By Olive Talley

A national cable television correspondent was covering a murder trial of a man already serving time on a prior conviction. With a live report minutes away, she asked a young assistant to find out when the defendant was eligible for parole on the prior.

The young woman dutifully made phone calls and relayed her findings. When the on-air reporter asked for the source of the information, the young assistant proudly cited the local newspaper. She was dumbfounded when the correspondent sent her back to call court sources with direct knowledge of the case.

This incident came to mind as I read Kovach and Rosenstiel's chapter on the process of verifying information. They argue that journalism, as an institution, has failed to adhere to a system for testing the reliability of its reporting. "The modern press culture generally is weakening the methodology of verification journalists have developed," the authors write. "Technology is part of it."

After 25 years of reporting that spans radio, UPI, newspapers and, since 1995, network television newsmagazines, I share the authors' concerns about slippage in the fact-finding process in journalism and how it can erode our credibility. Unfortunately, anyone pondering this complex issue in the context of broadcast journalism gets no help from Kovach and Rosenstiel. The authors fail to include insightful or substantive examples from television or Internet news reporting in their analysis of the verification process in "modern press culture."

The anecdote mentioned above illustrates a troubling phenomenon in network TV. While seasoned reporters fill the top ranks, many of the support staffers—who actually do much of the reporting—have little or no journalism training.

Although I've long admired Bill Kovach for his integrity and advocacy for traditional news values, I'm disappointed that he and Rosenstiel did not lend their experience and thoughtfulness to an examination of this and other issues in broadcast media. Instead of citing aired pieces in which techniques of verification have been blurred, they point to TV "docu-drama" as an example of adding fiction to fact for better storytelling. I've never heard anyone in TV news use the term. The authors write: "If a siren rang out during the taping of a TV story, and for dramatic effect it is moved from one scene to another...what was once a fact becomes a fiction."

It would have been more useful to discuss a case like this: As a producer, I build an opening sequence for a crime story by showing close-ups of yellow crime scene tape with the sound of sirens underneath. The sirens and the tape

are not the actual footage of the crime scene because those images don't exist. But if I create a combination of images that portray a crime scene, don't present them as being the specific crime scene in question, and get all the facts of the case correct, am I crossing the line into fiction because of my opening sequence?

Predictably, the use of hidden cameras is discussed briefly under "misleading sources." While I believe hidden cameras have been overused and improperly used by various local and network news shows, when used wisely they can provide the ultimate level of verification. Seeing is believing. It's compelling TV and good journalism when hidden cameras let viewers see and hear the misleading sales pitch, the abusive child-care worker, the dishonest employee.

In a report on the illegal trade of exotic animals and the serious dangers they pose as pets, I used a hidden camera to show the availability of baby tiger cubs in Texas. I went to a roadside zoo advertising them for sale on the Internet. I used my real name and my real phone number when I responded to the ad and when I showed up. Yet I did not tell the sellers that I worked for "Dateline NBC" and had cameras rolling.

Using the Kovach/Rosenstiel guidelines, was I deceptive? I don't think so, nor did the senior producers and lawyers who reviewed the material and my script. In the two years I've worked for NBC, there has been a rigorous approval process involving senior producers and legal and standards attorneys before hidden cameras can be used. And the network publishes a 70-page policy manual that spells out its policies and standards on reporting, use of anonymous sources, and a variety of other news practices. I'm no shill for NBC, but I was heartened during my second week on the job to attend mandatory meetings to discuss and debate ways to raise standards in our reporting process.

It's the kind of effort that can help create the system of verification that Kovach and Rosenstiel find so lacking in the industry. And while I wholeheartedly agree with many of their criticisms, they missed an opportunity to explore this from the perspective of broadcasting—perhaps the most powerful force in our industry. ■

*Olive Talley, a 1993 Nieman Fellow, was a Pulitzer Prize finalist and a George Polk winner for her newspaper work. Since 1995, Talley has worked as a TV producer for "PrimeTime Live," "20/20," and most recently for "Dateline NBC."*

## 4

## Journalists must maintain an independence from those they cover.

“ ...Being impartial or neutral is not a core principle of journalism. ...impartiality was never what was meant by objectivity. ...the critical step in pursuing truthfulness and informing citizens is not neutrality but independence....

This applies even to those who work in the realm of opinion, criticism and commentary. It is this independence of spirit and mind, rather than neutrality, that journalists must keep in focus.... Their credibility is rooted instead in the same dedication to accuracy, verification, the larger public interest, and a desire to inform that all other journalists subscribe to....

The question people should ask is not whether someone is called a journalist. The important issue is whether or not this person is doing journalism. Does the work proceed from a respect for an adherence to the principles of truthfulness, an allegiance to citizens and community at large, and informing rather than manipulating—concepts that set journalism apart from other forms of communication?

The important implication is this: The meaning of freedom of speech and freedom of the press is that they belong to everyone. But communication and journalism are not interchangeable terms. Anyone can be a journalist. Not everyone is. The decisive factor is not whether they have a press pass; rather, it lies in the nature of the work....

People increasingly see the press as part of an establishment from which they feel alienated, rather than as a public surrogate acting in their behalf. The solution to this kind of isolation is not to repudiate the concept of independence, however. The solution is to recruit more people from a diversity of classes and backgrounds and interests in the newsroom to combat insularity. The journalism that people from a diversity of perspectives produce together is better than that which any of them could produce alone....

Independence from faction suggests there is a way to be a journalist without either denying the influence of personal experience or being hostage to it.... Just as it should with political ideology, the question is not neutrality, but purpose. This journalistic calling to independence from faction should sit atop all the culture and personal history journalists bring to their job....

In the end it is good judgment, and an abiding commitment to the principle of first allegiance to citizens, that separates the journalist from the partisan. Having an opinion is not only allowable, not only natural, but it is valuable to the natural skepticism with which any good reporter approaches a story. But a journalist must be smart enough and honest enough to recognize that opinion must be based on something more substantial than personal beliefs if it is to be of journalistic use. ”

— Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel,  
“The Elements of Journalism”

# In Crisis, Journalists Relinquish Independence

‘Ideological biases can overtake the desire to be independent.’

By Ying Chan

**A**fter clashing with a Chinese jet fighter, a U.S. spy plane crash lands on an island in southern China and its 24 crew members are held by the Chinese.

This news instantly becomes the top international story. Soon CBS News Anchor Dan Rather is talking with a former U.S. ambassador to China who urges Americans to give leaders on both sides time to resolve this difficult situation. “When should we consider this serious?” Rather asks.

When I heard this all-too-obvious identification with the Bush administration, I cringed. Neither side had fired a shot at the other. But from the perspective of journalism, there was already a casualty in this new cold war—independence from faction had been compromised.

This notion that journalists function best when they maintain an independence from those they cover is simple to understand but more difficult to adhere to, especially in times of crisis and conflict. As journalists, we know what is required to retain our independence. Except for causes directly related to our profession, we don’t join organizations or serve on boards. We report on protest marches and demonstrations; we don’t join them. We don’t sign petitions, as close as the issue might be to our heart. By becoming journalists, we give up the right to be partisans.

But ideological biases can overtake the desire to be independent. During this spy plane incident, it was clear that media in both countries rallied to their government’s side. In China, news organizations condemned the United States with a singular voice. But that’s China, where the media still are under state control. Yet in the United States, a country that boasts of having a free press, most major media accepted the Bush administration’s narrow and legalistic claim to the “right of espionage.” Media commentators praised the President for his “cool-headed” control, and few questioned why the spy plane flew off China’s coast or the wisdom of conducting such surveillance flights.

At the University of Hong Kong, I recently explained to a young writer that his role is not to defend China. A journalist’s job is to scrutinize the facts and then let the chips fall where they might. Nor is it, I told him, the task of the U.S. media to defend their nation’s actions.

Then there is the challenge of staying independent of one’s sources, including those on whom reporters depend for tips and exclusive leaks of information. Two years ago, by relying on leaks from overzealous officials at the energy department, The New York Times led the media pack in convicting—in the press—the Los Alamos nuclear scientist, Wen Ho Lee, of spying for China. No spy charge was ever filed, though lesser charges were. Lee was finally freed from prison after

the judge apologized for wrongful detention.

One way to bolster the likelihood that news coverage will demonstrate that reporters have remained independent of faction is to support diversity in the newsroom. When people of different ethnic, racial and social groups work together, there is a greater chance that necessary checks and balances will be in place to counter biases. As a former reporter for the (New York) Daily News—a paper once found guilty of racism in its newsroom hiring—I am painfully aware of why diversity is so important.

In 1990 I created the Daily News’s immigration beat, one of the first in the United States, and I wrote about Mexicans, Haitians, Italians and the Irish. I wrote more about Asian Americans because those were the stories editors gave me. I didn’t resent this or worry about being pigeonholed, but I believed that to do justice to the stories of more than 170 ethnic groups in New York City, all of the paper’s beat reporters had to expand their coverage to include non-white communities. Race matters. But for too long, professional organizations have pursued diversity in terms of numbers, a worthwhile measure, but by no means the only one. Today, the goal should include promoting excellence in coverage of our different communities, irrespective of writers’ skin color.

Journalists cannot be true believers. Rather we are perpetual sojourners, restless and undomesticated. In pursuit of stories, our paths often cross with freedom fighters, especially in situations of extreme oppression. The experiences in Namibia of fellow Nieman Gwen Lister remind me of the importance of keeping independent even from one’s former allies. In the struggle against apartheid, Gwen and her staff at The Namibian suffered through arbitrary arrests, harassment and bombing of their offices. After independence, The Namibian monitored abuses of those who had assumed power. Some of these former “comrades” did not like the spotlight put on their actions; earlier this year, the ruling Cabinet ordered that no government ministry place ads in the paper.

Perhaps by learning about experiences such as Gwen’s, we will come to value—and practice—independence in our roles as journalists. ■

*Ying Chan, a 1996 Nieman Fellow, is journalism professor and director of the Journalism and Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong. After spending 23 years in the United States working as a journalist, she returned to Hong Kong in July 1998 to create this journalism program.*

# Retaining Independence Isn't Easy for Journalists

But protection of sources can cheat the public and betray the truth.

By Robert Blau

Early in his tenure as a Chicago Bull, Michael Jordan asked reporters for a favor: He would appreciate if they wouldn't reveal that he had a child, since he wasn't married just yet. Many of the writers already knew this but didn't mention it because they didn't want to alienate one of the greatest athletes of the century. They liked him. They wanted to be liked by him. And they needed him.

There's a healthy debate to be had over whether an out-of-wedlock child born to a basketball player, even a superstar, is newsworthy. It certainly had nothing to do with performance on the court. But given Jordan's carefully choreographed image, the information might have been useful to readers in assessing the man.

More troubling was the tacit understanding entered into by the reporters: We'll agree to this as long as you are available to us. This daily journalistic transaction, more than any other kind of relationship, has the potential to undermine Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel's simple commandment: "Journalists must maintain an independence from those they cover." Protecting sources and currying their favor so they will remain sources, whether in a sweaty locker room or swank boardroom, too easily crosses the line from common sense to conspiracy, cheating the public and betraying the truth.

Political coverage often depends on reporters getting along with candidates and public officials in the hope they will achieve candor and trust. Ideally this benefits the reader. But these bunker friendships can obscure good judgment. Veteran political reporters and editors found it difficult to believe former Congressman Dan Rostenkowski, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, was capable of being a felon, all the way up to his conviction for mail fraud. And their coverage reflected this bias.

It's often that way when you've spent long days together picking apart policy and talking football over steaks and beer. Every police reporter knows how hard it is to remain sternly objective about the cop on the beat when you are shuttling together from one crime scene to the next, finding in each other much needed common ground.

The most egregious breach of public trust and professionalism is a hidden relationship that might compromise the journalist's ability to report fairly. News organizations have gotten increasingly vigilant about policing such conflicts, but this doesn't happen everywhere. I'm haunted by the story that a reporter covering a celebrity was at the same time writing a book with this person—without any editor's knowledge. Of course, in much of celebrity journalism, public relations specialists hold reporters and editors hostage by masterfully

offering the carrot of access and exclusivity.

Further eroding "independence of mind," as the authors put it, is the expanding punditocracy. More journalists are angling for face time on television, trafficking in opinion, speculation and guesswork as part of the information elite. They give speeches for large fees. They vacation together and work out together and feed each other's sense of mission and importance. Is there any place chummier than a TV studio in Washington, D.C. on a Sunday morning?

But the most insidious loss of independence happens daily, quietly, in the minds of journalists determined to protect access. It took a freelancer, not a battalion of beat reporters, to expose the anti-Semitic leanings of the New York Knicks' Bible-study clique. In the arithmetic of daily reporting, the beat writers have the most to lose from delivering the unflinching truth and burning their sources. Context. Background. Authority. Quotes. But how many crucial facts get lost in these off-the-record conversations and moments?

There is inspiration in the opposite approach: Washington Post reporter Milton Coleman courageously revealing Jesse Jackson's Hymietown comment and a Sports Illustrated writer delivering John Rocker's racist diatribe even though it might have been easier, even tempting, to dismiss it as mischief.

Overdependence on sources is not as obvious a violation as fabricating quotes or events. But its consequences can be just as dangerous. It's about airbrushing the rough edges of truth. The antidote is reliance on incontrovertible fact. The most ambitious journalism does not require dealmaking. It doesn't depend on what someone says, but on what can be proven. It doesn't rely on hunches about a person's character or snap judgments about the relevance of private matters to public policy. The standards of the best investigative journalism should be the standards of the industry at large. Allegiances, affiliations and predilections need to be neutralized or disclosed.

Beyond that, there must be a sense that our job is different from those of the people we cover, that people are going to be mad at us, that comfort lies in the shared ideals and ethics of the newsroom and not at the feet of the best to play the game. ■

*Robert Blau, a 1997 Nieman Fellow, is associate managing editor/projects and investigations at the Chicago Tribune.*

## 5

# Journalists must serve as an independent monitor of power.

“ In 1964, the Pulitzer Prize, the most coveted award in newspapers, went to the Philadelphia Bulletin in a new reporting category...called Investigative Reporting. ...the journalism establishment was acknowledging a kind of work increasingly done in recent years by a new generation of journalists....

Some old-timers began to grumble. Investigative reporting, they harrumphed, was little more than a two-dollar word for good reporting. In the end, all reporting is investigative. The critics had a point. What the Pulitzer Prize Board formally recognized in 1964 had been, in fact, more than two hundred years in development....

[T]he watchdog principle is being threatened in contemporary journalism by overuse, and by a faux watchdogism aimed more at pandering to audiences than public service. Perhaps even more serious, the watchdog role is threatened by a new kind of corporate conglomeration, which effectively may destroy the independence required of the press to perform their monitoring role....

The watchdog principle means more than simply monitoring government, but extends to all the powerful institutions in society.... As firmly as journalists believe in it, the watchdog principle is often misunderstood.... The concept is deeper and more nuanced than the literal sense of afflicting or comforting would suggest. As history showed us, it more properly means watching over the powerful few in society on behalf of the many to guard against tyranny.

The purpose of the watchdog role also extends beyond simply making the management and execution of power transparent, to making known and understood the effects of that power. This logically implies that the press should recognize where powerful institutions are working effectively, as well as where they are not. How can the press purport to monitor the powerful if it does not illustrate the successes as well as the failures? Endless criticisms lose meaning, and the public has no basis for judging good from bad.

...the proliferation of outlets for news and information have been accompanied by a torrent of investigative reportage.... Much of this reportage has the earmarks of watchdog reporting, but there is a difference. Most of these programs do not monitor the powerful elite and guard against the potential for tyrannical abuse. Rather, they tend to concern risks to personal safety or one’s pocketbook. Among some popular topics of prime-time magazines: crooked car mechanics, poor swimming pool lifeguarding, sex slave rings, housecleaning scams, dangerous teenage drivers.

...the expanding nature of journalism as a public forum has spawned a new wave of journalism as assertion, which makes the need for a vibrant and serious watchdog journalism all the more critical. In the next century, the press must watchdog not only government, but an expanding nonprofit world, a corporate world, and the expanding public debate that new technology is creating. ”

— Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel,  
“The Elements of Journalism”

# Investigative Journalism Can Still Thrive at Newspapers

It requires fierce determination, hard work, some guerrilla tactics, and thick skin.

By Loretta Tofani

It was never easy to be an investigative reporter, especially when the journalist wanted to tell a story that was original, that he or she saw but others didn't see. These stories took much more time than ordinary stories—months, sometimes years. And there were cases, on occasion, in which a reporter would spend time investigating a story only to find that the thesis couldn't be proven or that editors found the finished product not worth printing.

So, in this era of newspaper publishers expecting to achieve double-digit profits for stockholders, investigative journalism no longer has the same level of support. The dominant message, amid buyouts and pink slips, is produce, produce, produce! The result is that reporters tend to produce more good or mediocre stories at the expense of the great and vital stories, which are still out there.

At The Philadelphia Inquirer, where I am a staff writer, reporters still write investigative stories. But fewer of them are consistently engaged in that enterprise now than 14 years ago, when I came here from The Washington Post.

Despite changes in newsroom culture, I think it is still possible to report and write great investigative stories at newspapers. The key then, and now, is fierce determination, hard work, and some guerrilla tactics.

In 1982, when I wrote a series on jail rapes for The Washington Post that won a Pulitzer Prize for Local Investigative Specialized Reporting, newspapers were still proudly touting their First Amendment watchdog role. Watergate and the book and movie that celebrated it, "All the President's Men," were recent memories. Nevertheless, my two immediate editors at the Post had no interest in giving me the time to report and write this series. But it was possible to circumvent them. And it is still possible, today, to overcome obstacles in the newsroom.

My series was about gang rapes of prisoners awaiting trial for misdemeanors by other prisoners who were convicted of crimes like murder and armed robbery. I learned about the rapes while I was covering the Prince George's County Courts. During a sentencing, a lawyer said, "Your honor, my client was gang raped in the county jail." I was shaken, thinking of what had happened to the young man. Afterwards, I asked the judge how often he heard about the rapes. "Oh, it happens all the time," he said.

So I began my reporting. I still covered my beat. But on my days off, and when I finished work, I visited the homes of jail

guards and jail rape victims and interviewed them. I didn't say anything to my editor. After about six weeks, I finally made my pitch. At that point I knew most of the key points of the story. I explained them to my editor: About a dozen men a week were getting gang raped in the jail. Most were legally innocent, in jail because they lacked money for bond before their trials. They were gang raped because the jail failed to enforce its rules and permitted prisoners to block the view of guards with black trash bags. Indeed, jail policies actually promoted the gang rapes because the jail failed to separate the weak from the strong and to separate those charged with drunk driving, shoplifting and trespassing, who became rape victims, from convicted murderers and armed robbers, the typical rapists.

My editor said, "Let's put it on the back burner." I argued, but there was no winning. I went over his head, to another editor. He refused. The second editor needed me for daily stories. I went over his head, to the metropolitan editor. "That's a great story," he said, and ordered my immediate editor to give me some time to report and write it.

Later, of course, other newsroom obstacles appeared to publishing an investigative story: It was hard to get the time to find and interview the jail rapists and obtain medical records of the victims. One editor thought the story should be a "trend" story. Another editor didn't like case studies, didn't like quoting the men who had raped each victim. Another editor wanted a feature story.

So it takes determination to get the job done, even in the best of times. I think now, even in harder times, reporters can find more ways to report and write investigative stories at newspapers. Editors love good stories. And good reporters feel outrage about social injustice, about systems that don't work, about policies that hurt people.

Of course, it helps to have an editor who has been an investigative reporter—even if he or she is an "unofficial" editor. It helps to talk to other reporters who have written investigative stories. And it helps to have thick skin. ■

*Loretta Tofani writes for The Philadelphia Inquirer. She participated in the Nieman Foundation's second Watchdog Journalism Project conference on the use of sources.*

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**...it is still possible,  
today, to overcome  
obstacles in the  
newsroom.**

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# Press Failure to Watchdog Can Have Devastating Consequences

Every news organization should monitor the powerful in the public interest.

By Murrey Marder

In this electronic age, the most serious challenge to American journalism is the threat of becoming irrelevant. Unless the American print and broadcast press can demonstrate some unique service to the public, they will be overrun in time by cheaper, flimsier news competition.

The core purpose of the American press since its origin has been to serve as a watchdog for the public interest, guarding against the abuse of power. But with notable exceptions, that distinctive, essential function is now atrophying like a muscle, shrinking from lack of exercise.

When it has been true to its heritage, the press has sounded the alarm if public rights were being impaired. It marshaled public opinion to act against city, state, or federal authorities, or against any other group, public or private, found to be misusing the public trust.

How could such a vital function fall into widespread disuse? By not admitting that it has deteriorated. By pretending that it is being pursued. By focusing on minor abuses of power and avoiding the greater abuses. By making superficiality the norm for news coverage.

Watchdog reporting—when it is done well—extends basic reporting to a deeper level of intensity and thoroughness, without hobbling deadline pressure. It allows a reporter and editor time to think, to probe, and to analyze in a profession where the clock is often the prime adversary.

The failure of the press to be a public watchdog often goes unnoticed, but it can have devastating consequences. None was costlier than the total failure of the American press—and Congress—in August 1964, at the crucial point for expanding the war in Vietnam. Reporters like me were just beginning to probe skeptically the Johnson Administration’s claims about unprovoked attacks on U.S. destroyers in the Tonkin Gulf. Before anyone could unearth and assemble the facts, most U.S. newspapers (including mine, *The Washington Post*) editorially leaped to join the stampede that gave the administration a blank check for its covert war plans. By a combined Senate-House vote of 504 to 2, taken without public hearings, Congress yielded its responsibility to checkmate a massive abuse of executive power.

That monumental default of both press and Congress was seared into my consciousness. As a crowning irony, at the war’s end American public opinion blamed press criticism for undermining the United States’ war strategy, when the default was exactly the opposite. The press had failed to provide soon enough the kind of important evidence that citizens could have used to criticize it.

In “The Elements of Journalism,” Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel write that in the American colonies “it was the watchdog role that made journalism, in Madison’s phrase, ‘a bulwark of liberty.’” But now Kovach and Rosenstiel report with dismay that journalism’s watchdog role has deteriorated into “diminution by dilution,” and this has happened through “overuse, and by a faux watchdogism aimed more at pandering to audiences than public service.”

Watchdog reporting is no gimmick, but requires a shift from rutted, traditional habits of the mind to open thought.

During the 2000 campaign, literally thousands of reporters walked right past the biggest story of the presidential election—the humiliating inadequacy of the voting equipment not just in Florida but across the nation. Where precincts used the antiquated ballot-punching machines, the error rate was a well-known disgrace glossed over by election managers until it crashed over the nation’s head. The lesson: News exists everywhere in the power structures that surround us. No reporter or editor worth their press passes should ever say, “There’s no news today.”

While Kovach and Rosenstiel focus on three investigative forms of watchdog reporting usually done by specialists, non-specialist alternatives are being explored by the Nieman Foundation’s Watchdog Journalism Project. Launched while Kovach was Nieman Curator, this initiative seeks to elevate all reporting to more intensive levels. The premise is that even the smallest newspaper or broadcasting station in any community should accept and pursue its watchdog obligation in the public’s interest. Wherever there is power, there is need for public accountability.

Walter Lippmann, early in his philosopher-journalist life, much like Madison had done, extolled newspapers as “the bible of democracy, the book out of which a people determines its conduct.” But as he grew older, he often criticized the press for failing to fulfill its potential. He never gave up hope, but near the end of his life he ruefully described journalism as “a refuge for the vaguely talented.” His characterization was painfully apt, but it need not remain valid forever. We, the vaguely talented, all bear the obligation to disprove it. ■

*Murrey Marder, a 1950 Nieman Fellow and former Washington Post correspondent, created the Watchdog Journalism Project at the Nieman Foundation in 1997.*

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## Journalism must provide a forum for public criticism and comment.

“...This forum function of the press would make it possible to create a democracy even in a large, diverse country by encouraging what James Madison and others considered the basis upon which democracy would stand—compromise, compromise, compromise....

In the new age of media, it is more incumbent on those providing us with journalism that they decipher the spin and lies of commercialized argument, lobbying, and political propaganda. ...it is more important, not less, that this public discussion be built on the same principles as the rest of journalism—starting with truthfulness, facts, and verification. For a forum without regard for facts fails to inform. A debate steeped in prejudice and supposition only inflames.

Just as important, this forum must be for all parts of the community, not just the affluent or demographically attractive....

Some people might consider this argument for stewardship anachronistic—and more than a little elitist—a leftover from an era when only a few outlets controlled public access to information.... Now we can let the journalist mediator get out of the way, and let the debate occur in the genuine public square, not the artificial one defined by NBC or CBS News.

This is where the technology-verses-journalism debate comes to its clearest philosophical divide.

...it is appealing, on some level, to think that technology will free those who produce the news from having to exercise judgment and responsibility...[but] it is creating a public square with a diminished regard for fact, fairness, and responsibility. Facts are replaced by whatever sells—or can be sold. Spin replaces verification. Right becomes a matter of who has the greatest might—wattage, audience, rhetorical skill.

In practice, unfortunately, the technological argument is the digital equivalent of tyranny, not freedom. Rather than liberated, we become captive to the technology....

The problem with...the Argument culture—the diminished level of reporting, the devaluing of experts, the emphasis on a narrow range of blockbuster stories, and the emphasis on an oversimplified, polarized debate—is that [it tends] to disenfranchise people from the discussion that the media not only are supposed to support but need for their own survival. Making politics into a shouting match drives people away from the media....

The press has a stake in that discussion being inclusive and nuanced, and an accurate reflection of where the debate in society actually exists, as well as where the points of agreement are. ”

— Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel,  
“The Elements of Journalism”

# When the Public Speaks, Do Journalists Listen?

‘I don’t recognize myself or anyone I know in your newspaper.’

By Geneva Overholser

**H**ow well are journalists doing these days at behaving as what the Hutchins Commission in 1947 called “common carriers of public discussion?” That’s the question Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel examine in their chapter “Journalism as a Public Forum.” Their conclusions are the same ones I derive from my practice and observation of journalism: Many of us have lost our way, and both the media and our democracy are the worse for it.

The spawning of new technologies and ever more numerous channels of information make the media’s *potential* for creating public forums more robust than ever. But today’s conditions also greatly increase chances that the news will be distorted and manipulated and make it harder than it’s ever been to shape the news responsibly. It seems anyone with a point of view—and plenty of resources—can influence media coverage. This makes it all the more incumbent on us as journalists to act prudently and carefully in choosing and presenting the news. Instead, all too often, we are primary figures in misshaping it.

Take the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, which began when I was ombudsman at The Washington Post. Certainly it was an important story, but the Post and other news organizations ill-served their public forum responsibilities in the great excess of sometimes prosecutorial, sometimes voyeuristic coverage. The paper and the political process were the worse for it. Indeed, readers’ complaints frequently involved, in one way or another, the paper’s failure to take into account just how much impact it had in deciding where and how to train its spotlight. “Why does your political coverage seem to imply that everyone is always scheming all the time, and no one ever means what they say?” readers asked. When the topic was legislative battles, a familiar complaint was, “Why do I have to follow the story inside to learn what a bill would actually do?” And in a message I remember well, one reader pleaded, “Could you just give me the facts? I can supply the cynicism.”

At a time when voices are raised to such a high pitch in so many media, the demands on serious journalists to keep their wits about them are great. Yet we frequently feed the polarization instead. Think of coverage of gun control, crime and punishment, abortion, drug abuse, the death penalty. The thoughtful middle—the realm where most American public opinion lies—is poorly represented and often just plain ignored. The result is another complaint I heard frequently: We appear to be writing for one another and for others in power—“I don’t recognize myself or anyone I know in your newspaper.”

Our provision of a public forum is essential to the forma-

tion of, in these authors’ words, “what James Madison and others considered the basis upon which democracy would stand—compromise, compromise, compromise.” Yet with our “wedge issues R us” stance, we encourage exactly the opposite. Some would say that the proliferation of channels of communication has the potential to make this system self-correcting. We might fail in individual media to be responsible, but with the Web enabling anyone to enter the debate, someone at some point will call us on it.

But Kovach and Rosenstiel hold—correctly, I think—that instead of being liberated we have “become captive to the technology.” I believe cost cutting lies behind many of the issues raised in this chapter, though the authors don’t explicitly link this to their concerns. They observe that the diminished regard for fairness and responsibility leads to situations in which “facts are replaced instead by whatever sells—or can be sold.” And they also cite this powerful quote from Noah Webster: “[N]ewspapers are not only the vehicles of what is called news; they are the common instruments of social intercourse, by which the Citizens of this vast Republic constantly discourse and debate with each other on subjects of public concern.” Yet today we see these “common instruments” are much reduced, having developed a preference for demographics that draw advertising over old allegiances to community and the largest and most diverse possible readership.

Consider, too, the negative effect of cost cutting on what we actually produce. The authors blame “our new media culture” more broadly, but surely money is a piece of why we have “seen the urge to comment replace the need to verify, sometimes even the need to report. The communications revolution is often more about delivering news than gathering it.” As the authors note, “quite literally, talk is cheap,” a fact that explains much of the vitriol to which we, in the media, subject the public.

The sad result is that “the mass media no longer help identify a common set of issues.” Democracy is thus weakened and so, ironically, given how much of this is driven by our quest for commercial success, is the health of our industry. ■

*Geneva Overholser, a 1986 Nieman Fellow, is former ombudsman at The Washington Post. She currently holds an endowed chair at the University of Missouri School of Journalism.*

# Is Journalism Losing Its Place in the Boisterous Public Forum?

An editor finds an appetite for serious conversation. Media ought to respond.

By Christine Chinlund

In some ways, journalism has come full circle. It began as a spoken medium, the stories exchanged in the Greek marketplace and, later, in colonial American taverns, over a pint of ale. Then, for a time, the printed word ruled the day and set the cadence for public discourse; the “forum” had moved to newspapers’ opinion pages.

But now the voices are back, blasting from the airwaves in an explosion of radio call-in shows and television talk shows, a loud and clamorous accompaniment to the printed word. In this incarnation, the volume on the “forum” has been cranked up to a new, sometimes deafening, decibel level. On any given day, television offers more than 175 hours of news and public affairs programming of which, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel inform us, 40 percent comes in the form of talk shows. Add to that the online chatter of the Internet (granted, a different sort of volume, but news/noise nonetheless), and we have a din that needs some taming.

That’s where today’s mission for journalists comes in. With the expanded audience and jacked-up volume comes an added responsibility to keep the conversation focused on the fact track, to nurture the best of what this new super-forum can offer and prevent the worst from infecting it.

Never before, suggest Kovach and Rosenstiel, has it been more crucial that journalists play the role of honest broker and referee in the free-for-all exchange of ideas. Never before has it been so important that the long-held principles of journalism, starting with truthfulness, prevail every day.

True, technology gives us the potential for a more open debate than ever before, and that should excite the little “d” democrat in all of us. But the new communication format, the authors warn us, already has demonstrated that the “urge to comment replaces the urge to verify.” It is often more about delivering news (and concurrent comment) than gathering it. As a result, it devalues expertise—thus, the rise of inexperienced young pseudo-expert commentators (sometimes misconstrued by viewers as being journalists) who are the rage today.

One might think we are losing depth, but at least we are gaining scope as technological wizardry provides a breathtaking reach and allows coverage of more stories from more places and with more voices. But we shouldn’t be willing to make that trade-off so fast. For the new media culture does not, in the end, truly expand coverage. In fact, as reporting infrastructure recedes, chat room venues define the conversation relying on the most common denominator. A handful of simplistic blockbuster stories use up a lot of the journal-

istic oxygen. Soap operas dramas, known by familiar names (Monica; Lady Di; J.F.K., Jr.; Elián), dominate.

“The paradox,” the authors write, “is that news organizations use expanding technology to chase not more stories, but fewer.”

As if all of this were not enough to discourage public participation in the forum, one final thing might: Call it the “food fight” factor. Too many of today’s talk shows proceed on the theory that everyone likes a good fight. Polarization, not conversation, become the defining principle. We forget that the job of journalism is not just to foster an exchange of ideas, but to make that exchange a civil one in which truth is a requirement. But will that really sell in this market-driven age of communication?

My experience suggests it will. During the past six years, I’ve been able to take the temperature of the Boston community in an unusual way—through absorbing the content of the often overwhelming number of manuscripts and queries submitted to The Boston Globe’s (Sunday) Focus section. The writers differ in background—from academia to the union rank and file, from retirees to high-school students—but the majority of their offerings have a common thread: They are about matters of consequence, be it public policy, social culture, politics, or sometimes history. And, by and large, all presume that facts must define the debate, albeit facts sometimes selectively offered.

This tells us something about the public’s appetite for serious conversation and the need for a forum to present it. The media—out of enlightened self-interest, if nothing more noble—ought to respond. Return for a moment to “will it sell?” Kovach and Rosenstiel acknowledge that argument journalism builds a passionate following. But it is a limited one that constricts over time as shouting matches alienate the broader public, shutting it out of the conversation by failing to give it voice or reflect its nuanced views.

Therein lies the real message: The price for letting journalism get sidetracked by the boisterous, facts-are-optional, anything-goes approach is not just the sacrifice of truth and civility, important as they are. It’s the loss of our audience and, with it, a piece of democracy.

It’s a price we cannot afford. ■

*Christine Chinlund, a 1998 Nieman Fellow, is editor of the Sunday Focus section of The Boston Globe.*

## 7

# Journalists must make the significant interesting and relevant.

“ ... This classic way of posing the question of engagement—as information versus storytelling, or what people need versus what people want—is a distortion. This is not how journalism is practiced, journalists told us. Nor is it, we believe, how people come to the news. The evidence suggests most people want both....

Storytelling and information are not contradictory. They are better understood as two points on a continuum of communicating.... Most journalism, like most communication, exists in the middle. The journalists’ task is to find the way to make the significant interesting for each story and finding the right mix of the serious and the less serious that offers an account of the day. Perhaps it is best understood this way: Journalism is storytelling with a purpose. That purpose is to provide people with information they need to understand the world. The first challenge is finding the information that people need to live their lives. The second is to make it meaningful, relevant, and engaging....

If journalism can be both significant and engaging, if people do not basically want it one way or the other, why does the news so often fall short? A litany of problems stand in the way of news being delivered compellingly: haste, ignorance, laziness, formula, bias, cultural blinders. Writing a story well, outside of the box of the inverted pyramid, takes time. It is, in the end, a strategic exercise that involves more than just plugging facts into short, declarative sentences. And time is a luxury of which journalists today feel they have less and less....

Even if reporters are given the time to report and write, there is the question of space in the paper or time on the newscast. With news organizations convinced that ever-shortening attention spans require ever-shorter stories, it is difficult for a reporter to get the space and time necessary to tell a story right....

The evidence suggests that attracting audiences by being merely engaging will fail as a business strategy for journalism over the long term for three simple reasons. The first problem is that if you feed people only trivia and entertainment, you will wither the appetite and expectations of some people for anything else.... The second long-term problem with the strategy of infotainment is that it destroys the news organization’s authority to deliver more serious news and drives away those audiences who want it....

Finally, the infotainment strategy is faulty as a business plan because when you turn your news into entertainment, you are playing to the strengths of other media rather than your own. How can the news ever compete with entertainment on entertainment’s terms? Why would it want to? The value and allure of news is different. It is based on relevance. The strategy of infotainment, though it may attract an audience in the short run and may be cheap to produce, will build a shallow audience because it is built on form, not substance. Such an audience will switch to the next “most exciting” thing because it was built on the spongy ground of excitement in the first place....”

— Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel,  
“The Elements of Journalism”

# Why Has Journalism Abandoned Its Observer’s Role?

‘The mirrorer was viewed as fat to be trimmed, and was.’

By Jon Franklin

Reporters, who are in the best position to pick up the sentiments of readers and would-be readers, often complain to me that the public no longer sees us as either engaging or relevant. Complaints, however, are rarely followed by any serious analytical thought about how we got into this sorry mess and how we might somehow climb out of it. Perhaps the Kovach and Rosenstiel book will help focus our minds.

The obvious villain, of course, is the news industry and its collective lust after very high profits. The last era of relatively good (relevant and engaging) newspaper journalism rose in the late 1960’s and survived until the early 1980’s when “The Age of Gannett” began and ushered in a crackdown by publishers, who’d complained bitterly during the 1970’s that they had lost control over their editors and reporters.

Perhaps this disjunction between reporters’ and publishers’ perspectives on how news can be conveyed engagingly should not surprise us. This is, after all, a business in which advertisers, not subscribers, pay the fare. And this fact creates the central fallacy of the business. When a reader pulls the *Daily Blatt* out of the box, he or she perceives the transaction in an innocent simplicity. The reader bought the paper, right? But, in fact, the major financial transaction happened when the publisher sold the readers’ attention to advertisers for many times the value of the coins put in the box.

So it is that the journalistic content of the newspaper is ultimately a loss leader. And the shrewd businessperson strives to make loss leaders as formulaic, efficient and cheap as possible. The rise of Gannett-think brought this insight into sharp focus. The scope of the newsroom was inexorably narrowed; the once-sacred role of the reporter as observer-analyst was transmogrified into that of information gatherer; the most compliant editors were promoted; the chain of command became six notches more militaristic, and hot-button news flowered into a star-crazy sensationalism.

When I was a young reporter, I was taught that the function of a newspaper was to report news and mirror society. This was in the mid-1960’s, when Nicholas von Hoffman of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote what became known as the “Haight-Ashbury” series, in which he portrayed for the first time the gathering of flower children in San Francisco. Other reporters, reading the von Hoffman piece, discovered similar gathering places in their towns. Suddenly the nation awakened to find the New Age all around it.

So why did Nick discover this, instead of some reporter in Kansas City or New York? The answer: reportorial vision, on an heroic scale. Youngsters like me were captivated by the power of it. I, for one, bought into the mirroring aspect of journalism and spent the following decades explaining

complicated subjects and writing true short stories that let the reader walk for a while in another person’s shoes.

Readers love these kinds of stories. Tom Hallman, who just won a Pulitzer Prize for a story about a patient’s saga to find himself, provoked many thousands of reader calls, letters and e-mails. You want relevant? You want engaging? The stories are there, and so are the reporters, though few young ones are being trained.

Why is this kind of journalism so rarely allowed? The question is, of course, rhetorical. Such stories are expensive. They take specially trained reporters and equally expert editors ready to break newsroom rules of thumb and to fight the story through the copy desk. They are disruptive and time-consuming, as mirroring reality is wont to be. But by 1980 many newspapers had set up systems to do the job—special editing procedures, narrative-savvy copy editors, and the like. Soon, however, all bean counters saw was the expense. The mirrorer was viewed as fat to be trimmed, and was. In years since, feature writing, in general, has become softer, flabbier, more star-driven and sensational. And information gathering resembles the work of the long-vanished rewrite man going through stacks of releases and making a phone call or two. Covering the obvious.

All this makes for quarterly profits, but it does not build and expand a readership. It does not find new narratives to interest or engage. It does not function as an institution that binds us together. It drapes stories around the ads, but those stories seem less and less likely to distract from the advertisers message.

What should we do? For openers, we should take a recess from our front-page romanticism and face the reality: We journalists are thrall to the printing, advertising and distribution industries, and in recent decades we have steadily lost what little power we once might have had. This is not just a professional issue: It’s a social one. But as was the case with von Hoffman’s flower children, this critically important story is too close for most of us to see. It’s in our own newsrooms. ■

*Jon Franklin is Philip Merrill Professor of Journalism at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, College Park. He has won two Pulitzer Prizes, one for explanatory journalism (1985), the other for feature writing (1979), both while he worked for The Evening Sun in Baltimore.*

# Journalists Engage Readers By Learning Who They Are

Newsrooms should know more than marketers do about their audiences.

By Melanie Sill

**T**he most oft-mentioned and misrepresented figure in journalism might be “the Reader” (or alternately, “the Viewer”), a spirit summoned to support nearly every content argument that cannot be won on its own merit. Its voice sounds so familiar. “The Reader doesn’t want to plow through long stories.” “The Reader doesn’t want to see dead people on the front page.” “The Reader doesn’t like stories that jump.”

Engagement and relevance absolutely do involve a consciousness about who is on the other side of communication. But often such arguments within news organizations overlook an abiding reality: There isn’t one reader or viewer. There are tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of them, and they have lots of conflicting likes and dislikes. Add to this that more and more people are getting through life without subscribing to daily newspapers or watching network or local news broadcasts and our concern should become even deeper.

Such realities add urgency to questions of how to engage, or reengage, more people in the kind of presentation of important issues to which high-quality journalism aspires. These challenges require us to do more than look inward to our ideals and aspirations about journalistic quality. We also have to consider what’s happening on the other end of this exchange, a place where we need to think hard about how to connect with readers and viewers, in the plural.

Of course, the goals of engagement and relevance are inseparable from the other elements of journalism that Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel identify. Yet I would add a bit to their arguments in this chapter. To engage someone in a conversation, it helps to understand who they are, what they know, what’s going on in their lives. The old “know your audience” rule of public speaking might be worth adapting for newsrooms. To extend our reach and, perhaps more importantly, intensify the connections between our work and our readers or viewers, we might need to devote more time to exploring communities and considering what’s going on in the neighborhoods (both geographic and demographic) that we serve.

I wonder, for instance, how newsrooms are using the new census results. Are these numbers being left to the census beat reporter while others in the newsroom tune out? Or are reporters, editors and news directors poring over them with the idea that the numbers can inform their coverage in much deeper ways? Does the local editor look at information about poverty and wealth, age and race, family structure and migration in the various areas of the paper’s coverage

as part of considering the paper’s reporting strategies? Job trends, housing patterns, changes in retailing, these are the kinds of information that flesh out what journalists see in neighborhoods or find in archives.

Knowledge like this begets relevance at the most fundamental level. And this kind of knowledge can bring power. If a newspaper or television station applies these layers of knowledge to the area it reports on, chances are its coverage will be smarter. Such depth of understanding informs stories, helps journalists to spot trends and, in turn, can enlarge the reach of the newspaper or station. Out of it can come new sections, new beats, and new sources of stories. Out of it can come coverage that is accurate, ahead of the curve, truly relevant, compelling and important.

One of the worst mistakes journalists make is to leave such understanding to marketers. Newsrooms ought to know more than any other department about their reader or viewer data. Readership studies commissioned by newspapers often are complex and contradictory, including information not just about up arrows and down arrows of numerical change but about people’s lives, interests and habits. The details show you not just who’s reading (and who isn’t) but also how people read. Of all the kinds of numbers that push news companies in different directions, these are most important to us in news, but only when we examine them in combination with this broader understanding of our community.

Such challenges loom for broadcast as well as print. On the newspaper side of things, the massive Readership Institute project undertaken through Northwestern University offers not just understanding of long-term readership trends, but useful and specific analysis. I find its approach encouraging because it considers not just why people don’t read newspapers, but why they *do*, along with what they like, what brings them back to newspaper reading, what gets them to read more closely. This is a study that offers encouragement and hope, but the question is whether newsrooms and news companies will take hold of the material and use it to improve their journalistic efforts.

If we can do better at knowing our audience, and understanding how to engage them in our work, we’ll stand a better chance of carrying these principles into the next generation of journalism. ■

*Melanie Sill, a 1994 Nieman Fellow, is managing editor at The News & Observer of Raleigh, North Carolina.*

## 8

# Journalists should keep the news in proportion and make it comprehensive.

“ Journalism is our modern cartography. It creates a map for citizens to navigate society. This is its utility and its economic reason for being.... As with any map, journalism’s value depends on its completeness and proportionality. Journalists who devote far more time and space to a sensational trial or celebrity scandal than they know it deserves—because they think it will sell—are like cartographers who drew England and Spain the size of Greenland because it was popular. It may make short-term economic sense but it misleads the traveler and eventually destroys the credibility of the mapmaker. The journalist who writes what “she just knows to be true,” without really checking first, is like the artist who draws sea monsters in the distant corners of the New World....

Thinking of journalism as mapmaking helps us see that proportion and comprehensiveness are key to accuracy....

But as journalism companies aimed at elite demographics and cost efficiency, the industry as a general rule did not try [to reach more diverse audiences].... The concept of the mapmaker makes the error clear. We created a map for certain neighborhoods and not others. Those who were unable to navigate where they lived gave it up....

Proportion and comprehensiveness in news are subjective. Their elusiveness, however, does not mean they are any less important than the more objective roads and river feature of maps. To the contrary, striving for them is essential to journalism’s popularity—and financial health. It is also possible...to pursue proportion and comprehensiveness, despite their being subjective. A citizen and a journalist may differ over the choices made about what is important. But citizens can accept those differences if they are confident that the journalist is trying to make news judgments to serve what readers need and want. The key is citizens must believe the journalists’ choices are not exploitative—they are not simply offering what will sell—and that journalists aren’t pandering. Again, people care less whether journalists make mistakes, or correct them well, or always pick the right stories. The key element of credibility is the perceived motive of the journalist. People do not expect perfection. They do expect good intentions.... Concern for proportionality is a key way of demonstrating public interest motives.

...we need to stop using market research that treats our audience as customers, asking them which products they prefer. We need to create a journalism market research that approaches people as citizens and tells us more about their lives. How do you spend your time? Take us through your day. How long is your commute? What are you worried about? What do you hope and fear for your kids? [Give us] open-ended research on broad trends of interest. The kinds of questions that will allow editors to understand how to design a news package that is comprehensive and proportional to their community and their needs.... ”

— Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel,  
“The Elements of Journalism”

# The Absence of Memory Hurts Journalism

Short-term investors stifle investment in long-term and necessary research.

By Philip Meyer

It is a lovely metaphor. Journalism today, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel tell us, is where cartography was in the 15th century. We report well about what our audiences already know, but lapse into sensationalism and exaggeration elsewhere—just as the early mapmakers drew sea monsters for titillation or expanded and shrank continents to fit the prejudices of their consumers.

Journalism should be more like modern cartography, they argue. The news ought to be “proportional and comprehensive,” keeping readers informed about segments of the population with which they are not familiar. Instead, the trend toward target marketing, which began in the 1960’s, is pushing us in the other direction, toward the eventual self-absorbed audience of one.

The two authors have that right. But their proposed solution, adoption of newer market research techniques, won’t cut it. The first problem is that the proposed techniques aren’t new. Kovach and Rosenstiel want to segment audiences “not just on demographics, but on attitudes and behaviors.” Jonathan Robbin, the founder of Claritas Inc., got that idea 40 years ago, and Christine Urban applied it to newspapers in the 1970’s. It is still helping editors visualize their audiences even as their size diminishes.

Kovach and Rosenstiel present another oldie but goodie when they argue that editors should concern themselves less with what readers say they want and more with what they need. True, but uses and gratifications of mass media have been topics of academic research since the 1950’s. The late Steve Star drove the point home to newspaper editors at his marketing seminars in the 1970’s by telling them, “People don’t buy quarter-inch drills, they buy quarter-inch holes.” Heads nodded, but nothing changed. In a business whose product has to be recreated every 24 hours, there’s no time for basic reflection about long-range goals.

The problems that are killing journalism, as we know it, are far too fundamental to be solved by tactical redirection of market research. In the first place, the media industry only pays for research that promises cheap solutions to superficial problems. Its ownership by short-term investors prevents it from looking deeper.

Is this assessment too gloomy? After all, most industries and professions have provisions somewhere in their structures for thinking about the basic questions that will determine their future over the long haul. For many, it involves a close alliance between educators and industry. But newspapers and network television, for most of their existence, never needed the long-term thinkers of academic research. Their oligopoly status made them immune to market forces and any need for innovation. This created a culture that is anti-intellectual and

scornful of work without immediate application. But without theories that put some structure on isolated bits of fact, there is no way to understand what is happening to journalism today, much less to develop strategies for preserving it.

Developing theory requires a tribal memory. As Kovach and Rosenstiel note in a previous chapter, journalism doesn’t have one. Unlike other industries, we “fail to communicate the lessons of one generation to the next.” Indeed, we don’t even communicate them from one year to the next. The March 2001 issue of *American Journalism Review* [AJR] presented the results of a national survey on newspaper credibility funded by the Ford Foundation. The report contained not a single reference to any of the previous credibility studies of the past two decades.

Even Christine Urban’s 1999 study for the American Society of Newspaper Editors was ignored. And ASNE, in commissioning Urban’s study, ignored its own previous work with Kristin McGrath in 1985. She’d laid the groundwork for a better theoretical understanding of the sources of media credibility by revealing intriguing evidence of a relationship between a newspaper’s ability to build strong community ties and the trust its readers placed in it. To ignore this is like writing a local story without checking the clip files—a firing offense at good newspapers.

The purported good news in the AJR study is that 31 percent of respondents to a telephone survey thought their newspapers were becoming more accurate. Asking a one-shot cross section to judge change over time by comparing its current impression with its own offhand recollection is, of course, the world’s worst way to detect change. The right way would be to replicate McGrath’s work today, but nobody will pay for it because each new study sponsor insists on acting as though he or she were the first intelligent life form to ever consider the problem.

We need continuity and theories. Where do theories come from? They can start as metaphors. Kovach and Rosenstiel put us on a good path with the parable of the cartographers. “Comprehensive and proportional” news is a worthy goal. We can define that concept in a way that would allow it to be measured and studied and its value assessed. Let’s get on with it. ■

*Philip Meyer, a 1967 Nieman Fellow, was a reporter and market researcher for Knight Ridder before joining the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1981.*

# A Newspaper Strives to Make Its Coverage Complete

The new approach works but reporters feel constricted by its rigidity.

By Mike Connor

Four years ago at The (Syracuse) Post-Standard we had a rare and precious opportunity to start our newspaper all over again. We'd announced that the morning and evening newspaper staffs, once fiercely competitive, would merge. Because our company has an ironclad policy of no layoffs, the staff would be the sum of the two newsroom rosters—a huge increase for the newspaper.

This change did not happen overnight. Fortunately, we were given several months to create a blueprint for this new entity. We could step away from the daily press of business and ask ourselves questions not asked when the clock is ticking. What, for example, would we do if we suddenly had 250 journalists with whom to start a newspaper? How would we do it? What would our organizational chart look like? How would we define "community" and cover it?

When I read Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel's words about making coverage comprehensive and proportional, my mind leapt back to this time of reflection, when we said that making our news complete would be our primary goal. Of course, what "complete" meant resided in the eye of the person who maps it and the needs of those who used it. And because journalism is part science, part art, our notion of "complete" would integrate our experiences, instincts and what research told us about our audience.

To create navigational guides, we drew a series of maps—some geographical, others topical, and still others demographic. These helped us decide where to open new bureaus and how to assign reporters: For example, our education reporters increased from two to nine and our suburban staff went from four to 20. It wasn't just numbers that changed. So did our journalistic mission: We pledged to record every public vote, every crime, every important transaction of public and business life that we could obtain. We'd use agate type—as we do with sports' scores—to build a newspaper of record to offer readers consistent community data.

But we wouldn't stop there. We'd put our reporters' skills and ingenuity to work questioning, explaining and analyzing the data, putting it in a comprehensive context. If the best investigative reporting helps readers to closely inspect aspects of their civic life, why not publish as much detailed data as we could each day so readers—and reporters—would have what they needed to form probing questions? Enterprise and explanatory reporting would grow up naturally from this seedbed of data about public actions, transactions and records.

To contrast these changes is to vividly see how completeness and proportionality fit into our transition. Before, a reporter received a hunch or tip about exorbitant fees that a town

paid its hired lawyers. To do the complete investigation, she collected data about legal fees paid by that town and neighboring ones. She compared the fees, showed anomalies, and did reporting to reveal why it happened. This was a massive amount of work to be done for one story.

Now we publish legal fees in zoned sections of the newspaper. Our reporters cull the highlights and present them in articles that compare costs in each town and the billing practices of lawyers. Each year, we build on this database to deepen the perspective. When we see anomalies, they prompt reporting instead of the reporting being done to find them. The result is that stories of community importance no longer depend on a chance tip or hunch by one reporter.

Of course, this approach to being a comprehensive purveyor of news can be—and is right now being—jostled by economic downturns at the newspaper. Financial constraints are forcing us to redefine what we mean by complete coverage and causing us to reorganize beats and shrink the numbers of reporters assigned to certain ones.

But we are also facing a different threat. No matter how well our maps might be guiding us in filling in gaps in our coverage and giving readers a sense of connection and scale, they are failing to inspire individual reporters. While reporters understand the reasoning, this approach doesn't jazz them. We've lost too many who felt constricted by our systematic approaches. Imagine Jack Kerouac, *Least Heat-Moon*, or Pirsig with a TripTik and directions from an editor.

What we need is to use new metaphors to help the best daily journalists see connections between our approach to community coverage and their individual work and aspirations. Right now, to many, our form must seem like haiku—its pattern austere and rigid, signaling death to the individual spirit. But within haiku, infinite creative possibilities abound, as its great practitioners show.

Surely we have within our newsroom the potential for reporters to demonstrate greatness within the form we have created. It's our challenge, as editors, to find ways to help them realize this potential without diminishing our promise to readers of complete coverage. ■

*Mike Connor, a 1989 Nieman Fellow, is editor of The (Syracuse) Post-Standard.*

## 9

# Journalists have an obligation to personal conscience.

“ Every journalist—from the newsroom to the boardroom—must have a personal sense of ethics and responsibility—a moral compass. What’s more, they have a responsibility to voice their personal conscience out loud and allow others around them to do so as well....

Innumerable hurdles make it difficult to produce news that is accurate, fair, balanced, citizen focused, independent-minded, and courageous. But the effort is smothered in its crib without an open atmosphere that allows people to challenge one another’s assumptions, perceptions, and prejudices. We need our journalists to feel free, even encouraged, to speak out and say, “This story idea strikes me as racist,” or “Boss, you’re making the wrong decision.” Only in a newsroom in which all can bring their diverse viewpoints to bear will the news have any chance of accurately anticipating and reflecting the increasingly diverse perspectives and needs of American culture.

Simply put, those who inhabit news organizations must recognize a personal obligation to differ with or challenge editors, owners, advertisers, and even citizens and established authority if fairness and accuracy require they do so.... And then managers have to be willing to listen, not simply manage problems and concerns away.... Allowing individuals to voice their consciences in the newsroom makes running the newspaper more difficult. It makes the news more accurate....

This notion of open dialogue in the newsroom is at the core of what a growing number of people who think about news consider the key element in the question of diversity and in the pursuit of a journalism of proportion.... Traditionally, the concept of newsroom diversity has been defined largely in terms of numerical targets that related to ethnicity, race, and gender. The news industry has belatedly recognized that its newsrooms should more closely resemble the culture at large. ...intellectual diversity is also difficult for managers. The tendency, for many reasons, is to create newsrooms that think like the boss....

Maybe the biggest challenge for the people who produce the news is to recognize that their long-term health depends on the quality of their newsroom, not simply its efficiency. The long-term interest pulls one toward a more complex and difficult newsroom culture....

Journalists must invite their audience into the process by which they produce the news. ...they should take pains to make themselves and their work as transparent as they insist on making the people and institutions of power they cover. This sort of approach is, in effect, the beginning of a new kind of connection between the journalist and the citizen. ...it gives the reader a basis on which to judge whether this is the kind of journalism they wish to encourage. ...the way journalists design their work to engage the public must not only provide the needed content but an understanding of the principles by which their work is done. In this way, the journalists will determine whether or not the public can become a force for good journalism. ”

— Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel,  
“The Elements of Journalism”

# Journalists Need Help With Ethical Decisions

In today’s newsrooms, there are plenty to be made.

By Carol Marin

**W**hen journalism students arrive at my door to ask what they should know about being reporters, I give them the same spiel again and again. I’m sure some consider it a rant.

“Being a reporter is a privilege,” I begin. “For that privilege, you have to give up some of your rights as a citizen. You’re no longer a Democrat or a Republican, no longer a public proponent of any social issue, a protester in demonstrations, a signer of petitions, an advocate of good causes, a fundraiser for charities, or an advocate on behalf of any constituency. Whether objectivity is achievable in the absolute sense, a reporter has, above all else, to be fair. Prepare to be unpopular. Finally, get ready to be fired for the wrong reason or quit on principle.”

In 1997, my rant rang in my ears. For two years I’d fought with management about the direction our newscasts were taking. My concerns: the progressive dumbing down of content and the commercial corruption of the news because of promised “stories” to advertisers. Finally, with the hiring of trash talk show host Jerry Springer, I quit my anchor job at WMAQ-TV in Chicago.

Now, in reading what Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel say about journalists and their responsibility to conscience, I agree with much of what they say. But I get uncomfortable when they write, “Journalists have an obligation to personal conscience. Every journalist—from the newsroom to the boardroom—must have a personal sense of ethics and responsibility—a moral compass.” I quibble over the use of words like “conscience” and “moral compass.”

I tell people all the time that news is my religion. But what I fear is that these words open the door for a kind of moralizing that is antithetical to good journalism. I didn’t quit my job because I thought Jerry Springer and his show were morally offensive. My decision had much more to do with his hiring being a ratings stunt, that he brought no credibility to our newscast, and that I felt his presence would destroy the trust we’d established with our viewers.

For me, resigning was an ethical decision, not a moral one. This might seem a distinction with no difference, yet words are powerful instruments. Kovach and Rosenstiel use “ethical” and “moral” interchangeably, as do dictionaries. But while definitions overlap, I find important distinctions in the different tones. “Conscience” and “morality” seem to hold a bit too much righteousness and rectitude for what journalists

really do when they try to do the right thing. “Ethical” suggests a search for guidance for conduct and decision-making, a process rather than a doctrine.

The authors and I agree that journalists need a support system to help them make good ethical decisions. A few years ago, a young woman who was the medical reporter at a small television station called me. Her boss asked her to prepare reports that a local hospital would vet before they were broadcast. What should she do? I could tell she knew the answer before she called, but she needed me to be her support system that day.

I’d been involved in a similar situation at WMAQ a few years earlier. Management was “selling” the news through making “value-added” deals with advertisers. This meant that in addition to buying commercial time on a given newscast, advertisers were promised to be part of actual news stories. (If a hospital offered free thyroid tests, we’d broadcast a medical “news story.”) The problem: The viewer was left unaware that such “news stories” were being bought. When I refused to read copy that prompted a “value added” story, I was suspended.

My decision then was not based on conscience or morality but on my belief in the need to uphold a professional context for our work. Ours is, after all, a public trust in which we are required to seek out and report the truth, not hide it from those we serve. Our privilege carries risks, and this young reporter was learning this quickly. And she was doing what we all do, seeking out someone to talk to for guidance.

The Chicago Headline Club of the Society of Professional Journalists is trying to break some ground on this. With ethicists at Loyola University, it has set up an advice line where journalists can confidentially ask for help on thorny problems they face in their newsrooms. There are kinks to be worked out, but it’s a heroic effort by very dedicated journalists. They understand that journalists don’t just report on ethical dilemmas that others confront—though we do plenty of that, as well—but also travel through territory of ethical conflicts. What journalists need are safe harbors like this one to turn to when the pressure becomes intense. ■

*Carol Marin is a CBS News correspondent contributing pieces to “60 Minutes” and “60 Minutes II.”*

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**‘Conscience’ and ‘morality’ seem to hold a bit too much righteousness and rectitude for what journalists really do when they try to do the right thing.**

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# Refusing to Take the Easier Route

Journalists have an important social contract to uphold.

By Mark G. Chavunduka

“Why didn’t you just give them the names and save yourself from this barbaric torture?”

Following my harrowing experience at the hands of Zimbabwean military authorities in January of 1999, I’ve been asked this question again and again. For nine days, I was tortured in an attempt to try to get me to divulge names of my sources within the Zimbabwe National Army that I’d used in a story that published details of an attempted coup against President Mugabe’s government. I endured beatings with planks, booted feet and fists, electric shocks and water suffocation for hours on end. Finally, I was released. The information had been withheld.

It would have been easier, certainly, for me to reveal our sources and “simply go home,” as my torturers kept telling me. “Yes, I have family,” I’d respond, and “Yes, I want to see them again,” I’d reply. But by taking that easier route, I’d have violated the professional ethics I’d been taught in journalism school as well as my personal conscience, about which Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel write. Revealing their names would have betrayed and endangered our sources. And what would this have meant to the public’s perception about the integrity of my newspaper, of me, and of journalists in general? With all of this at stake, that route was neither an easy one nor the right one to take.

At a time when technological advancements are bringing about big changes in the way that our industry operates, some important tenets of journalism are being sacrificed in the rush to publish “news.” Are journalists adhering—as doctors and lawyers do—to a code of ethics that calls on them to protect their sources’ privacy in ways that are making members of the public feel safe in confiding information to a reporter? Or is the lure of a scoop obliterating this responsibility to protect sources and to follow the obligation of personal conscience? Too often, I believe, these more difficult burdens of our profession are simply tossed aside.

Kovach and Rosenstiel contend that “those who inhabit news organizations must recognize a personal obligation to differ with or challenge editors, owners, advertisers or citizens if fairness and accuracy require that they do so.” Some years ago, while I was working as a junior reporter on a Zimbabwean paper, I learned about a situation in which a used razor blade was found in a sealed Fanta bottle. When a man was just about to open the bottle to give to his three-

year-old son, he saw the blade in the drink. After hearing this, I discussed the story with my editor and also made arrangements for a photographer to take pictures from various angles showing the contents of the bottle.

Here was a case of a young boy who could have been killed by this object. I wanted to find out if there were similar cases occurring on the bottling company’s product lines or, at least, investigate how this happened. But the editor did not share my enthusiasm for this story. Later, his lack of interest was explained to me: He’d taken the story to the publisher who had stated emphatically that no such story would be done. The Coca-Cola Company was the largest single advertiser for consumer publications like ours, and its parent company

had the largest advertising budget in Zimbabwe. Weigh the potential loss of advertising against possible harm to people who purchase these drinks, and you can guess which one comes in a distant second in the publisher’s perspective.

Though I’d done everything I could to push for this story to be done, I felt angry, guilty and hopeless, and my view of the publisher and the publication deteriorated.

I’d tried to challenge the editor and ask that the story about this bottle be published, if only on moral grounds. He threw his hands into the air and pleaded impotence given the publisher’s strict instructions. Yet this publication was considered a leader in exposing inequities brought about by the actions of individuals and businesses in Zimbabwe. We held ourselves out as being the fearless and outspoken champions representing the underdogs of society.

After this experience, a feeling of revulsion gripped me and, at the first possible opportunity, I happily closed the door behind me at that paper. I left with an invaluable lesson—never would I hesitate in speaking up and challenging those in authority when something wrong is occurring.

There are numerous instances when journalists’ personal conscience is tested. Challenges that journalists confront and obligations they hold must be revisited as a way of reminding them of the important social contract they’ve made with society. ■

*Mark G. Chavunduka, a 2000 Nieman Fellow, is editor of The Zimbabwe Standard.*

[Chavunduka remained in poor health after his arrest in 1999. He died in 2002 at age 37. For more information, click here.](#)

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**I left with an invaluable lesson—never would I hesitate in speaking up and challenging those in authority when something wrong is occurring.**

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