

civil rights and compassion, advocacy groups . . . defend these people's rights to continue their disruptive behavior."

In October 1989, police and transit authorities launched an effort to get subway vagrants under control. Homeless advocates immediately objected that "'nooks and crannies' should be available for the homeless to do as they pleased, that is, to live in, and that passive panhandling

should be allowed." In January 1990, a federal judge ruled that subway panhandling was a First Amendment right. The decision was later overturned, but the battle over disorder in the subways goes on. If it is lost, Kelling writes, "The ultimate victims will be the working classes and the poor—bereft of [transportation] options, but then even more vulnerable to the predations of hoodlums and thugs."

PRESS & TELEVISION

*A Kind Word
For TV*

"The Impact of Television Viewing on Mental Aptitude and Achievement: A Longitudinal Study" by Steven L. Gortmaker, Charles A. Salter, Deborah K. Walker, and William H. Dietz, Jr., in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Winter 1990), Inst. for Social Research, P.O. Box 1248, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48016.

Many parents are sure that TV is rotting their children's minds. The average American youngster spends more than 15 hours a week in front of the TV set, so that would mean a lot of wasted brainpower. Not to worry, say Gortmaker, acting chairman of the Department of Behavioral Sciences at Harvard's School of Public Health, and his colleagues.

The researchers scrutinized National Health Examination Survey data on 1,745 children who were studied twice: in 1963-65, when they were ages 6-11, and then again in 1966-70, when they were 12-17. In the earlier years, the youngsters watched an average of about two hours of television a day; by the late '60s, they were watching nearly three hours a day.

At first glance, the amount of TV viewed *did* seem to be having a malign effect. Among the children 12 and older, the more TV the youths watched, the lower

were their scores on intelligence, reading, and arithmetic tests. However, the causal connection turned out to be an illusion. When the children's test scores from the earlier years were taken into account, it seemed that the children who were *already* scoring low then simply tended to watch more television later. And when other pertinent factors, such as parents' socioeconomic status, were taken into account, the connection between extensive TV viewing and lowered cognitive abilities all but completely vanished.

This finding agrees with that of an extensive 1986 study of U.S. teenagers. (Other studies, which lent some support to popular fears, suffered from various shortcomings, according to Gortmaker and colleagues.) Of course, while youngsters who watch a great deal of TV may not be *losing* their minds, that doesn't rule out the possibility that they are filling them with junk.

*All the Fluff
That Fits*

"When Readers Design the News" by Carl Sessions Stepp, in *Washington Journalism Review* (Apr. 1991), 4716 Pontiac St., College Park, Md. 20740-2493.

Newspapers are in trouble. Only 24 percent of Americans under 35 read yesterday's paper, according to a 1990 Times Mirror survey, compared with 67 percent

in 1965. "Declining penetration [of the market] and declining profits are giving editors and publishers a jolt," said Seymour Topping, director of editorial devel-

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opment at the New York Times Company. As a result, they are reshaping their newspapers to give readers the "news" they are thought to want, rather than the news they might be thought to need. "News is what our readers say it is," the *Wausau (Wis.) Daily Herald's* managing editor told his shocked staff.

"The new reader-friendly journalism," writes Stepp, a journalism professor at the University of Maryland, "elevates lifestyle issues, local 'chicken-dinner' items and almost anything relevant to young people

and baby boomers, and downplays items perceived as boring, particularly routine government coverage." At the *Orange County (Calif.) Register*, reporters' "beats" now include shopping malls and the car culture. At the Rochester, N.Y. *Democrat and Chronicle*, the editor admitted, "We're not as nose-to-the-grindstone on City Hall and the county legislature. . . . [We] still cover them, but [not] in the nitty-gritty way we used to." And the *Wausau Daily Herald's* managing editor, Steve Crosby, says coverage of government has been re-

Covering the War

A Survey of Recent Articles

Almost no one, it seems, is entirely happy about American journalism's coverage of the Persian Gulf War—except the Bush administration and the U.S. military, the Cable News Network (CNN), and, from all evidence, the American public. "[The] most powerful images of this war were of triumphant technology," Daniel Hallin of the University of California complains in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (May 1991). The potent images—and perhaps the reaction at home—would have been quite different, he points out, "if the cameras [had been] on the ground, where the bombs landed." Yet, he adds, that is seldom possible in "a technological war, especially one in which most of the dying is on one side."

Even so, according to the Center for Media and Public Affairs' *Media Monitor* (Apr. 1991), the images most often televised on the major networks' evening news shows from Jan. 17 to Feb. 27 were of "damage and injuries inflicted on civilians," in Iraq and elsewhere. The center counted 1,217 individual camera shots of civilian damage—almost 30 a night. Nearly one in five were of human casualties.

It was precisely so that he could tell viewers about civilian casualties that Iraqi authorities permitted CNN's Peter Arnett to remain in Baghdad for weeks after the first bombs fell on Jan. 17—as the veteran correspondent himself later acknowledged. *New York Times* TV critic Walter Goodman writes in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (May–June 1991) that Arnett's reports "never contradicted the Iraqi line."

Yet, skeptical or not, reports from the enemy's capital were only a limited part of journal-

ism's war story. The overall coverage, according to critics such as Hallin, reflected the U.S. military's effort to "manage" the media in much the same way a modern presidential candidate and his aides do—"releasing carefully controlled doses of information, setting up carefully planned photo opportunities, and minimizing reporters' access to any other source of information." The public did not seem to mind. A Times Mirror survey in late January, cited in *Columbia Journalism Review* (Mar.–Apr. 1991), indicated that eight in 10 Americans approved of the war coverage—and nearly six in 10 said the military should put even tighter restrictions on the press.

Journalists chafed under the constraints of the pool system, which had been worked out last year by the Pentagon with the cooperation of major news organizations. It "encouraged the most docile sort of pack journalism," charges Peter Schmeisser in the *New Republic* (Mar. 18, 1991). "Only 160 reporters were allowed near the front lines, and these had to travel in groups . . . with military public affairs officers close behind. The most gripping reports came from correspondents who violated ground rules and hitched up with Egyptian or Saudi units."

Not all news organizations were upset about the coverage. When the major TV networks "lost their communications links from Baghdad in those crucial first hours, CNN was able to keep its line open and crackling with reports" from Arnett and colleagues, notes Patrick Mott in the *Quill* (Mar. 1991). The dramatic feat elevated CNN's status, but did not do

duced so much that "the mayor calls and complains."

"Reader-focused journalism" has been taken up as a cause at the Knight-Ridder chain's 29 dailies. "I've never heard so many editors talking about readers, thinking about readers . . .," said Jennie Buckner, vice president for news. "It doesn't mean dumbing down. It means a stronger push for clarity." Readers want much more than clarity, however. One study of 450 readers found that they generally deemed articles boring unless they had a

prior interest in the subject.

Editors such as John Walter of the *Atlanta (Ga.) Journal* and *Constitution* pooh-pooh claims that newspapers are being dumbed down and argue that highfalutin journalists just lost touch with everyday concerns. Starting in the late 1960s, newspapers moved away from the interests of their readers, Walter said. "Stories lengthened. Attitudes toward stories changed. And we . . . became so convinced of our mission to save the world and comment soberly on it that we veered away from

much to help viewers understand the war.

For the rival news divisions of ABC, NBC, and CBS, writes Jon Katz, former executive producer of the *CBS Morning News*, in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (Mar.-Apr. 1991), the war proved, despite soaring ratings, "an economic as well as editorial disaster." The cost of covering the war skyrocketed, while advertisers, "unwilling to associate their products with war, defected in droves." The radical conclusion was clear, in Katz's view: The major networks "can't afford to be in the breaking news business any more."

Newspapers could not hope to match the drama of the early television coverage, but they launched a strong effort to compensate with bountiful graphics, "sidebar" stories, explanatory pieces—and perspective. The *New York Times* began to display "the same breadth and authority" that it had in covering the revolution in Eastern Europe in 1989, comments Peter Braestrup, director of communications at the Library of Congress (and *WQ* founding editor), in the *New Republic* (Feb. 11, 1991). By the second week of the war, writes the *Washington Journalism Review's* Thomas J. Colin (Mar. 1991), it appeared to many observers "that newspapers, with their well-rounded, graphic packages, had decisively recaptured the story from television."

Yet supplying readers with genuine perspective on the war was far from easy. Pentagon

restrictions were only part of the problem. Many young journalists had no prior military experience. "They're all bright [and] energetic enough, but this [for them] is like landing on Mars," Braestrup, a veteran Vietnam war correspondent, told Richard Valeriani in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (Mar.-Apr. 1991). Ignorant also of history, the reporters concentrated on "high-tech stories" or else on "'boo-hoo journalism,' that is, asking, How do you feel? not What do you know?"

The military, however, harbored its own illusions, as Braestrup also notes. "A lot of the military are living a myth—that TV news had a decisive effect [on] public support for the war in Vietnam." Public opinion surveys conducted during the Korean and Vietnam wars indicate otherwise. "In Korea, you had censorship and no TV. In Vietnam, you had [TV and no censorship]. Public support for each war fell at roughly the same rate."

Nevertheless, the Vietnam myth left "today's officer corps [with] a loathing for the press," retired Marine Lt. Gen. Bernard E. Trainor, a former *New York Times* military correspondent, writes in *Parameters* (Dec. 1990). But "the roots of the tension are in the nature of the institutions." Both the military and the free press are essential to national well-being, but "the problem of minimizing the natural friction between the two is a daunting one." And, one might add, is likely to remain so.



what we had." Reporters and editors, he said, used to be "of the public. But we got overeducated and forgot. Now, with embarrassment, with little apologetic titters, we're gathering up the courage to go back."

Critics, however, decry the trend. "You might as well not have newspapers if you can't give people the news they need to live full decent lives," Columbia University journalism professor Melvin Mencher said.

Editors "taking these paths, in a democratic society, are [not] giving people the news they need to give informed consent."

The publishers and editors who are trying to give the public what they think it wants are hoping that their newspapers thus will become more vital to readers. But, Stepp observes, the danger is that as newspapers provide less and less real news, people may find the newspapers even more dispensable.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

New Age Nonsense

"The New Age Movement: No Effort, No Truth, No Solutions" by Christopher Lasch, in *New Oxford Review* (Apr. 1991), 1069 Kains Ave., Berkeley, Calif. 94706.

The New Age movement "invites a mixture of ridicule and indignant alarm," University of Rochester historian Christopher Lasch observes, but the discontents it addresses are "supremely important"—and hence deserve a better response than the New Age one.

The movement's central teaching is "that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as it works for you." Actress-author Shirley MacLaine and other New Age enthusiasts have whipped up an eclectic mix of meditation, positive thinking, faith healing, environmentalism, mysticism, acupuncture, astrology, extrasensory perception, spiritualism, vegetarianism, organic gardening, ancient mythologies, chiropractic, herbal medicine, and other ingredients.

But something vital is missing, Lasch contends. While the New Age concoction may occasionally provide temporary spiritual relief, it "cannot bring about the equivalent of a religious conversion, a real change of heart . . . [or] even an intellectual conversion to a new point of view capable of standing up against rigorous questioning." What is missing, he says, is "spiritual discipline—submission to a body of teachings that has to be accepted even when it conflicts with immediate interests or inclinations and [that] cannot

constantly be redesigned to individual specifications." Genuine religion, by contrast with the New Age substitute, aims to produce not inner peace so much as "a sense of falling short of an absolute ethical ideal," with the result being "as much spiritual discomfort and even anguish as emotional security."

Nevertheless, the "intuition" underlying the New Age movement must be taken seriously, Lasch says. This intuition is "that mankind has lost the collective knowledge of how to live with dignity and grace; that this knowledge includes a respect not just for nature but for the nurturant activities our society holds in such low esteem; and that man's future depends on a renewal of prematurely discarded traditions of thought and practice. Those traditions [provided] answers to old questions about the meaning and purpose of human life, questions our own society has unwisely chosen to ignore as either unanswerable or unimportant (or both)."

Lasch argues that the New Age movement is best understood as a revival of the second-century heresy of gnosticism—"the belief that the material world was created by evil deities and that salvation lies in the soul's escape from the flesh into the spiritual realm whence it came." The New Age version, however, is "considerably