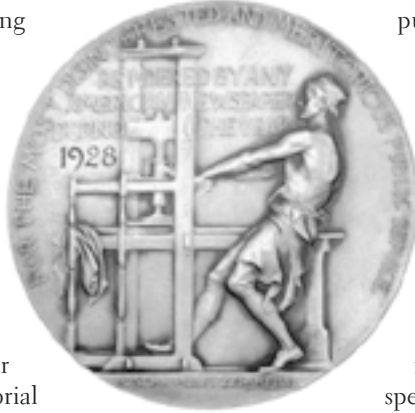


“Nothing illustrates the powerful passion for prizes quite so vividly,” Shepard says, “as the fact that for months on end, worrying about contests will be someone’s full-time job” at many large news organizations, such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (which won many Pulitzers during the 1970s and ’80s, under editor Gene Roberts). The payoff? Reporters who bear the “Pulitzer Prize-winning” tag usually find their services in greater demand, while winning newspapers take on new (if not necessarily permanent) allure for ambitious scribes and editorial overseers, near and far.

Defenders argue that the prizes not only reward deserving journalists but spur others to do better, including even publishers. “Newspapers get embarrassed when they don’t ever win,” says Roberts, now a journalism professor at the



*The Pulitzer Prize*

University of Maryland, College Park. “That’s a pretty good signal to send. The message is: They could be winning if they spent time, money and newshole [space for news] on good stories.”

Others worry that the frantic pursuit of prizes distracts news organizations from more important, less glamorous work. “Rather than devoting buckets of money to a knock-em-dead five-part series that has Pulitzer or duPont written all over it,” writes Shepard, critics “say resources might be better spent on more local gumshoe reporting or daily beat reporting.” And for those already in those essential jobs, it can be

demoralizing to see designated “stars” given oodles of time to work on megaprojects remote from “a paper or station’s core responsibilities.”

## *The No-News Media*

“Media to Government: Drop Dead” by Stephen Hess, in *Brookings Review* (Winter 2000), 1775 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Asked to define “real news,” a veteran journalist once said it is “the news you and I need to keep our freedom”—meaning, mainly governmental and political news. By that standard, most Americans now get much less real news than they did a few decades ago, contends Hess, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and long-time observer of Washington journalism.

In 1997, according to one study, only one-fifth of all the stories on the front pages of the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, on the network TV nightly news programs, and in *Time* and *Newsweek* were about government. Twenty years earlier, the proportion had been one-third.

Washington no longer gets the lion’s share of the news media’s attention, Hess points out. Newspapers he examined in 1978 averaged 12 Washington stories a day, and 45 percent of their lead front-page stories had a Washington dateline. Twenty years later, the

newspapers averaged only six stories a day from the nation’s capital, and took only 36 percent of their lead stories from there.

“As the ’90s evolved, our papers showed less and less interest in any news from Washington,” says Robert Rankin of the Knight-Ridder chain’s Washington bureau. In response, his bureau added national “theme specialties” such as science, religion, and consumer affairs to its traditional White House and congressional beats. Other Washington bureaus did the same.

Network TV news shows also have paid less attention to Washington in recent decades. And while local TV news operations started paying *more* attention in the early 1980s, capitalizing on the new availability of commercial satellites and lightweight video cameras, the novelty eventually wore off, Hess says, and station managers concluded that Washington stories simply “didn’t excite viewers.”

Local TV news programs have become Americans' "most popular source of information," says Hess, but their diet of crime, fires, and fluff leaves "little room for stories about municipal government or elections." A survey of 13 top-market cities during the month before the 1996 elections showed that only seven percent of the stories were about politics (compared with 22 percent about crime).

Hess doesn't think the shift is merely a reaction to political change. Political power

may have shifted from Washington to the states, but coverage of the statehouses has also declined. (See *WQ*, Autumn 1998, pp. 127–129.) Rather, he says, the shift emerged from within the news business itself. An influential 1980 report by focus group researcher Ruth Clark for the American Newspaper Publishers Association and work by TV consultants pointed the way toward "consumer-driven" journalism. "Self-help information was in. Celebrity features were in. Hard news about government was out."

## *Big Brother or Small Beer?*

"Prime-time Propaganda," "Propaganda for Dollars," and "The Drug War Gravy Train" by Daniel Forbes, in *Salon* (Jan. 13, 14, Mar. 31, 2000), [www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com), and "White House Blasts *Salon*" by Robert Housman, in *Salon* (Apr. 20, 2000), [www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com).

Should the federal government have a say in the story line of *Chicago Hope* or other TV series? Should it be providing magazines with financial credits for articles whose content it approves? In its war against drugs, charges freelance writer Forbes, the government has been engaging in precisely those practices.

In late 1997, Congress authorized the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy to buy \$1 billion in antidrug ads over five years, so long as the TV networks or other media provided matching antidrug ads or editorial content free.

Not wanting to give up lucrative advertising, six networks—ABC, CBS, NBC, the WB, Fox, and, this past season, UPN—elected to use programming for some of the matching antidrug messages. According to Forbes: "In certain cases, the drug czar's office was allowed to review scripts and suggest changes before a show was broadcast. In some cases, the networks inserted government-approved anti-drug messages into TV sit-

coms and dramas in order to satisfy their obligations to their government 'client.'" Virtually none of the producers and writers involved in crafting the antidrug episodes knew of the arrangement with the government, however.

Forbes also says that *Parade* and five other magazines submitted some published articles for ad credit. But the drug control office did not review articles before publication. The editors involved all denied being influenced.

Perhaps because few question the government's antidrug message, the nation's usually hyperactive media watchers by and large have yawned at Forbes's disclosures. Tom Goldstein, dean of the Columbia University School of Journalism, told Forbes the arrangement with the magazines struck him as "highly dubious." But Jacqueline Leo, president of the American Society of Magazine Editors, said, "Given all the things editors can be pressured about, this doesn't ring my chimes."

## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

### *God Knows*

"'We Speak to God with Our Thoughts': Abelard and the Implications of Private Communication with God" by Susan R. Kramer, in *Church History* (Mar. 2000), Divinity School, Duke Univ., Box 90975, Durham, N.C. 27708-0975.

During the "renaissance" of the 12th century, religious thinkers such as Peter Abelard (1079–1142?)—the famous French theolo-

gian who is best known to nonscholars for his tragic love affair with Héloïse—proposed a new purpose for penance, one that reflect-