

Here's Madonna with the News

Jon Katz, former executive producer of the *CBS Morning News*, announces in *Rolling Stone* (Mar. 5, 1992) that "straight news," as reported in daily newspapers and on TV network broadcasts, is becoming extinct.

In place of the Old News, something dramatic is evolving, a new culture of information, a hybrid New News—dazzling, adolescent, irresponsible, fearless, frightening and powerful. The New News is a heady concoction, part Hollywood film and TV movie, part pop music and pop art, mixed with popular culture and celebrity magazines, tabloid telecasts, cable and home video.

Increasingly, the New News is seizing the functions of mainstream journalism, sparking conversations and setting the country's social and political agenda. It is revolutionizing the way information reaches people and moves among them. It is changing the way Americans evaluate politicians and, shortly, elect them . . .

The modern news media—the Old News—was formed in the years after World War II. Major newspapers and instantly powerful network-news divisions chose Washington and New York as their headquarters, and presidential politics, the economy and foreign affairs—the Cold War, mostly—as their pre-

minent beats. In its heyday, the Old News showed us the murder of John Kennedy, took us to the moon, then helped drive a president from office and end a war.

Other stories—the sexual revolution, the role of race, dramatic changes in the relationship between people and their jobs, the evolution of pop culture, a rebirth of spiritualism—were covered sporadically and incompletely by the Old News . . . They were a sideline, never the main event.

But for the New News—and for much of America—they were the event. Women, blacks, Hispanics, gays and Asians had launched an ongoing political and cultural revolution against middle-class white males, who continue to dominate most institutions, including the news media . . .

Mainstream journalism frequently checkmates itself. In worshipping balance over truth, objectivity over point of view, moderation over diversity, and credibility over creativity, the Old News gives consumers a clear choice. Consumers can have a balanced discussion, with every side of an issue neutralizing the other, or they can turn to singers, producers and filmmakers offering colorful, distinctive, often flawed but frequently powerful visions . . . More and more, Americans are making [their preference] clear.

er's circulation has declined to 30,000, one-tenth what it used to be, while the *Courier's* is down to 50,000, and the *Baltimore Afro-American* has dropped its national edition.

To woo readers back, some black newspapers are focusing on local issues and strengthening their base in the inner cities. The publish-

ers contend that black communities still need a local black perspective on the news and advocacy on black issues. While blacks trust CNN and *USA Today*, *Birmingham Times* publisher James E. Lewis says, "on the local level, black people do not trust the information that's in the local newspapers as it applies to them."

How Clark Kent Learned to Fly

The American news media emerged from the Watergate scandals with unprecedented power—founded, some press critics say, on illusions. As Edward Jay Epstein noted back in 1973, "What the press did between the break-in in June [1972] and the trial in January was to leak the case developed by the federal and Florida prosecutors to the public." Yet the myth that young *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein had toppled a disgraced president—a myth fed by their best-

"Watergate: A Study in Mythology" by Michael Schudson, in *Columbia Journalism Review* (May-June 1992), 700 Journalism Bldg., Columbia Univ., New York, N.Y. 10027.

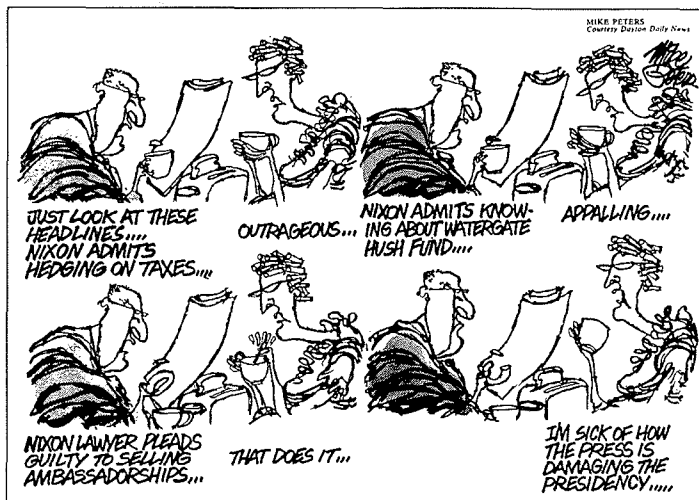
selling book, *All the President's Men* (1987) and the popular movie that was made from it—dies hard. That partly explains journalism's enhanced clout after Watergate. But Michael Schudson, author of *Discovering the News* (1978) and chair of the communication department at the University of California, San Diego, sees another reason: the Nixon administration's relentless attacks on the news media.

From the beginning of Richard Nixon's presidency in 1969, he "insisted on treating the

press as the enemy and on identifying it as a distinct power center in American life rather than as a representative of the public or a medium through which other power centers speak," Schudson says. In early 1970, Nixon's chief of staff H. R. Haldeman pushed to get out the story that his boss, the champion of the Silent Majority, had overcome the "great handicaps" he had on entering office, namely, in Haldeman's words, "the hostile press epitomized by the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, etc., the hostile network commentators, the generally hostile White House press corps, the hostile Congress, etc."

As a result of the administration's attacks, Schudson argues, many Americans came to perceive the news media—whether admired or feared—as an independent source of power. And the perception of power is a form of power, especially "inside the Beltway." Journalists complained about the unfairness of attacks on the media but exulted in their newfound influence.

Today, the pumped-up image of the post-Wa-



The Nixon administration portrayed the news media as an independent and hostile power, and many Americans were persuaded.

tergate news media, Schudson says, serves the interests of both government and the news media. Political leaders can portray themselves as "unfairly besieged," and journalists are able to present themselves as "a brave and independent social force." Hidden from view, Schudson notes, is the mundane reality: "The relationship between public officials and the press in Washington is, for the most part, comfortable and cooperative."

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

In Defense Of Objectivity

Objectivity seems an almost unimpeachable scholarly virtue, yet in recent years it has come under vehement attack in certain academic and intellectual circles. Postmodernist critics such as University of Illinois communications professor James Carey claim that the idea of objectivity rests on a false epistemology. Reality, they insist, is "socially constructed" and no "true" reality exists to which objective knowledge can correspond. Nonsense, says Judith Lichtenberg, a research scholar in the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at the University of Maryland, College Park.

The postmodernist critics, she says, claim that "because different people and cultures em-

"Objectivity and Its Enemies" by Judith Lichtenberg, in *The Responsive Community* (Winter 1991-92), 714 Gelman Library, The George Washington Univ., Washington, D.C. 20052.

ploy different categories and there is no way of deciding which framework better fits the world," objectivity is impossible. Yet the critics also claim that "particular stories or accounts of things perform an ideological function or represent the world in a partial or distorted way." These two claims are logically incompatible, Lichtenberg notes, since the charge of ideological bias implies "that other, better, more objective [views] are possible."

The assault on objectivity, she says, "threatens to discredit the possibility of knowledge by undermining even its most basic elements." Some questions, after all, do have definite right answers: "We ordinarily call these facts."