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## Journalism as a High Profession in Spite of Itself

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## Journalism as a High Profession in Spite of Itself

The famous early newspaperman James Gordon Bennett, the editor of the *New York Herald* and one of the founders of that first popular medium the penny press, back in 1836 at the start of the age of mass communication, described the role of newspapers as he saw it:

Books have had their day—the theaters have had their day—the temple of religion has had its day. A newspaper can be made to take the lead in all of the great movements of human thought and of human civilization. A newspaper can send more souls to Heaven, and save more from Hell, than all the churches or chapels in New York—besides making money at the same time.

I suggest that the practitioners in any institution so central and so powerful as to supplant churches, schools, books, and the theater, and to take the lead in all these great movements of human thought and civilization, are part of a high calling, a demanding profession—whether they know it or not, whether their institution admits it or not.

It is true that the journalist is a different sort of “professional” in a different sort of institution from the doctor or lawyer. In traditional theory, if not in much of current practice, doctors and lawyers are independent professionals, making moral choices of great importance on their own—holding in their hands, often literally, the life and well-being of another. Modern journalism, on the other hand, is a collective enterprise, with wire services, assignment desks, city editors, editorial conferences, make-up desks, advertisers, owners of chains, enormous pressures of time and space, and commercial breaks for words from our sponsor. The modern journalist is not an independent agent, although he may once long ago have been so, when he himself owned and printed and reported his own little *Bootstrap Bugle*. He or she is now a hired employee of a profit-seeking business: WISH-TV, *The Washington Post*, *The Bloomington Herald Telephone*, CBS News, *Time Magazine*, *The Laramie Republican-Boomerang*, *The Associated Press*, Hearst’s *Journal American*, *The Des Moines Register*. He is hired, fired, promoted, demoted, assigned, edited, by the national desk, the front office, the tenth floor, the executive editor, the owner. Although an individual in his niche may make decisions of importance he makes them within the boundaries, and under the impe-

tus, of that collectivity. Peter Arnett made many very important decisions about his reporting from Baghdad under Saddam Hussein's thumb during the Gulf War; but CNN in Atlanta made the fundamental decision to keep him there, to carry his reports, and to surround them with disclaimers.

And although the stream of publicity to which an individual reporter or editor makes his contribution can cause both harm and good to individuals—a recurrent issue in the journalism ethics texts—the larger issues about the effects of that publicity are more diffuse, remote, and collective. For a journalist the moral shape of the situation is collective on both sides: news organization/public instead of independent professional/client. The reader/viewer/citizen/member of the public for whom the newsperson's work is done is not the same as the patient/client for whom the doctor's or lawyer's work is done. Journalists do not have a special obligation—creating bond with a particular human being: this is my patient, this is my client. (This is my *source* is obviously a different relationship.) When a journalist says to himself, like Kierkegaard only differently, you are that One, my reader, he says it, having hoped for a larger circulation, in despair. In fact if a journalist has a client—the Governor, the local Daddy Warbucks, the Gas Company, or the Citizens Against Outer Space—then he has failed to meet a prime responsibility of his profession. First among those responsibilities is exactly to reject such antecedent and particularized obligations on his mind and his powers of observation and interpretation. His obligations, as he rightly says—although he often does not put it in terms of obligation—are exactly and almost uniquely to the whole public.

Lawyers and doctors have a formal and explicit obligation to Law or Medicine that transcends their own immediate material interests. So do the members of the classic professions which have, in varying mixtures, a more centrally communal purpose than those independent professions: the armed services, the civil service, the diplomatic corps, the university, the church. These professions, like the independent professions, all have some means of explicit self-definition, of exclusion and inclusion, by which that larger obligation is expressed. But there is no such profession-defining hurdle, or formally stated

larger moral obligation, controlling journalism. There are no ordination vows. There is no oath of public service. Although the journalist appeals to the Constitution—that is, the First Amendment—more perhaps than any other professional, he takes no formal oath to uphold it. There is no bar exam, no license, no tenure apparatus, no teachers certificate, no barrier set up either by the state or by the profession itself. Indeed, the faintest hint that there might be such an institution-defining barrier to entry would cause First Amendment fits in an American journalist. Hired by a newspaper, a magazine, a radio station, one is a member of the press without further examination of any kind. In Lou Cannon's fine book, *Reporting*, he mentions an ability to write quickly, and a general interest in public affairs, as the only requirements for a journalist. He presents a picture of Ben Bradlee making a decision about hiring on the basis of a "hunch." One would not want to be operated on by a neurosurgeon hired in the same way as are journalists.

Just as there is no entrance requirement for the profession, so there is no decisive institutional reprimand. How does one disbar a journalist? A doctor can have his license to practice revoked; a Roy Cohn may be disbarred; the Bishops may defrock priests. A Janet Cooke who gets caught is fired and shamed, but not many desks away, two Metro reporters who cut many corners are heroes (and millionaires). There is no institutional procedure by which she (or they) can be appraised, reprimanded, maybe even put out of the profession—or, indeed, defended and exonerated.

There is also no body of knowledge that every member is required to master: no formal body of doctrine, no sacred text or formidable shelf of Church Fathers, nor any Book of Common Prayer; no roomful of law books. There is no way that a journalist can attain his vocational objective, as a few able people once did in another field—by "reading law." There is nothing to read. There is no formally tested skill. The traditional notion of the journalist has been that of the general assignment reporter who can cover anything. If he can cover a fire, he can cover city hall; if he can cover the Cubs in Chicago then he can cover the State Department in Washington; if she can cover state politics in Topeka she can cover arms control negotiations in Helsinki. To be sure there are now a number of specialized reporters

in the wealthier news organizations: a handful of foreign correspondents, reporters on the Supreme Court, specialists of other kinds. But even among them advanced substantive knowledge is a rarity (Cannon quotes a journalist's description of a foreign correspondent as a general assignment reporter with dysentery). It is one of the legitimate criticisms of journalism in a very complicated modern world that this substantive competence has no formal institutional undergirding, is not very widespread, and is vulnerable to the industry's economic logic.

The news business developed, in place of distinct bodies of substantive knowledge, the concept of the "beat," an external idea, requiring exposure, and go-getting use of shoe leather, taxis, and the telephone, rather than books and study. Journalists in general would of course celebrate and defend that difference, sneering a bit at mere book-learning, at punditry, at "thumb sucking" essays. Critics would say that defensive imbalance is a fault in journalism, as it is, measured against what the logic of its situation requires of it.

All this means that journalism schools—like Columbia and Missouri and Medill School at Northwestern—are not like West Point, the Yale Law School, or the Jewish Theological Seminary; they are not the scene of the moral formation of most journalists. Many top reporters proudly tell you that they never took a journalism course. Even today, with the considerable upgrading of professional journalistic training, editors will still often say, to the dismay of journalism school deans, that they would rather hire an undergraduate with a history or an English or a political science major than a graduate of a journalism school. (In the old days, reporters did not "major" in anything, not having gone to college.)

One reason for the intellectually and morally underdeveloped character of journalism is its recent origin and its rapidly changing shape. Medicine and Law have codes and theories reaching back to Hippocrates, Hammurabi, and Solomon. A human got sick, presumably not long after human life itself appeared millennia ago; the first "member of the healing professions" presumably appeared shortly thereafter. Systems of "justice" and "law" appeared with the first organized societies, indeed as part of what it meant for them to be organized. The soldier may have appeared even earlier, and some kind

of priest was right there in the beginning, and everywhere, too. The teacher and the scholar can trace their beginnings in the West to Athens at least, and find their counterparts in almost all societies, and particular schools and universities reach back into the medieval period. And all of those ancient professions had centuries for thinkers to ruminate upon and codify what it was that they were supposed to do.

In contrast to all this ubiquity and antiquity journalism did not emerge until very recently indeed. Just yesterday the modern means of communication did not exist. Young people in the television era think that just after God divided the light from darkness, and created the earth and water and every living thing that moveth upon the earth, He created the three American commercial television networks, each with its own anchor persons and prime time schedule. That is not correct, either as to the timing or as to the agency of their creation.

Speech has existed for 30,000 years, give or take a few millennia; writing for 6,000 years; print for 500 years; the telegraph for only 150 years—nothing by comparison. But with the telegraph, communication was separated from transportation, and the modern era of mass communication began. What hath God wrought indeed! Since the telegraph, the penny press, and the first wire service, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century new developments have tumbled over each other in that rapid and accelerating succession for which metaphors “explosion” and “revolution” are scarcely adequate. To select dates and media somewhat arbitrarily: the steam press 1834; the telegraph 1844; the rotary press 1868; photography 1839; the telephone 1876; the phonograph 1877; roll film 1884; patent on the radio 1891; the movies 1905; the newsreel 1910; photographic journalism 1919; radio broadcasting 1920; wire photos 1924; sound in the movies 1927; American television 1950; British television 1953; color television 1965; cable television 1980. I am as old as radio; my oldest child is as old as television; my first grandchild is as old as the VCR; my youngest grandchild is as old as the Internet. We live in different worlds.

The human race moved, in not much more than a century and a half, from laboriously communicating by written or printed messages carried from place to place by horse-drawn vehicles or by riders on horseback, or by ships and boats, so that you could fight a battle two

weeks after the war was over because the news had not reached you yet, to viewing simultaneously and instantaneously and in motion the resignation of an American president by 111 million people, the final episode of MASH by 125 millions in the United States, and the “Live Aid” telethon concert for Ethiopian Aid on July 13-14, 1985, by 1/3 of the people in the world (1.6 billion human beings). As to wars: we now watch them “live,” as we have come to say. Pictures with sound, motion, and color are sent to us from households in Tel Aviv, and from correspondents in Riyadh and Baghdad, while bombs are actually falling. Also wars on the domestic front: a Los Angeles shoot-out between the cops and the bad guys, where several bad guys were killed, was brought to us as it was happening, interrupting our regularly scheduled programming.

Many of the pioneers of the “media” world as we know it—makers and interpreters—are still alive; all are of recent memory. A college teacher of mine used to speak, rather grandly, of the teaching profession, “bequeathed of Socrates.” Journalism looks back not to Moses, Hippocrates, St. Paul, or Blackstone, but to Joseph Pulitzer, Edward R. Murrow, and James Gordon Bennet.

Partly because of their recent and rapid evolution, and partly because of the complexity of their role, these powerful new means of communication have not yet been fully appropriated intellectually and morally by the modern societies within which they take such a noisy and prominent place; therefore, questions about their telos and proper form are still in flux. Just as twilight settles on one form, so that Minerva can stretch her wings and ready her flight, some new technological marvel dazzles the eastern sky, and she has to subside again, confused. It appears that even before we have intellectually assimilated the institution of the “press” it will have vanished in a buzz of electronics.

Sometimes it is concluded that journalism is not a “profession,” but simply a “craft” or even a “trade.” As journalism, it may be said, is a business, so then the journalist is just a hired hand, like the seller of gas or shirts; or perhaps like the assembly-line maker of pants or potato chips; what the journalist turns out is a commodity, sold in a market, just like theirs. So it may be said—but very few really believe that. I don’t believe it, and I doubt that you do, either; certainly most

true journalists, whatever their surface cynicism, do not in their hearts believe it. Crafts and trades and businesses are usually defined by some narrower human need or desire, often tangible and immediate—for a dishwasher that works, for the plumbing to be fixed, for a Lexus that is suitably impressive, for 57 varieties of ice cream on a summer evening, for term life insurance until the kids are grown. These goods and services—“commodities”—are provided for particular individuals and households—specific customers. Some “commodity” is provided that in theory in our capitalist culture is appropriately disciplined by the organization and morality of the marketplace. One finds out what kind of a mousetrap the market indicates the potential purchasers want, and beats one’s competitors in supplying it.

It is true that journalism in some ways resembles that picture. The market cannot be ignored. Although fewer and fewer American newspapers face competition in their own city, the news organization the journalist works for does face some kind of competition, and is certainly a profit-seeking business, with an owner. In one of the revealing moments in the early history of television news even the avuncular eminence Walter Cronkite, momentarily bumped from the anchor’s chair at CBS when NBC’s Huntley/Brinkley passed CBS for ratings in coverage of the 1956 conventions, said in calm acquiescence to the decision by William Paley: “It’s his candy store.” CBS news people have not too long ago learned again that they work for a candy store that somebody else owns and defines, and NBC news people do, too.

Newspapers at their best, in contrast to the new electronic world, at least had as their primary content and link to the public, news and public affairs rather than entertainment (or entertainment-as-bait-for-commercials). But newspapers, too, are businesses with owners—increasingly owners who live somewhere else, own a string of other papers, and even in some cases have no heart for newspapering. Alex Jones, former media critic of *The New York Times*, believes that what he calls “the glorious decade” between 1977 and 1987 may have ruined the newspaper business. The period was “glorious” because newspaper companies became accustomed to profit margins three times greater than the average for Fortune 500 companies. When the mild 1990 recession hit, followed by sharp hikes in newsprint prices,



says Jones, many publishers panicked, raising advertising and circulation rates and shrinking their editorial staffs. American newspapers have been “downsized” in recent years. With fewer readers, there are fewer advertising and circulation dollars. The fewer revenues, the greater the pressure to cut back in just about the only place in the business left to cut back—the newsroom. Since 1990, 3,100 newsroom jobs have been eliminated, a little more than 5% of the total daily newspaper labor force in this country.

The market may, in some instances, be a boon to reporting. In an earlier era, after World War II, *The New York Herald Tribune* kept its foreign correspondents in order to compete with the *Times*, and the *Times* to some extent did the reverse, and the syndication of the foreign coverage of these two newspapers provided most of the foreign coverage most Americans ever saw. *The Herald Tribune* only stayed alive to provide the competition upon which this whole structure rested as long as the New York department stores continued to advertise in it as well as the *Times*. A. J. Liebling observed: “The country’s present supply of foreign news, therefore, depends largely on how best a number of drygoods merchants in New York think they can sell underwear.”

Liebling’s witticisms notwithstanding, the ink-stained wretches of the newspapers managed to create and to sustain, underneath the ink, the whiskey, and the cynicism, and often against the depredations of the publishers and the advertisers, a certain idealism about what they were doing after all. They wouldn’t be caught saying so, but the press developed a standard of performance, independent of gain, that went back to fundamental conceptions of a democratic or a free society as a great tournament of reason, with the free press as a central participant. American commercial television has no such heritage, and has come to be, without the redeeming ambiguity of the newspaper, the free lunch that is to bring people into the saloon to sell them the beer.

In its comparatively innocent first days in the late Forties and early Fifties network television still had a faint sense of social responsibility—a rudimentary “conscience” very much resembling the cynic’s definition of conscience as the uneasy fear that somebody may be looking. This minimal sense of social responsibility had been brought over from radio. It had been written into law in 1932 in the

provision that stations should operate in the “public interest, convenience, and necessity;” it had been encouraged by the marked public service radio rendered in news and public affairs before and during World War II. To some degree it drew upon the older heritage of the press. Commercial television, arising in part out of that past, and governed in theory by that law, slightly nervous, did at first apply to itself a certain deodorant of community service. But the potential for gain soon proved so vast that that early nod to the larger responsibilities was overwhelmed.

David Halberstam tells the story of Bill Moyers’ departure from CBS. William Paley, who very much wanted him to stay, offered much, and asked what more Moyers wanted. Moyers, frustrated by the network’s limitations, asked for a regular prime-time show much like Murrow had, on a regular schedule and a set hour. Halberstam quotes Paley as saying, “I’m sorry, Bill. I can’t do it any more. The minute is worth too much now.”

Once in a session of “humanists” called by ABC to examine certain programs, those of us who attacked the whole concept of “docudrama,” which mingles fact and fiction in a way we found objectionable, asked the vice president who was in charge why they could not *sometimes* at least go back to the honorable and worthy form of the *documentary*, faithful to its factual grounding. “We tried that,” he answered dismissively, “but got only three million people. Nobody watched it.”

With commercial television the true message is not the one that the audience turns on the set to hear and see, but the one that interrupts the message with we will now take a break for, which comes from our sponsor. The substance came to be designed and judged not on its own merits but by an antecedent purpose, to attract and hold the largest possible audience relevant to sales. ABC scheduled the much anticipated episode of the sitcom “Ellen” in which the starring character “comes out” during the recent May “sweeps.” Despite all the print about the courage it took to have a gay central character on a network program, Tom Shales, the television critic for *The Washington Post*, notes that ABC expected its Nielsen rating for the show to increase from an average of 17 for “Ellen” to 25 to 30 for this episode and consequently boosted its ad rates from \$170,000 to \$335,000 for

a 30-second spot on the show. “Courage”? Although we might expect such blatant commercial opportunism on the entertainment side of television, it has also become widespread on the news side. The nightly news at 6:30 is filled with stories about medical findings (Should women in their 40s receive mammograms?), and interrupted by commercials extolling the virtues of various antacids, feminine hygiene products, and pain killers. Television “programming”—including the news—is not, in the end, what the activity is all about; the shows are merely the bait. The core of the operation is a gigantic bait-and-switch; while the magician directs our attention with his eyes and his voice and the fascinating action of his right hand, his true purpose is carried on under his coat by his left.

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Young journalists who do not know quite who A. J. Liebling was nevertheless can still echo his most often quoted wisecracks—the one about this country guaranteeing freedom of the press to those who own one, and the other about our needing, more than schools for journalists, schools for *publishers*. But the significant clue that journalism is not an ordinary business is that a journalist-to-the-bone like Liebling would write those words, and that journalists today would remember and keep quoting them. They know that journalism has a different kind of moral tension with its commercial base than accompanies the ordinary business that fixes shoes, builds cabinets, makes loans, or sells fudge. These businesses have the obligation to see that the fudge isn’t rancid or poisonous, but the obligation of a profession goes beyond that sort of thing. Even though no formal professional apparatus protects or inculcates it, journalists have a heavy claim upon them that goes well beyond satisfying the accumulation of momentary and surface private desires assembled in the market. In that regard they are like doctors and lawyers and artists and priests and scholars and national security advisors. All of these human undertakings are linked to a content—a moral structure—that precedes and disciplines their response to popularity and the market. In the artist’s case, that “content” may be an aesthetic vision, which the contemporary public may not grasp. A clergyman has an obligation to an historic deposit of faith that antedates and supersedes the notions and desires of today’s congregation—doctrines claimed to be true,

whether people accept them or not, and virtues held to be worthy, whether people achieve them or not. Any serious teacher is governed by obligations to a cultural heritage, which is of lasting value whether students want to learn it or not; if that is neglected, in order to please the whims of today's squirming students, then she is not really a teacher. A scholar has obligations to a heritage and a content and a future about which today's mass public hasn't a clue. It is significant that the old books about nuclear weapons used to muse about the handful of people who grasped the meaning of, and wrote and talked and advised their governments about, nuclear strategy, the metaphor "priesthood"—their obligations were not measured by polls. And so also—it is a primary sign that this activity is a profession, too—the honorable reporter, like a William Shirer in Berlin in the late Thirties, reports what needs to be known even though his readers would rather read the sports and the funnies, and not hear anything about it—even though they complain that he is always reporting bad news.

The implicit moral shape of journalism makes what the journalist produces something more than potato chips. It is true that journalism has not been organized as a profession. It is true that the public does not understand journalism to be, or honor it as, a profession. It is true that journalists today are guilty of many transgressions (so are members of other professions). It is true that journalists themselves often reject the application of the concept "profession," and when they accept it use the word loosely. Still, for all its recent origin and rapid change, and for all the tensions with its commercial base, and for all the shenanigans of yellow journalism, the eighty or ninety year run of newspaper reporting has shown the beginnings of a profession of a very high order indeed—especially since just before, during, and after World War II. In spite of everything, there is planted in people who follow that vocation, by its moral logic, some sense of the worth and value and norms of their calling. So it seems to an outsider. One must hope (not a well supported hope, alas) that that nascent and fragile conception of the free and independent press, honestly reporting, and independently interpreting, the day's events, will not now fade with the fading newspaper, but will be sustained and developed in the age of the new electronic marvels.

Journalism is potentially or ideally a high profession in two ways: it serves high and also fundamental human goods, and its worthy performance makes severe demands upon the higher human powers. What great human good does journalism, by its nature, serve, or ought it to serve? Law and medicine can give great, clear, simple answers to the question: Justice and Health. A soldier and a priest perhaps can give equally short and basic answers. If you asked such a question of journalism, could you come up with so fundamental an answer? Even though the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) code claims Truth as the journalist's purpose, one suspects that when challenged the journalist would cede the larger part of that big word to scientists, philosophers, historians, poets. One remembers the young Walter Lippmann carefully making the distinction between "news" and "truth." But if the journalist should allow others to claim the larger share of Truth he would nevertheless, perhaps demoting it from a capital letter to lower case, and even making it plural, still claim an important slice of the truths—today's truths, as they affect us all, as they bear upon our common life. And as a journalist claims as his responsibility today's truth about the shared things, he claims also to be the chief organized means of its being shared—the chief conduit of the common daily truths, and of their continuing interpretation.

Because journalists themselves always skip directly to their connection to the values of a particular kind of society—a free society, a liberal democracy—it is well to note that the good they serve is wider than the bounds of any particular society. They serve the good of a community-making interchange—of communication itself.

Communication is a fundamental human activity, part of the definition of our humanity. Aristotle's best known sentence is that man is a political animal, or, as it is sometimes translated, a social animal, and the evidence he gives a little further along in the *Politics* is that man is endowed with *speech*. That human beings talk to each other is of the essence of man's social nature which is of the essence of his being human.

One important facet of that essential human communication is the continual stream of sharing of the day's information. E. M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, had to admit that the novel finds its foundation in the rather elemental human desire, like that of your daughter when

you tell her a story at bedtime, to hear a narrative:—to know what happened and then what happened next. In a similar way human beings want to participate in a community by knowing what’s going on, and by talking about it. The fact is that many of us respond to an exciting running story not on its merits as part of the sober conversation of public life but exactly as a story, a narrative from real life full of interest and often of amusement (certain kinds of stories) and material for conversation. When Watergate was over and done and one had to pick up a paper with no new material in it, one felt let down, a little empty.

That raw human curiosity and commonality, one foundation of journalism, is by no means squelched in unfree societies—on the contrary, it is accentuated by being partially denied, and therefore is seen the more clearly to be of our nature. People subjected to such societies find ways to inform each other and learn what is happening, in spite of the efforts of their oppressors—by word-of-mouth, by jokes and Aesopian tales, by underground press, by clustering in secret around radios tuned to the BBC World Service. “News” of a kind seeps out and spreads despite Big Brother’s efforts to suppress it. That tells us something worth underlining about a strong human need and desire. Thus a journalist as a teller of daily events is already a participant in a dignified and honorable human calling, just by serving that need for community, that *good* of communication, before you get to the overtly civic or political purpose. William Earnest Hocking, in one of the rare treatments by a philosopher of this topic, said in his volume in the Hutchins Commission series, that journalism is “The day’s report of itself. . . .”

And again: “it is the permanent word of that day to all the other days.” Though the journalist himself often lacks historical sense, he is inadvertently serving another binding communal need and desire, for a common memory. It is significant that the description of journalism by Philip Graham as the “first draft of history,” is so often quoted. Clifton Daniel described *The New York Times* to a potential employee from the academic world as the newspaper of *record*. Even lesser papers than the *Times* provide a service that has vastly improved the collective memory in accuracy and scope. Academic historians who may be disdainful of the inadequacies of the *contemporary* press nev-

ertheless in their professional role rely heavily on its equivalents (usually inferior) in the *past*. We should all be grateful that the *Chicago Press and Tribune* decided in the autumn of 1858 to assign two twenty-four-year-olds who could manage shorthand to give verbatim reports of the debates that were a part of the Illinois Senatorial campaign of that year, and, also to its rival the *Chicago Times* for importing two more experimental reporters to do the same. (Lincoln pasted these reports in a scrapbook, and a book was published from them.) The event was to become a legend for a nation, but as is not the case with most national legends of pre-journalism days—legends embroidered with fancy and adapted to interest—this one is vindicated and shaped, tied to reality, by an almost verbatim stenographic report, published in newspapers of the rival parties.

Journalists are too quick to tie their work to the overt and immediate political process; although that is important, it is not everything. The muckrakers remain models for many journalists; the adjective “crusading” was in the old days regularly attached to editors and reporters, and since Watergate “investigative reporting” has had an unbelievable vogue. But all of that, worthy as it certainly is under the right disciplinary conditions, is nevertheless a foreshortening of the journalist's full vocation and service, which does not need to move society this way or that in order to fulfill its task. A reporter/editor whose stories reflect the truths of the day is doing something worthy even on days they do not move society an inch. Those who carry on the “communication” of human beings one with another touch our life very near its center.

The institution that does those things can function fully and properly only under conditions of freedom. And under conditions of freedom journalism has the further and distinctive task of going beyond helping to satisfy the universal human desire to share in the community's daily information. It provides the materials for continuing public argument and choice. Journalism has its most solid moral foundation in its ties to the *particular* social order that is governed by such public argument, namely, liberal democracy—and if you don't believe it, just ask an American journalist. Modern large scale free government and the free press, as everybody says—everybody connected with journalism anyway—are inextricably woven together.

The important connection between the democracy and the press was evident from the beginnings of this country. After the federal constitution was written in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay produced, at breakneck speed, their eighty-five articles for *The New York Independent Journal* and *The Advertiser*, trying to persuade the citizenry of New York to persuade the delegates to the State's convention to ratify the Constitution. These articles, even before the series was complete, were bound and sent around to other colonies ("syndicated"); they then became a kind of handbook of argument that the Federalists could use, for example, in their speeches and debates against the Antifederalists in the ratification convention in Virginia.

The carrying on of public discussion in a modern continental republic is made possible by an expanded and vigorous press. In fact, to promote that conversation is the core obligation of journalism in a free society. As we said above, the prime moral claim upon journalism is not that of a particular client or patient (or customer) but almost uniquely, of the public as a whole. We may now add that journalism serves that "public" in a most essential way—a way that defines the public in a free society. It serves the whole people's deliberation about those things they share. The name our forefathers (and *their* forefathers) used for this kind of social order, before the more recent shift to the word "democracy," contained that concept within it—"republican" government, government by mutual deliberation about the *res publicae*, the common or public matters.

A policewoman, for a comparison, serves the "public," too, and is paid by the public to do so, as the journalist is not. The policewoman serves the public's safety, its life, limb, property. If she serves, to the disadvantage of the public safety, something less—her buddies, her racial stereotypes, or a private interest, not to mention the mob—then something is wrong. The journalist, for contrast and to put it a little grandly, serves the public's deliberating *mind*, the public's *conversation*—the materials of public understanding and argument. If he or she serves something less, once again something is wrong.

In this free society journalism serves a public that is not a static entity with a single lasting will—as a controlled press is forced to do, as French Revolutionaries following Rousseau seemed to posit, or,



still less and worse, as the Ein Volk with Ein Fuhrer of a totalitarian state, a manipulated mass goose-stepping to a single drummer. A mob or a mass or a crowd does not deliberate; a public does. In a free society the journalist serves a public that is presumed from the start to differ within itself, containing shifting and differing convictions and interests. (The Americans, like James Madison, were particularly good in grasping this point.) This public has a common mind and will only about the ground rules of disagreement, and only on a few great and occasional matters of policy, for the most part temporarily, and of course voluntarily; it is a public locked in argument with itself. The dual aspect (argument and consent; agreement and disagreement) may be symbolized by a creature whom E. B. White discovered in a children's book by a writer named Laurie Lee: a two-headed sheep that "could sing harmoniously in a double voice and cross question itself for hours."

A skeptical modern temper may be inclined to dissolve that "public" into manipulable demographic subunits and a congeries of contending interests, as it would dissolve the related concept of the rational and conscientious citizen into a bundle of interests and prejudices. But alongside, or entangled with and qualifying, our interests, prejudices, and demographic identities there are our links to all our fellow citizens in the great common life, and our convictions not about our personal good or a group's good but about the public good. That aspect of our lives, that "public," with its good, is a moral postulate of the kind of society we have inherited. The journalist has a particular link to that fundamental republican premise. He and she have not only (like all citizens) a personal tie but also (unlike most others) a close *professional* tie to the public good of this society as self-governing. That tie is rightly celebrated in song, story, editorial, film, stage, slogan, masthead, and First Amendment, but not yet enough in thought and precept.

And what happens now in the age of the television screen? A scribe being handed the first printed book he had ever seen, after thinking about it, pointed to the book and said "This will destroy *that* (pointing to the Cathedral)." The question now is whether this—the television set—will in its turn destroy *that*—the book (and the news-

paper). And then whether that work of destruction will then destroy that—Westminster, mother of Parliaments, or the U. S. Capitol; that is, societies, governed by mutual persuasion, deliberation, the exchange of ideas.

The moral seriousness of journalism springs not only from the importance of the good to be served, but also from the magnified evil that stands there as a constant competing possibility. Those who stand at such a juncture of choice participate in a high profession indeed. “Communication” and the public conversation are very far from being unambiguous goods, as are Health, Justice, Knowledge.

Suppose when speech was invented that first human speaker tells Eve some lies? Uses the symbols on the wall of the cave to subdue her to his will, against her own good? Leaves a report of a buffalo hunt that never existed, and does not record the defeat in battle that did? Uses “communication” to falsify the community’s memory of its life, and invade the consciousness of its members with corrupting symbols?

A central core of the tradition of moral philosophy in the West has of course dealt with the rights and wrongs, the goods and evils, of our speaking to each other. Perhaps it appears especially among the Kantian “deontologists” (with their strict and formal duty, their stern daughter of the Voice of God) and among the Bible-based religious ethics of which perhaps Kant and company are secularized reflections; truth-telling and promise-keeping and letting your yea be yea, as part of treating other persons as ends but not as means.

Communicating the truth, using such a rigorous standard, has never been easy, but the evils that “communication” can bring explode in the modern world, exactly with the means of communication that make modern journalism possible. “Propaganda” in its modern sense comes into the language, followed by phrases like the “engineering of consent.” A vast apparatus of word, sound, and image now creates those “pictures in our heads,” as they were called by Walter Lippman, by which we interpret the world, including our responsibilities in it. And they can be warped and manipulated pictures.

Perhaps one can say, if one has a sufficiently Augustinian view of these matters, that evil is a perverted good, that the modern perversities of manipulation are still to be understood as the perversion of the

fundamental good of communication, but the norm then is a truth-telling and person-respecting communication, a community-preserving and community-constituting communication that is by no means a description of much of the flow that comes daily from the modern engines of publicity.

The extraordinary journalist who chose the name George Orwell—something of a moral model for many good journalists—had an early and unusually firm grasp of the corruption that these new means of communication made possible. He returned from the the Spanish Civil War to find an ideological press in London reporting whole battles that were never fought and failing to report actual battles in which he himself had participated. He tried himself to tell what he knew of what had happened in his remarkable book of reportage, *Homage to Catalonia*,—with a detail about factions in the Spanish parties that his friends told him were tedious and would put off the readers, but which he responded were the reason he wrote the book. He was going to get it right, very much including points that went against the side he fought on. Orwell carried that perception and that moral resolution on through the rest of his work, including the famous essay “Politics and the English Language” and of course *1984*. In the latter as you remember Winston Smith works in the history factory obliterating events and personages who have become ideologically obsolete and inserting new ones who have come to party fashion.

Many have written, as Orwell of course certainly does too, about tortures and police knocks on the door and concentration camps, but Orwell centered his condemnation of totalitarianism on this deeper aspect, that of mind and word and memory, with a clarity that unfortunately the public has somewhat missed. It remains a perception of deepest importance to journalism. (Newspeak and Doublethink, his rather too blatant inventions, and his writing name itself turned into an adjective, have become slogans approaching in mindlessness the phenomenon they were intended to protest.)

It is to be noted that neither the good to be defended (truth-telling) nor the evil to be condemned (the perversion of truth) have boundaries exactly coinciding with the United States, or the liberal democracies. The ideal comes out of a long past, and coincides with something deep in the human spirit (telling each other truly what has

happened) and should not be vulgarly claimed for an ideological political purpose. (If you do that you shrink and damage the effort to achieve the ideal and in the end destroy it; you are doing something contradictory to it, something that is, with deep irony—let us use the word here—“Orwellian.”) Human beings sought to serve that ideal long before there were today’s forms of social-economic organization, and do so in places our form does not exist; in unfree societies the effort to serve it seeps out around the edges in moving and instructive ways. And meanwhile our own effort to achieve this, for reasons going beyond human frailty, falls very far short of achieving it. Nevertheless that ideal is about as near as you can get to the moral center of the kind of society we have intended.

In an earlier essay Orwell had quoted a key phrase from Jefferson—truth is great and will prevail (Jefferson, echoing Milton and Locke and anticipating Holmes and Brandeis, had gone on to say that truth needs no weapons except free argument and debate). But Orwell quoted Jefferson’s central republican conception not to describe a settled accomplishment but to indicate a new anxiety. “It is quite possible,” he wrote, “that we are descending into an age in which two and two will make five if the leader says so. One has only to think of the sinister possibilities of the radio, state-controlled education and so forth to realize that ‘truth is great and will prevail’ is more a prayer than an axiom.” He wrote that in 1939—before the full program of the Nazis and Stalinists was widely known, and also before the arrival of commercial television blanketing a nation, of sophisticated polling and marketing, and of the domination of public discourse by the logic of advertising and the manipulative skill of public relations in Jefferson’s own country.

Because of this close tie to the conversation of the society, journalism differs institutionally from the other professions, and therefore—if we are thinking of “ethics”—requires even more than others a social or institutional ethic—an ethic-for-the-system, a moral understanding of the profession itself—accompanying the working out of rules and the solving of quandaries for individual practitioners.

Let us make the distinction between individual ethics and social ethics with two easy examples. One may imagine that, in the last days of slavery in the Old South some conscientious slaveholders worked

out an elaborate code of right action toward one's slaves, with many references to the Greeks, and many careful moral distinctions; but beyond all that there was the issue of the justice of slavery as an institution. Or another example: moralists know the distinction, in the ethics of war, between *jus in bello* and *jus ad bellam*, justice in the conduct of war, whatever its purpose and beginning, and that other, larger, question, the justice of the war itself. There were, many say, deeds that were to be condemned in the allied conduct of World War II, even though the war itself was just, and, conversely, there were imperatives of conduct in the Vietnam War, that were, or should have been if they were not, observed even though (in the view of many) the war itself could not be justified. I am using these examples not to raise extraneous arguments, or to hint that "the media" is an institutional evil like slavery or war, but simply to distinguish the two levels or kinds of moral judgment. The point about journalism—not to mention the larger world of "the media"—is that its institutional shape, meaning, telos, is not as nearly settled as it may be for the historic professions.

I said that the news profession is fundamentally a high vocation not only in the elevation of the human goods (and potentially, evils) it serves but also in the human capacities, or attributes, upon which it draws. It is an exacting vocation, inadvertently produced by the modern industrial and democratic world. Even the powers and abilities the press itself has long recognized in itself are not paltry: to make factually accurate observations (accuracy, accuracy, accuracy—Joseph Pulitzer); to select swiftly which events to make accurate observations *about*; to produce, rapidly, a piece of writing accessible to a general public reporting what has been observed—to GET THE STORY and WRITE THE STORY. Those are no small things. And as journalism goes beyond "hard" news and the 5Ws the intellectual requirements increase. Even though a concrete-minded abstraction-avoiding anti-intellectualism runs deep in American journalism, the practice of the profession nevertheless requires a considerable intellectual capability of a kind—mental as well as physical energy, quickness, powers of observation and expression. In some quarters now powers of critical reflection are at least admitted, if not required. Already back in 1919 Max Weber was explaining to his hearers/readers for his great

address/essay on *Politics as Vocation* that journalism is both a more worthy and a more exacting line of work than they might think: producing the stuff, every day and on a deadline, with some cogency.

As newspapers and the other forms grew and developed, and became more central to the society, they acquired the duty to bring to the citizenry not only the “fact” in “the news” but, in the words of the Hutchins Commission, “the truth about the fact.” That, too, is not easy. The great English poet John Milton in the *Areopagitica* makes use of the Egyptian myth of Osiris, whose body was chopped to pieces by his brother the usurper, after which Isis searched for the pieces of his body—so the “sad friends of Truth” search the universe for pieces of her body (Truth’s) to put them back together. Truth, Milton said, is like that: its pieces scattered to the far corners of the earth, and nowhere found whole, and many of us with a part of it, and she will not be reassembled whole, Lords and Commons (he is addressing the first Puritan Parliament, the Long Parliament, vainly as it turns out) until Christ Jesus comes again, or as we might say a little less devoutly, until the end of time. But a journalist must seek truth and still meet a deadline.

The press should provide, the Hutchins people said, a “truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events, in a context which gives them meaning.” That commission—after almost half a century still the most significant of American efforts to interpret the responsibility of the press—stipulated, further, that the press should project a “representative picture of the constituent groups in the society,” and, as perhaps the most powerful “educational” instrument, it should present and clarify “the goals and values of the society.” However one might want to amend or qualify the Hutchins list, whatever would reasonably remain would call for its performance upon the disciplined use of formidable human powers. Something it has in common with the high professions.

It seems that neither the public nor, for the most part, journalists themselves fully comprehend this point. Journalism does not obtain the formal respect—respect for the ideal if not for the present practitioners—that is given in sober moments to doctors; to judges and attorneys who live largely in the law and are officers of the Court; to scholars, professors, and teachers; to priests, preachers, and rabbis; to

soldiers, especially generals; to ambassadors, diplomats, and foreign service officers. To be sure, many of these have lost altitude (and the media have played a role in causing the decline) but the journalist never had the altitude in the first place. Look at the picture of the journalist in Anthony Trollope's novels, or in Dorothy Sayers' mysteries. And now, in late twentieth century America, the sizzling hostility to the "media" is a major fact.

This popular hostility to "the media," a striking phenomenon of our time, means that journalists as such (at least until they become "celebrities" and effectively cease to be journalists) are not highly regarded by the broad populace; their troubles getting access to the war front are not our problems, and if they are shot or captured it does not move us in the same way as if that happened to a member of the armed services. What were they doing there anyway? When politicians use the "media" as a foil, or avoid or manipulate the press, the complaints from the press fall on deaf ears. As one observer of the press put it, "there is no downside" for ignoring, manipulating, restricting, or assailing the "media."

The popular indifference and hostility toward the press comes partly from the atrophying sense of public life in general over the decades of consumer culture since World War II. To some extent it spills back onto newsgathering, including newspapers, from the lumping together into one thing of all of what we have come to call the "media." Newspapers get some of the blame for the sins of that different medium, television. Partly it is partisan and ideological, manipulated to serve specific political ends. But partly—it is important to grant—it springs from genuine faults in the press—hidden cameras in Food Lion, swarms of reporters on the lawn, tabloid intrusions into private life, harm to individuals, shortcuts to get the story, insensitive questions, and all the other misconduct that we may rightly criticize, which become the more menacing as the perceived power of the media, taking over the culture through the engine of entertainment, becomes greater. Even though the printed press at the top is better on the whole than it once was, the combination with new means of communication makes the whole complex a more formidable power, and its faults more glaring and disturbing.

And attacking the “media” has become a device and a habit. There is indeed a “feeding frenzy” phenomenon in the modern media, in which waves of reporters pile on some more or less public figure whose private life has been declared fair game. But there is also another feeding frenzy, or something like it, in the populace, with the “media” as victim. The broad populace is not likely easily to comprehend that journalism is a worthy enterprise with an exacting discipline.

Meanwhile American journalists themselves often seem to an outsider not to comprehend that too well either. They underestimate the demands of their role at the same time that some of them, in a different way, *overestimate* themselves. The arrogance of a member of the “press,” claiming privileges by citing the First Amendment, the Free Press, the Public’s Right to Know, slapping down these phrases like a trump card, is all too familiar.

The business world justifies its irresponsibility by a debased reference to “free enterprise,” to “Adam Smith” and a “free market” in which if everyone pursues gain with unrestrained greed the result will nevertheless *somehow* be, by the working of the celebrated invisible hand, to the good of all. The political world justifies its irresponsibility by a debased reference to checks and balances, to James Madison, and interest balancing interest, so that if every group pushes its interest to the utmost the result will somehow be liberty and justice for all. So also when the press operates with a debased conception of the public liberty, the mutual persuasion and exchange of ideas, put forward by the great tradition symbolized by Milton, Locke, Jefferson, Mill, Brandeis—if we give full publicity to whatever we can get our hands on the result will somehow be a service to democracy. None of these somehow work; they are in each case false to their claimed origin and evidence of a thoughtless and convenient (that is self-serving) laziness. The arrogance on the part of journalists is both institutional and, in some few cases, individual. The latter has been much increased by the advent of television, which has made certain journalists, in stark contrast to the ink-stained wretches of the past, rich and famous, so that they are regarded not only by the populace but by themselves as more important than the people and subjects they report.



But together with some puffed up personal self-importance and rudeness there is more generally in the whole body of journalists a curious underestimation of the demands and significance of their role. I am one of two American academics ever to have taught a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar for practicing journalists; both the other teacher and I came to believe that journalists tended modestly to underestimate at least their social idealism and perhaps also the intellectual difficulty of their work. American journalism has such a heavy anti-intellectual heritage that it has a hard time articulating, perhaps even understanding, its own high demands. The general style, certainly in the *Front Page* past, and to some extent even yet, is, as A. J. Liebling once remarked, not to talk about anything more serious than the temperature of the beer. But what you are not willing to talk about in large abstract terms, and what your work nevertheless represents, may be very different.

Without withdrawing any of the criticisms of contemporary journalism that are scattered through this article, one must add this counterbalancing impression: the best parts of the news business have an ethos that is at least comparable to, perhaps superior to, professions that have a longer history, a more learned tradition, and higher pretensions. News people, as we have said, are not given to high-falutin' talk, so the idealism you find among them may be understated, off-hand, or covered with a hard-boiled exterior, but that idealism does seem to an outsider to be there, fairly often, all the same.

Suppose you use this test: do the members of the profession have soaked into their being a commitment to its telos—the human good it serves—deep enough to cause them to pursue it even without reward, even at risk? Even if there is no money in it, or fame or glory? There are certainly many examples, in the age of world wars and American empire, of journalists in Soweto and Mississippi and Vietnam and the Middle East and Bosnia and on many front lines, risking (and losing) their lives to fulfill the claims of their profession, usually without much recognition by the public they are serving. To be sure, the most extreme situations can be misleading with respect to more ordinary life; sometimes we can rise to heroic performance in a sufficiently dramatized situation without having the stuff in us to perform worthily in the day-after-day continuity of prosaic small decisions. Perhaps

that would be especially true of a profession, like journalism, that is not without its strain of romanticism. But even back on the home front one can often find in reporters and editors, along with all the human frailties one can find everywhere, something more.

If “conscience” be the “generalized other,” then the “other” whom a good journalist has generalized within himself or herself is not the all purpose member of the public, because the public now does not understand the press’s role as well as it does other professions; in assessing the moral claims on the press the broad public and the journalist diverge more sharply than is the case with respect to professions like law, medicine, or soldiering. The “others” whom a journalist has internalized to form his or her conscience is more likely to include the reporters and editors he or she has known, who have imparted a mostly unarticulated sense of journalistic responsibility. As a physician may have been so deeply imbued by his moral formation with a devotion to physical health and life to find in himself something that balks at anything resembling euthanasia, so American journalists taken in bulk do seem to have planted in them, to a sufficient degree that a critical outsider can observe it, a journalistic conscience that guides and impels them. It is that internalized set of purposes, ideals and restraints, largely taken over from one’s peers, that is the important locus of the morals of most professions, but particularly of this insufficiently institutionalized and insufficiently appreciated one. Such worthy commitment to a high public purpose as one may find in the press is the more admirable as it is carried out in the teeth of public misunderstanding.

But the point in the end is not to assess the actual moral quality of today’s journalists, as compared, say, to lawyers, or to anyone else. It is enough to say that alongside everything else you can find in journalism as it is—plenty to criticize of course—there is also something worthy. And in any case the moral logic of the journalist’s situation demands something worthy. If not in each story, in bulk this daily journalism is of great importance—and growing importance—to our common life, now world-wide. The journalistic institutions deal every day with the shaping winds of culture, and have a very large part in determining what the human landscape shall become.

*Journalism as a High Profession in Spite of Itself*

An earlier version of “Journalism as a High Profession in Spite of Itself” was originally presented February 18, 1997, at the “Freedom and Responsibility in a New Media Age” conference organized by the Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility. Other speakers and topics included:

“The Hutchins Commission - Fifty Years Later”

Everette Dennis, Ph.D., The Freedom Forum

“In Your Face: Consuming Images”

Carol Adams, M. Div., Author

“Censorship in the New Media Age”

Roger Newman, J.D., New York University

“The New Media: The Internet, Democracy, Free Speech and the Management of Temperance”

Richard O. Mason, Southern Methodist University

“Instant Decision Making in the Global Village”

Ed Turner, Cable News Network

“From Muckraking to Buckraking: Journalism, Superstars, and the Public Interest”

Jill Abramson, *The Wall Street Journal*



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