



*Courtesy of Joseph D. Shein.*

*If this pensive young woman in Alfred Leslie's Seven A.M. News (1978) is an average American consumer of news, she does not favor "news as entertainment," or TV news over print, or newspapers that strain to cater only to her whims. Surveys indicate that she just wants the news*

# The News Media

Probably no business in America, of late, has seemed so prone to upheaval as the multibillion-dollar "news business," with the prospective expansion of "electronic home delivery" of news via broadcast and cable, the death or illness of major newspapers, and the surge of media self-criticism. In this special survey, Lawrence Lichty concludes that TV is probably *not* most Americans' chief source of news; Leo Bogart describes the newspaper's changing character; James Boylan analyzes journalists' self-perceptions in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate; and A. E. Dick Howard examines the health of the First Amendment.

## VIDEO VERSUS PRINT

*by Lawrence W. Lichty*

So far, 1982 has been a good year for news, much of it bad news, but highly "visual" news—anguished faces last spring of the relatives of victims of El Salvador's civil war, clouds of grey-black smoke billowing over the high-rises of West Beirut during the Israelis' summer-long attacks, Iraqi tanks clanking into action against the Ayatolla Khomeini's invading revolutionary youths, the demurely smiling face of the Princess of Wales with the newborn Prince William, Solidarity's street demonstrations in Warsaw, Margaret Thatcher sending off the Gurkhas and Scots Guards aboard the QE 2 to humble the Argentines in the Falkland Islands.

For Americans, it was news from far away, a distraction, perhaps, from economic troubles at home.

Television's handling of this "news," more than ever, seemed to fit Walter Lippmann's 60-year-old description of the workings of the press: "It is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode then another out of darkness into vision. . . ."

The three television networks, competing for ratings, exaggerated this chronic tendency, presenting the news, when possible, as one melodrama after another; they were often far more

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compelling melodramas than those television could offer as regular entertainment. No star of any TV series was as vivid in 1982 as Yasser Arafat or Menachem Begin or as jaunty as Ronald Reagan, whose aides made no secret of their belief that the 40th President could—and should—play to the TV producers' need for "visuals" and avoid the newspapers' traditional preoccupation with words.

By coincidence, this big news year has also been a time of accelerating change, pushed by economics and technology, in the newspaper business. As suburban papers prospered, big city newspapers, here and there, continued to die or falter. The Philadelphia *Bulletin* folded in January. The *New York Daily News*, the nation's biggest big-city daily (1.48 million weekday circulation), was offered for sale in December 1981 by its parent *Chicago Tribune*; then last spring, the *Tribune* dropped its sale plans, but the *Daily News* still may lose more than \$20 million this year. Among the three major New York City dailies, only the *Times* makes a profit.

### The Dog and the Tail

Unsure of the future, a dozen newspaper managements, from the *New York Times* to Times-Mirror, Knight-Ridder, and Copley, are starting or testing "teletext" or home "videotex" services in New Jersey, Florida, California, and elsewhere. (Such electronic services use cable or telephone lines to send textual matter and graphics to a TV screen at the viewer's behest.) The *Washington Post* in early 1982 disclosed plans to provide local news and advertising programming for all cable TV system operators in the metropolitan Washington area. And publishers lobbied vigorously in Washington against moves to permit AT&T to send news via telephone lines into homes.

Yet a 1982 study of videotex usage in Britain found that most customers were usually seeking specific pieces of data (e.g., 60 percent regularly looked up classified listings; nearly half looked up stock exchange information at least every other day). "News" was not the main attraction. Indeed, as a Canadian operator observed, with videotex, information is "the tail not the dog. The dog is [electronic] shopping and banking."

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Drawing by Mort Gerberg. © 1977 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

"And now here's Andy to horse around with the news." *Local newscasts—which "deliver" audiences to later network news and other shows—provide as much as half of a TV station's profit. During the 1970s, "news doctors" prescribed such devices as "happy talk" to boost ratings.*

The biggest expansion in news has come in television. TV news is the child of radio news, and of the Paramount newsreels of the 1930s and '40s; it is not the child, or, in its basic attitudes even a very near relative, of the newspapers. In their rivalry for audiences (ratings) which govern TV advertising revenues, the producers of the evening news shows—local or national—can never relax; when Walter Cronkite retired as an anchorman in 1981, the question for CBS was: Could his successor, Dan Rather, officiate over the news as well, i.e., draw the most viewers? The answer was yes, but all three networks were changing their style and on-camera personalities in late 1981 and early 1982.

The spread of cable television (to one-third of all U.S. television households) prompted Ted Turner last January to start Cable News Network 2, a 24-hour Atlanta-based TV news service, in a direct challenge to the networks. The networks responded by announcing plans to present news from 2 A.M. to 7 A.M.—when 4.9 million TV sets are in use.

This impending surge in broadcast news seems only to confirm the ascendancy of video. Already, the TV viewer in a medium-to-large-sized city faces no shortage of "news." In

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Washington, D.C., for example, the city-dweller has only one full-fledged local daily, the *Washington Post*, but he can watch "news" for nine and one-half hours each weekday, including two stretches of three hours (6 A.M. to 9 A.M., 5 P.M. to 8 P.M.). Another five and one-half hours of news is available via Cable News Network 2 from Baltimore's station WMAR-TV.

All told, in the Washington area, there are more than 14 hours of programming—network, syndicated, and local—on three network stations, two independent stations, and PBS's station. If one includes such programs as the PBS *Nightly Business Report*, as well as the lighter *Phil Donahue* and *Hour Magazine*, the total comes to 24 hours.

### No Time for Facts

What is striking, of course, is how thin and how much the same all this video news is. On the three network evening news shows, for example, there is about 50 percent duplication of major stories, far more duplication than exists on, say, the front pages of the San Francisco *Chronicle* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, leaving aside strictly local items.

The half-hour evening news show has room for 17 or 18 items in 22 minutes (commercials eat up eight minutes). Eight or nine of these items are film snippets lasting from a few seconds to one and a half minutes; the rest are the anchorman's brief reports written by anonymous network writers from the news dispatches coming in over the studio teletype from Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI). In Washington or the Mideast, the TV correspondent, as NBC's Douglas Kiker put it, is "making little movies," directing a camera crew, scribbling the words he will utter to give significance to the film. He is no "reporter," in the sense that reporters for AP, UPI, and newspapers are. He has little time for fact-finding, and little time on the air to present any facts he does find.

The requirements of TV news do not, therefore, impel ABC, CBS, and NBC to deploy large numbers of information-seekers—although the logistics and technology require a sizable supporting staff. In Washington, locale of 40 percent of CBS News's stories and (not coincidentally) site of its largest bureau, there are 200 CBS News employees. Of these, only 25 are reporters, for both radio and TV—versus 35 Washington reporters for the *New York Times* and 100 for the AP. In Manhattan, station WCBS-TV, like its local rivals, has no such creature as a City Hall reporter, wise in the ways of Mayor Koch and the Board of Estimate; the station usually sends a reporter and camera crew

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to City Hall only when the AP ticker indicates in advance the probability of "good film."

Overseas, CBS has only 23 full-time correspondents, versus 32 for the *New York Times*, 36 for *Time*, eight for the Baltimore *Sun*, 19 for the Knight-Ridder papers—and about 300 for the AP, whose operatives and those of rival UPI supply most of the news that, without attribution, Dan Rather (like his ABC and NBC counterparts) reads off a teleprompter every weekday evening.

Television, as *Newsweek* columnist Jane Bryant Quinn observed, gives us "the faces," the voices, the scenery—albeit in highly selective bits and pieces. Its infrequent documentaries draw relatively small audiences but occasionally strike political sparks. At its best, TV provides us with a live view of the great spectacles: a space shot, a presidential inaugural, the national political conventions, the 1973–74 Watergate hearings (when the cameras were allowed to run without interruption), the World Series.

Thus, the further expansion of "video," even as it promises greater diffusion of the same news, does not add greatly to the array of information available to the public. Yet "electronic home delivery" has persuaded many analysts that the "news" in print, as it has evolved over the past 150 years in America, is all but dead. (Rare is the major publisher who has not invested in TV or cable, or both.) Predicts James Martin, author of *Future Trends in Telecommunications* (1977): By the early 1990s, there may be only a "minor intellectual press, a few picture newspapers for low-IQ readers, and some local newspapers," along with a few news magazines. Citing television's pre-eminence at the Dupont Awards ceremony this year, NBC's anchorman Tom Brokaw spoke of the young people who "have come to rely on us as their primary and only source of news."

### False Assumptions

Indeed, the conventional wisdom, widely echoed, is that Americans get most of their news from Brokaw and his colleagues in television. This assertion stems largely from surveys by the Roper Organization since 1959, indicating that TV became pre-eminent in home entertainment in 1960, and became adults' primary source of news in 1970. The question Roper has asked his respondents since 1959 is "Where do you usually get most of your news about what's going on in the world today?" In 1981, 39 percent specified television only, 22 percent newspaper only, and 20 percent TV and newspapers. Respondents were permitted multiple answers. When all were tallied, 64 percent

**USAGE OF INFORMATION  
MEDIA, 1981  
(percent of 'audience'  
using particular  
source)**

AUDIENCE	ANY NEWSPAPER	2 OR MORE NEWSPAPERS	TIME	READER'S DIGEST	ALL-NEWS RADIO	ALL TV (9+ DAILY)	CBS EVENING HOURS	LATE NIGHT LOCAL TV NEWS**	% OF POPULATION
Men	69	13	15	23	10	20	9	26	47
Women	67	10	11	26	7	20	10	27	53
Ages 18-24	59	9	14	17	5	15	7	22	18
25-34	63	9	16	22	7	14	6	22	23
35-44	71	12	15	25	10	14	7	27	16
45-54	75	13	13	29	10	19	7	29	14
55-64	75	16	10	30	11	25	14	30	14
65 +	69	13	7	29	9	36	17	34	15
College graduates	79	17	27	27	12	11	8	26	16
High school graduates	69	11	11	26	8	19	9	26	38
No high school	53	6	4	14	7	33	12	29	15
Professional/Technical*	78	16	26	27	10	10	7	24	11
Managers/Administrators	75	18	24	32	13	11	7	26	8
Clerical/Sales	70	12	14	25	9	11	7	23	15
Craftsmen/Foremen	67	11	10	21	10	13	6	25	8
Others employed*	63	10	9	20	6	19	8	23	19
Not employed*	65	10	10	26	8	30	12	31	39
Cities (500,000+)	66	12	13	17	16	20	8	28	15
Suburban	70	13	15	25	11	18	8	26	43
Rural	63	9	9	27	3	23	12	24	26

\*"Professional/Technical" includes accountants, engineers, lawyers, librarians, teachers, artists, and entertainers, etc. "Others employed" includes skilled workers, farmers, service workers, and laborers. "Not employed" includes housewives, retirees.

\*\*Network affiliate late evening news program.

Source: Simmons Market Research Bureau Inc., 1981.

cited TV, 44 percent newspapers, 18 percent radio, five percent magazines, and five percent "another person."

From all this, it seems clear that most people now *think* that they get most of their news from TV. As we shall see, this is almost certainly not true, even though Presidents, Senators, and other politicians (to say nothing of TV journalists and TV critics)

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have come to act on the assumption that it *is* true.

Those in the business of figuring out "audience exposure" to advertising messages have developed a number of surveys that give a far clearer picture of what sources Americans draw on for news and information. Simmons Market Research Bureau, based in Manhattan, does annual studies on "exposure" of Americans to various media.

Some 1981 Simmons data:\*

¶ More than two-thirds of U.S. adults (68 percent) read at least part of some newspaper every day. Twelve percent of all adults read two or more newspapers a day.

¶ Fewer than one-third of U.S. adults watch TV news, local or national, on a given day.

¶ About 31 percent of adults read *Time* or *Newsweek* or *U.S. News & World Report*. (One-fourth of all adults read *Reader's Digest*.)

¶ About 18 percent of adult Americans listen to one of the nation's 90 all-news radio stations as often as once a week, with the peak listening period being early in the morning.

#### Did TV Lose the War?

Other data suggest that TV is far from a dominant source of news. The number of American adults watching the three week-day network evening newscasts on a given night is very large (50 million), as is the audience for *Dallas* (47 million). But the audience for TV news fluctuates. It is far more fickle than the audience for newspapers or magazines. Slightly more than half of the nation's TV households watch one of the network evening news programs at least once in the course of a month. But only *one percent* of all 78.3 million American TV households watches CBS's Dan Rather as often as four or five nights a week, and Rather presides over the nation's most popular network evening news show. The average for households that watch his program at all is five broadcasts per month.

In short, the widely accepted notion that Mr. Rather and his rivals each command a vast, devoted nightly following seems far-fetched.

A related assumption, tenaciously held by both television's critics and its champions, is that the visual impact of TV nightly news "turned the American people against the Vietnam war"

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\*The 1981 Simmons report is based on more than 15,000 interviews, but uses smaller samples for certain segments of the 40 volumes of data. The Simmons material is used here with permission.



**AND THAT'S THE WAY IT IS**

*In The Right Place at the Right Time (1982), Public Broadcasting System's Canadian-born Robert MacNeil looks back at his globe-trotting days with the BBC and NBC and explains what is distinctive about TV reporting:*

In most of the stories television cares to cover there is always "the right bit," the most violent, the most bloody, the most pathetic, the most tragic, the most wonderful, the most awful moment. Getting the effective "bit" [on film] is what television news is all about. It is the bit you always recognize when you've got it and which you will go through just about anything to get because it means success and missing it consistently means you'd better look for a job other than a TV correspondent.

And to what purpose are thousands of men and women scrambling over the earth, sometimes at great risk, to get that bit? So that millions of people may be distracted for a moment from their own domestic concerns to witness another human being in great distress? To feel what? A moment of compassion? A second of titillation? A wisp of vicarious fear?

Does it not ultimately blunt and cheapen all those natural feelings to have them so often artificially stimulated? Does it not make human pity itself a banality? Does that not force competitive television producers to turn the screw a trifle harder each time to make the sensation fresher, to unbanalize it? Yes.

And what is the ultimate purpose of all this activity? The television journalists, like journalists everywhere, want to tell stories. The networks want to sell deodorant.

And that's the way it is.

and, later, pushed Richard M. Nixon out of the White House. Yet there is no empirical evidence that TV news "shapes" mass public opinion—or that any news medium does.\*

What "the news" probably influences is not *how* we think but what we think and talk *about*. But few subjects get much media attention for very long. When they do, politicians and other opinion-leaders may feel impelled to react. Even here, direct links between "news coverage" per se and the evolution of political decisions are not easy to establish.

Overall, the evening TV news audience is disproportion-

\*See John E. Mueller's *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (Wiley, 1973). Critic Michael Arlen reminded us in the Aug. 16, 1982 *New Yorker* that "what a television viewer of the Vietnam war [usually] saw . . . was a nightly, stylized, generally distanced overview of a disjointed conflict which was composed mainly of scenes of helicopters landing, tall grasses blowing in the helicopter wind, American soldiers fanning out across a hillside . . . with now and then (on the soundtrack) a far-off ping or two, and now and then (as a visual grand finale) a column of dark billowing smoke a half a mile away, invariably described as a burning Viet Cong ammo dump."

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ately older (especially over 65), female (53 percent), and less well educated than are newspaper readers or the population as a whole. Two types of Americans emerge as the keenest viewers of TV news. One happens to see a lot of TV news largely because he watches a lot of television: The news is only a small part of his daily fare. This viewer is somewhat more likely to have had only a high school education, to be in a clerical, sales, or service job, and to live in the South. The other, far less common TV news watcher, is the younger, better-educated American adult, a heavy *reader* of news, who watches a lot of news and information but not much else on TV.

Few newspapers or magazines reap the profits of TV's three network evening news programs (\$28 million in 1980 for CBS alone), and no print journalist matches the celebrity or the salaries of the self-assured, well-coifed men and women of television. Yet there is, as Simmons and others make clear, no sign that "video"—in its various forms—is about to eliminate its less exciting print competitors as sources of information. News as entertainment, as spectacle, as distraction—that was, to varying degrees, the role of the "yellow" press in the early 1900s, of *Life* and *Look* during the '40s and '50s, and of the *New York Post* in 1982. Here TV, already the distraction of the very young and the very old, has achieved pre-eminence. TV news is another show, and not a very habit-forming one at that.

What seems obvious is that most American adults get the "news" from many sources. And judging from the "exposure" data, most of what they get every day still comes from newspapers. This is not difficult to understand. Except for the illiterate, newspapers are easy and efficient: Scores of items can be scanned, selected, put aside, retrieved, pored over, even reread. This process occurs at the reader's convenience, anytime, anyplace. It takes far less time than the 60 to 90 minutes it takes to sit through the bits and pieces of the evening's local and national TV news shows, or to scan and select information from a computer. Barring a collapse in literacy or curiosity, or a total neglect of their responsibilities on the part of publishers, or a permanent walkout by the nation's newspaper delivery boys, Americans who want "the news" will probably continue to rely primarily on print for decades to come.

## NEWSPAPERS IN TRANSITION

by Leo Bogart

When World War II ended, eight daily newspapers in New York City reported the story, as did seven in Boston, four in Philadelphia, five in Chicago, four in San Francisco. Now, not quite four decades later, New York is down to three (the *Times*, *Post*, and *Daily News*), and Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago have only two newspapers apiece. The most recent major casualties are the *Washington Star*, *Philadelphia Bulletin*, and *Cleveland Press*. In Toledo, New Orleans, Des Moines, Portland, Sarasota, Tampa, Duluth, Minneapolis—all one-ownership newspaper towns—publishers have discontinued their less successful papers, usually their afternoon papers. The troubles of other newspapers are still making news. In 1923, there were 503 cities with more than one separately owned daily newspaper; now there are only 49. And in 22 of those cities, competing papers have joint business and printing arrangements.

After the evening *Minneapolis Star* (circulation 170,000) was discontinued last April, its editor, Stephen Isaacs, responded to a query from *Editor & Publisher*: "What do I see ahead? I talked to many publishers recently and was startled by the number who have in effect told me that the newspaper business is a dying industry. A dinosaur. Some will survive—the very big and the very small—but the in-betweens are going to face rough going in the electronic era. . . . Frankly, I was stunned by their comments."

The deaths of great metropolitan dailies are stunning events, and not only to publishers and editors. But do they mean that newspapers, as such, have outlived their function?

The fallen giants in the business have been stricken by the sickness of their home cities. In the 20 largest cities, newspaper circulation dropped by 21 percent between 1970 and 1980, while population fell by six percent. This does not tell the whole story, because the big cities have changed character even more than they have lost people. Their white population fell by 20 percent, and the whites now include a higher proportion of Hispanics and the elderly poor.\* In many blighted inner city areas, crime,

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\*To illustrate this point with an extreme instance, the Bronx lost 19 percent of its total population between 1960 and 1980. Blacks went from 11 percent to 32 percent of the total, and Hispanics now represent 34 percent. The *New York Times* lost 56 percent of its Bronx circulation in those years, the *Daily News* 26 percent.

vandalism, and collection problems have wreaked havoc with both home deliveries and street sales.

Changes in the urban economy and social structure have also had disastrous effects on downtown retailers, who have been the mainstay of metropolitan newspaper advertising. Retail chains followed the middle class to the suburbs—and began to put advertising money into suburban papers, give-away “shoppers,” and direct mail advertising. Metropolitan evening papers had to print earlier (usually well before noon) just to permit delivery by truck through traffic jams to the sprawling suburbs. Since their circulation was more concentrated in the central cities, they were more vulnerable than their morning rivals to the pressures of urban change. The deaths of metropolitan newspapers help explain why total daily circulation has declined since World War II; the ratio of newspapers sold to U.S. households dropped from 128:100 in 1948 to 79:100 in 1981.

The reasons are many and complex.

The price of a subscription has gone up, and some papers have stopped distribution in outlying areas because of the expense. Young people of the TV generation now read newspapers

*Newspaper-reading commuters, like these in Reginald Marsh's Subway —Three People (1934) can still be seen in many central cities. But more Americans now live and work in suburbs and ignore the big “metro” dailies.*



*National Museum of American Art,  
bequest of Dr. Frank McClure.*

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less often than their parents did. Changes in family life have altered the use of leisure. With more wives at work, both husbands and wives have less time to read when they get home.

Still, the "worst" appears to be over. In spite of the losses in the big cities, overall newspaper circulation and readership have stabilized during the past five years, following eight years of steady decline. The real question is not whether newspapers will survive into the 21st century, but rather *what kind* of newspapers they will be. The answer lies both in the economics of the press and in the perceptions of editors and publishers.

### Worrying about TV

Their perceptions have already led to rapid changes in newspaper style and character during the past decade, and to an extraordinary amount of editorial innovation.

One theory that quickly gained favor was that TV news was taking away readers—although there was no evidence that directly supported this notion. To the contrary, newspapers have done better (in terms of the ratio of circulation to all households) in metropolitan areas where TV news ratings are high rather than low. Television news viewing went down, not up, in New York City when the *Times*, *Post*, and *Daily News* were on strike in 1978.

Moreover, many editors appear to have been convinced during the 1970s that more and bigger photographs, and more "features" and "personality journalism" were necessary counters to the visual and entertainment elements of TV in general. Indeed, the *Miami News* billed itself as the newspaper "for people who watch television."

There were other less obvious changes, particularly among dailies with less than 100,000 circulation. One was the emphasis on local, staff-written news—leaving more of the wider world to the TV network news, the *Wall Street Journal*, or *Time* and *Newsweek*. Thirty-five percent of *all* editors who were asked about editorial changes in 1977–79 reported a shift toward "localizing" the news.

"What sells papers is the ability to identify with the news

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content," said Milton Merz, then (1976) circulation director of the Bergen County, New Jersey, *Record* (circulation 150,796). "And people identify with things that affect them directly. Once you get outside their town, their interest drops like a rock."

Among big-city papers, in particular, zoned editions, aimed at specific regions within a metropolitan area, seemed a good response to competition for readers from the mushrooming smaller suburban dailies and weeklies.

Yet the belief that people are mainly interested in "chicken dinner" news runs counter to reality. First, Americans as a whole today are increasingly well educated, cosmopolitan, and mobile, with weak ties to their home communities. Second, as is well known, fewer of any big-city daily's readers now live or work in the city where the newspaper is published and where it deploys most of its reporters (only 35 percent of the *Chicago Tribune's* circulation, for example, is within the city limits); the suburban dispersion of homes and jobs in scores of distinct communities over hundreds of square miles means that any particular local event is likely to affect relatively few people. A high proportion of what editors think of as "local" items that appear in a big-city paper are actually "sub-local": they deal with events—school board disputes, village politics, accidents—that matter little to most of the paper's readers.

### Enjoyable, Exciting, and Fun

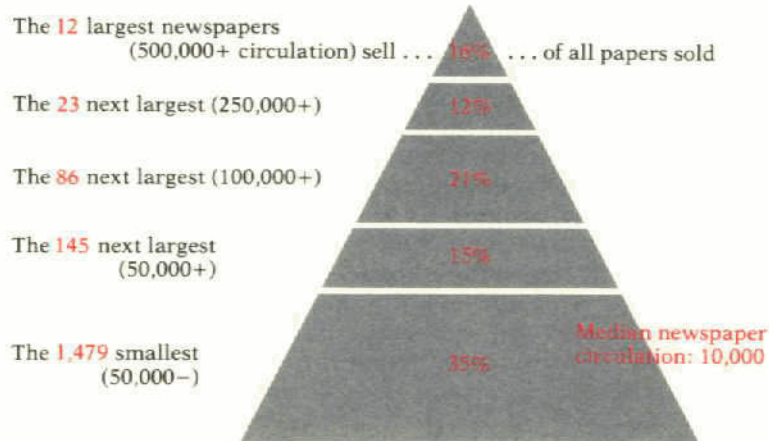
What some editors forget is that TV network news, for all its "show business" flaws, has made national and foreign figures, from Reagan to Begin, vivid and familiar to average Americans, to a degree unimaginable 20 years ago. Of course, as always, people want *both* kinds of news, not just one or the other. Still, national research shows that the average item of local news attracts slightly fewer people who say they are "interested" or "very interested" in it than does the average item of foreign or national news. The same study shows that the "memorability" of local events as "big news," "upsetting news," or "good news" is extremely low relative to the amount of space they occupy in newspapers or relative to more dramatic stories from the wider world.\*

The *Chicago Tribune's* Joseph Medill was once asked the secret of his success. "Just publish the news," he said. Today,

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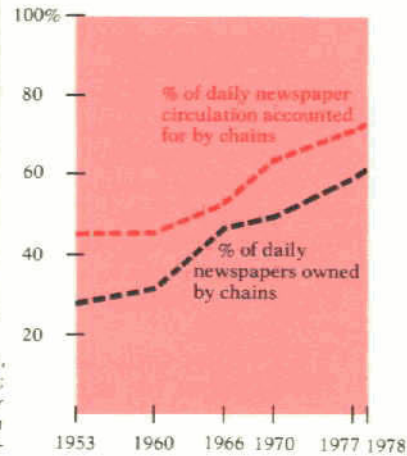
\*This and other findings cited in this article are from a national survey of 3,048 adults conducted for the Newspaper Readership Project in 1977 by Audits and Survey, Inc. A more comprehensive description of the study will be found in my book, *Press and Public*, (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981).

**SHARES OF TOTAL CIRCULATION, BY NEWSPAPER SIZE, 1980**



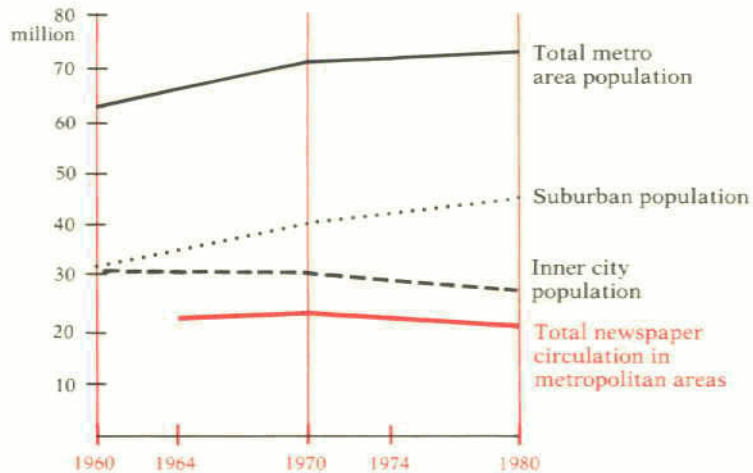
**NEWSPAPER CHAIN OWNERSHIP**

TEN LARGEST CHAINS, March, 1981	Daily Circulation	No. of dailies
Gannett Co.	3,621,800	85
Knight-Ridder	3,458,400	33
Newhouse Newspapers	3,133,500	29
Tribune Co.	2,806,600	8
Dow Jones and Co.	2,433,400	21
Times Mirror Co.	2,315,500	8
Scripps-Howard	1,518,800	16
Hearst Newspapers	1,362,300	15
Thomson Newspapers (U.S.)	1,219,600	77
Cox Enterprises	1,165,100	18



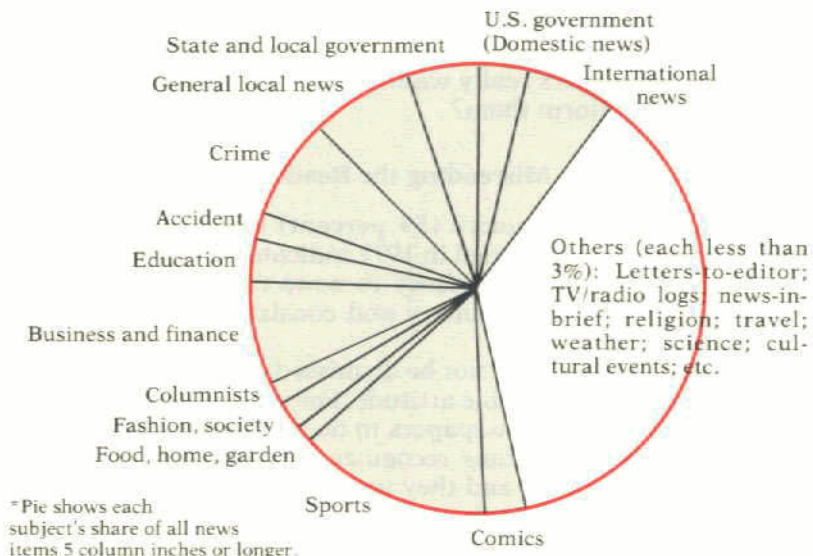
Source: *Editor and Publisher Yearbook, 1981*; Benjamin Compaine, director of Harvard's Program for Information Resources Policy; *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1981*; *American Newspaper Markets' Circulation* (1964, 1970, 1980); *Trends in Metropolitan America* (1977), Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations; 1977 Survey, The Newspaper Advertising Bureau.

**POPULATION VS. NEWSPAPER CIRCULATION, 1960-1980**  
(in top 25 metropolitan areas)



\*Twenty-five largest Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (1960): New York; Chicago; Los Angeles-Long Beach; Philadelphia; Detroit; San Francisco-Oakland; Boston; Pittsburgh; St. Louis; Washington, D.C.; Cleveland; Baltimore; Newark; Minneapolis-St. Paul; Houston; Buffalo; Milwaukee; Cincinnati; Paterson-Clifton-Passaic, N.J.; Dallas; Seattle-Everett; Kansas City, Mo.-Kans.; San Diego; Atlanta; Miami.

**A TYPICAL NEWSPAPER'S EDITORIAL CONTENT\***





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not every publisher would agree. The most notable change in newspaper content since 1970 has been a new stress on "soft" features, often concentrated in special sections aimed at "up-scale" suburban consumers, especially women. Under such umbrellas as "Lifestyle," "Living," or "Style," editors and writers have sought to impart the latest in television, movies, celebrities, "self-help," "women's issues," fashions, food, parties, recreation, and manners. (Less regular coverage has been devoted to the old specialized side dishes of the traditional newspaper menu: stamp-collecting, chess, gardening, photography.) The new "sectional revolution" was led by the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*.

At the *New York Times*, "Weekend" (1976) was followed by "Living," "Home," "Sports Monday," and "Science Times." The strategy worked; *Times* circulation rose by 33,000 during the 16 months after "Weekend's" birth. In 1977-79, almost half of all newspapers with circulations of over 100,000 added weekday "lifestyle" sections (and many of the remainder already had them).

Said Derek J. Daniels, president of *Playboy* and a former Knight-Ridder executive: "If [newspapermen] are to meet the new challenges, they must, above all, recognize that reading is work. . . . I believe that newspapers should devote more space to the things that are helpful, enjoyable, exciting, and fun as opposed to undue emphasis on 'responsible information.'"

In some ways, newspapers were coming to resemble consumer magazines. Editors had always used feature material as "good news" to lighten the "bad news" that dominates the headlines. But did readers really want newspapers to entertain them rather than to inform them?

### Misreading the Reader

Not really. A majority (59 percent) of a national cross-section of people questioned in 1977 indicated they would prefer a newspaper devoted *completely* to news rather than one that just provided a news summary and consisted mostly of entertaining features.

This response should not be dismissed as merely the expression of a socially acceptable attitude. For what it really indicates is that people expect newspapers to do more than cater to their personal tastes. Americans recognize a newspaper's larger responsibility to society, and they want it to cover a multitude of subjects, including ones about which they themselves normally would not care to read.

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People perceive that some newspaper articles are "interesting," but others are "important." Thus, according to the 1977 study, half of those who found the average sports item "very interesting" also rated it as "not very important." When people's responses to specific newspaper items are surveyed, entertainment features—except for TV and radio program logs, advice columns, and travel articles—all score below average in interest. A typical entertainment feature is rated "very interesting" by only 20 percent of those surveyed, while a typical straight news story is rated "very interesting" by 31 percent.

### Winner Take All

Editors, then, in remaking their newspapers during the '70s, may have underestimated their readers. But newspapers in those years were not just changing—they, collectively, were growing. In smaller and middle-sized communities, daily newspapers, most of them without local daily competition, continued to enjoy high levels of readership and prosperity. And the reader got more for his money. For a typical (surviving) major metropolitan daily, the number of pages of editorial matter went from 19.8 in 1970 to 28 in 1981, keeping pace with an increased volume of advertising.

So, despite the alterations, cosmetic and substantive, newspapers were actually providing more "hard" news and more national and world news. But the proportions were different. There was more icing on the cake, and often the cake itself was a bit fluffier. The *character* of newspapers was changing.

Editorial ingenuity and experimentation did not save the *Chicago Daily News* or the *Cleveland Press*. An article in the *Minneapolis Star*, after announcement of that paper's impending demise, recalled the editors' rescue efforts: "Suddenly, or so it seemed, the newspaper's most basic ingredients—City Council meetings, news conferences, speeches—were gone. In their place was an unpredictable front-page mixture of blazing illustrations, Hollywood features and all sorts of things that had once been tucked away inside the paper." The *Star's* radical changes did not halt its decline in readership.

Yet the disease that kills off competing newspapers is not lack of readers—it is lack of advertising (which accounts for three-fourths of a newspaper's income). This disease has struck down even highly respected newspapers with considerable numbers of high-income readers, from the *New York Herald Tribune* (1966) to the *Washington Star* (1981). From an advertising point of view, "duplication" is considered highly wasteful.

## The Philadelphia Inquirer VERSUS The Bulletin

The long war for Philadelphia began in 1969 when the Knight chain (now the Knight-Ridder chain) bought its first Northeast property, the morning *Inquirer* and the afternoon *Daily News*, for \$55 million from *TV Guide* publisher Walter Annenberg. The two papers were well-positioned but undistinguished, except by their mediocrity and bias. Affluent Philadelphians disdained them.

The staid rival afternoon *Bulletin*, owned by the McLean family since 1895, enjoyed primacy in reputation (two recent Pulitzer prizes), weekday circulation (641,000), and general advertising (40 percent). But its managers had yet to devise a coherent strategy to cope with the continuing dispersion and attrition of its traditional readers in the suburbs.

After an initial overhaul of the *Inquirer*, Knight put two low-key workaholics, both North Carolinians, in place in 1972: Publisher Sam S. McKeel, then 46, a sometime reporter turned manager, and Executive Editor Eugene L. Roberts, Jr., 40, a seasoned newsman (Detroit, Atlanta, Vietnam) and, latterly, *New York Times* national editor. On most big newspapers, editors don't talk to the business side. Here, McKeel, Roberts, and their senior associates, despite inevitable differences, worked and planned as a team to try to "turn the *Inquirer* around."

They had little choice but to improve operational efficiency. The parent Knight organization in Miami would spend or commit \$120 million in capital outlays (including the purchase price) in 1969-82; but for newsprint, reporters' salaries, and other operating costs, the *Inquirer* had to pay its own way or borrow from Knight.

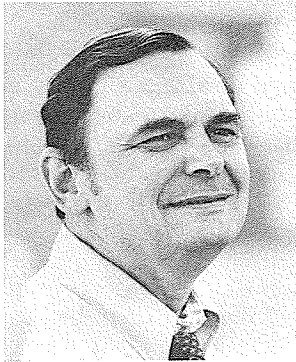
The battlefield was the City of Brotherly Love, especially its shrunken middle-class neighborhoods, and seven burgeoning suburban counties, including three in southern New Jersey across the Delaware River. As late as 1975, in the suburbs, especially the affluent Main Line, the *Bulletin* held a crucial 56,000 lead in daily circulation; if the *Inquirer* could even halve that lead, its advertising salesmen could pull away a sizable share of retail advertising from the *Bulletin*. As a morning paper, it was easier for the *Inquirer* to reach the more distant suburban growth areas on time than for the afternoon *Bulletin*; the tabloid *Daily News* would hold the line with blue collar folk and blacks in the city.

On the news side, Roberts initially had to make do with less manpower and space for news than the *Bulletin*. Unlike many of his counterparts elsewhere, however, Roberts did not attempt to match the "chicken dinner" coverage of suburban dailies, or to pump up crime news (a former *Inquirer* staple) or to lean on "soft" features to counter TV's appeal. He had a different, overarching approach.

As Roberts put it, "We concentrated on the Big Story." He wanted to convince Philadelphians and suburbanites alike that when a Big

Event occurred, the now-respectable *Inquirer* would provide more information about it than anyone else. So it was with the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, which boosted daily street sales by 15,000, and the 1979 Three Mile Island episode, when Roberts sent virtually his entire staff, including "lifestyle" writers, into the fray.

What endeared Roberts to reporters—and attracted new talent—was his willingness to allow them many months, if need be, to research lengthy "investigative" stories or regional "trend" series (schools, religion, county government), some of them high-risk enterprises. But Coach Roberts did not rush them into print. He and



Courtesy of The Philadelphia Inquirer.

Eugene L. Roberts, Jr.

his editors nit-picked every fact, every assertion; there was no Janet Cooke incident at the *Inquirer*. As the *Bulletin* reacted first with one news approach, then with another, the *Inquirer* won six Pulitzer prizes in a row, including one for a solid exposé of Philadelphia police abuses, and one for Mideast reporting (by its first overseas man, Richard Ben Kramer, on his first big assignment). The *Inquirer* circulation staff daily promoted "hot items" on morning radio and display cards, and arranged extra deliveries.

Yet the *Inquirer* either lost money or barely stayed in the black for six years. (The 1974–75 recession hurt all Philadelphia papers.) Its readership, like that of the *Bulletin*, kept falling. But in 1976, its circulation stabilized

and began to inch upward, while the *Bulletin's* continued to slump. McKeel put his increased revenues into more news and more promotion to attract more "up-scale" readers.

One event signaled to McKeel and Roberts (and to advertisers) that the *Bulletin*, beset by management turnover and strategic confusion, was no longer a winner. During a 23-day strike in 1977 that closed down the *Inquirer*, its rival kept publishing and picked up 100,000 readers and much advertising. However, within two months after the *Inquirer* resumed publication, the *Bulletin's* gains had largely evaporated. In 1978–79, the *Inquirer* won the edge in weekday advertising, as it overcame the *Bulletin's* suburban lead.

By late 1981, the *Inquirer's* annual revenues were up 80 percent over 1976; its total circulation had reached 425,000, surpassing its now-failing competitor's. The Charter Company, which had bought the *Bulletin* in 1980, finally shut down the paper last January.

"Nobody thought it would take us so long to turn the *Inquirer* around," said McKeel. "But I think we did it in the end by producing better newspapers for Philadelphia and by better operations."

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Once a newspaper, good or bad, falls into second place even by a small margin, it becomes a “loser” in the eyes of advertising agencies and big retail chains; more of their advertising goes to the “winner,” accelerating the decline of the “loser.”

Why has this “winner-take-all” doctrine taken hold on Madison Avenue—with all its pernicious side effects on local diversity of information and editorial opinion?

Part of it stems from the desire of advertisers for an exact fit between the kinds of people who buy their products and the characteristics of the media audience. The computer has created an insatiable appetite for marketing data, and the result is that advertising is bought by the numbers, by formula.

This practice has been fostered by the overall trend toward concentration. An increasing percentage of all retail sales goes to chains that operate in a number of different areas, with most of the growth since 1960 in the suburbs. The top 100 national advertisers (e.g., Procter & Gamble, General Foods, and Philip Morris) account for 43 percent of all advertising outlays in all media, up from 35 percent 20 years ago; and the top ten advertising agencies (led by Young and Rubicam), all but one headquartered in Manhattan, direct the spending of 25 percent of all national advertising dollars, up from 17 percent in 1955.

### **The Only Mass Medium?**

What this means is that the decisions to allocate advertising dollars among newspapers (or among newspapers, magazines, TV, cable, and other media) are increasingly made by fewer people in fewer places. And the decisions are increasingly made on the basis of strictly quantitative data, covering everything from income to personality types (“psychographics”).

The established doctrine in marketing on Madison Avenue and elsewhere says this: If 30 percent of the people in a given area buy 60 percent of the product, then you target 100 percent of the advertising dollars at this group. (And for practical purposes you forget the others.) The media attracting the highest percentage of this group get the advertising dollars. What this means is that in Philadelphia, the *Bulletin*, with over 400,000 circulation, strangled on a deficit of \$21 million in a market where advertisers spent \$1.8 billion on all media in 1981. (See *Box*.) In that same year, the *Press* had 43 percent of the daily circulation in Cleveland, but only 28 percent of the advertising.

Advertisers try to direct their messages only at the most likely customers, and media have responded by defining their audiences in terms of particular market “segments” in which

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advertisers might be interested. There are thousands of specialized magazines from *House and Garden* to *The Runner*. Radio audiences have long been broken up into fractions identified with various tastes in music. As cable television spreads, the regular TV networks' share of "prime time" is waning. There are already 21 cable networks that advertisers can use to reach specific types of viewers. The newspaper will probably remain the only mass medium in a given community—supplying each day the body of information that provides a shared experience for people who share a geographic space.

### Looking Ahead

To be sure, the death of a metropolitan newspaper is a dramatic story—big news. When a small-town weekly goes daily, that is not such big news. Yet since the end of World War II, newspaper births and deaths have approximately balanced each other out so that the total number of daily newspapers now (1,730) is roughly what it was on V-J Day (1,763). Twelve daily newspapers stopped publication in 1980 and 1981, but 25 new ones were started. Despite the 1981 death of the *Washington Star*, total newspaper circulation in the Washington metropolitan area as of March 31, 1982, was down by only four percent from what it had been a year earlier. The reason: Five suburban *Journal* newspapers were successfully converted from weekly to daily publication when the *Star* fell.

Despite the funerals of great newspapers, the newspaper industry is, in fact, not faring badly. Daily newspapers are published in 1,560 American towns, more than ever before. Newspapers have held on to 29 percent of all advertising investments over the past dozen years (television, local and national, now gets 21 percent; magazines get six percent; radio, seven percent). In 1981, newspapers made capital investments of about \$730 million, much of it in new production technology. The latter has transformed newspaper production and greatly cut blue-collar labor costs. Publicly owned newspaper companies have enjoyed considerable prosperity—with a profit rate double the average for all corporations.\*

Nine out of 10 Americans still look at a daily newspaper in the course of a week—108 million on an average weekday. Sunday sales are bigger than ever. This decade will see a 42 percent increase in the number of people from age 35 to 44, a prime age group for newspaper reading. With smaller families, the number

\*For example, the Knight-Ridder, Gannett, and *Washington Post* organizations showed net incomes in 1981 of \$100.4 million, \$172.5 million, and \$32.7 million, respectively.

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of households will keep growing faster than the number of people, further improving opportunities for newspaper sales. Despite all the concern about the state of the public schools, the average level of education has been moving upward. Educators are beginning to respond to public concern about students' reading skills. Publishers (and school administrators) have belatedly begun encouraging the use of newspapers in the classroom. And the members of the TV generation are heavy consumers of paperback books and magazines.

What really makes newspapers indispensable is the fact that they give voice and identity to the communities where they are published, and their disappearance somehow diminishes local civic spirit and morale.

It has been suggested recently that newspapers should simply turn themselves into an "up-scale" product, aimed at just the top half or third of the social pyramid. This would be folly. There is enough advertising to sustain "elite" newspapers in New York, Los Angeles, and maybe a handful of other places, but certainly not in the average town. Newspapers are inescapably for everybody—and in an era of ever more specialized audiences and markets, that is a significant distinction. Newspapers have a powerful argument to make to the advertiser of mass merchandise, who needs to cast his net as widely as possible so as not to miss any prospective customers.

Still, the trend toward "target" marketing is irresistible, and newspapers are adapting to it. Many of them are able to provide advertisers with "pinpoint" coverage in specific areas and to extend their coverage with supplementary distribution of advertising through mail or home delivery to nonsubscribers. But to be able to do this selectively for the largest number and variety of advertisers, newspapers must remain a mass medium.

As it happens, that is also what newspapers must remain if they are to fulfill their principal function, which is not to serve as a vehicle for advertising or entertainment, but to communicate to America's citizens what of importance is happening in their communities, their nation, and the world—and so to sustain informed public opinion in a free society.

## NEWSPEOPLE

by James Boylan

The press, wrote A. J. Liebling, is “the weak slat under the bed of democracy.” Journalists have always liked to think the contrary—that the press keeps the bed from collapsing. They thought so even more after Vietnam and Watergate: Journalism, its champions then argued, deserves the privileges and immunities of a fourth branch of government, and its practitioners should enjoy the status, rewards, and invulnerability that go with being known as “professionals.”

Unfortunately for the press, its critics have taken such claims at face value. The press, they say, has become imperial, and journalists an arrogant “elite.” Vice-President Spiro T. Agnew put an official stamp on this interpretation back in 1969 when he denounced the power of the “eastern establishment press.” Agnew soon left the scene, but he was succeeded by more sophisticated and tenacious critics. Their target was the same as Agnew’s—the Big League press and not American journalism as a whole. The latter, in fact, is a potpourri of wire services and syndicates, newspapers ranging in size from big-city tabloids down to mom-and-pop weeklies, and hundreds of magazines and broadcasting outlets.

However, focusing generally on the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and TV networks, such critics as Stanley Rothman, Kevin Phillips, and Michael Novak developed a wide-ranging indictment of journalism’s upper crust. These journalists, they charged:

¶ are better educated and better paid than most Americans, with ideas and values alien to those of “the real majority”;

¶ are concentrated in a few national news organizations that exercise disproportionate power over the selection of the news that reaches the American public;

¶ seek to enhance their own power by taking an aggressive, even destructive, stance toward other major American institutions such as government, the political parties, and business, while making themselves invulnerable to retaliation by wrapping themselves in an absolutist version of the First Amendment;

¶ have abandoned standards of fairness, accuracy, and neutrality in news to pursue larger audiences and greater power.



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Beneath the political animus that fuels such critiques is a residue of harsh truth. But what is not necessarily true is the assumption made by critics that the current state of journalism departs radically from what came before it, that there has been a distinctive break with the past.

As British historian Anthony Smith observed in *Goodbye Gutenberg*, "Each decade has left in American newspaper life some of the debris of the continuing intellectual battle over the social and moral role of journalism." For 150 years, journalists have sought success and power and respectability, usually in that order, and society has responded with unease and occasional hostility.

#### Four Generations

The press, in fact, has gone through at least four cycles of innovation and consolidation. America's first popular newspapers were the penny press of the 1830s and 1840s, typified by James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald*. The penny press created a first generation of journalists by putting printers in waistcoats and turning young college graduates of literary inclination and poor prospects into reporters. So threatening was Bennett's frank and sensational news coverage that New York's establishment, led by the musty, older commercial papers that Bennett was putting out of business, conducted a "moral war" to stop him. Bennett survived.

A second and far larger journalistic generation appeared during the 1880s and 1890s. By then, the city newspaper had grown into the first mass medium, thanks to the showmanship of such entrepreneurs as Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. In the shrill Hearst-Pulitzer competition during the Spanish-American War, the sales of an individual newspaper for the first time exceeded one million. Critics again fretted over the power of the press to push the nation into war, to debase society. Like Bennett, Hearst had a "moral war" declared against him, on grounds that his papers had incited McKinley's assassin. Like

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Bennett, Hearst survived.

Each journalistic generation set its own distinctive "style," but each progressed from rebellion to consolidation, from breaking old rules to laying down new ones. The penny press and its ragtag of "bohemians" angered and shocked the mandarins of the old commercial-political newspapers. Yet it was the old penny journalists who, during the 1870s, declared bohemianism dead and all journalists henceforth gentlemen of clean shirt and college education. Bohemianism reappeared with the "yellow" journalists of the 1890s. When that generation matured, it too set bohemianism aside: Its spokesmen began to claim that journalism was as much a profession as law or medicine, and universities established journalism schools in a flawed effort to prove the point.\*

For 40 years or more, newspapers rode high, but during the middle years of the 20th century, they were no longer unchallenged. *Time* and other magazines, radio, and TV began to claim a share of the news audience. (Even so, most journalists continued to ply their trade at newspapers, and 75 percent still do.) The character of the popular press, meanwhile, began to turn from yellow to gray, as befitted an aging institution.

### Redefining News

The next generation, the third, rebelled not by reverting to impetuous iconoclasm, but by trying to change the harsh economic rules of the game. The Great Depression had sent reporters' salaries plummeting; by 1933, many newsmen were out of work. New York columnist Heywood Broun, summoning reporters to set aside snobbery and join together, wrote that he could die happy if, when a general strike began, he saw Walter Lippmann "heave half a brick through a *Tribune* window" at a scab trying to turn out a Lippmann column on the gold standard. Broun became president (1933–37) of the first national union for journalists, the American Newspaper Guild, and led it into reluctant affiliation with the U.S. labor movement.

Unionization's immediate effect was to take from management some of the power it had long enjoyed—the power to fix

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\*Ironically, the romance of bohemianism was even then being forever stamped on the psyche of journalists, most indelibly through *The Front Page* (1928) by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. The playwrights conceded, however, that Hildy Johnson and his feckless colleagues were a vanishing breed—"the lusty, hoodlumesque half-drunken caballero that was the newspaperman of our youth. Schools of journalism and the advertising business have nearly extirpated the species." Despite computers, graduate schools, and the entry of more women, newspaper work, by its very nature, still retains some of the hurly-burly spirit of *The Front Page*.

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newsroom wages and to hire and fire as it pleased. In the long run, unionization made newspaper life more orderly, more predictable, and made it possible for reporters to think of a career. During the years after World War II, as newspapers' staffs grew, the newsroom became bureaucratized, even tame. "Somehow," lamented David Boroff, author of a 1965 Ford Foundation study, "the glamor and magic of the craft have leaked out of it." As before, consolidation had followed rebellion.

In fact, the glamor and magic were by then already leaking back in as a fourth generation of newsmen came of age. Like its predecessors, the new generation challenged the rules—not the economic rules, for the 1960s was an era of unprecedented affluence, but the largely unwritten rules concerning the *substance* of a journalist's task: the definition of "news," the authority of the employing institution, the relation of journalism to the larger society. The groundwork for many of these challenges had already been laid. What the new generation did most successfully was to combine the individualism and flair of *The Front Page* (i.e., of yellow journalism) with the ideology and seriousness of "professionalism."

### Farewell to the Colonel

The recipe had several ingredients.

The first was an erosion of "publisher power." By the beginning of the 1960s, most newspapers had lived down their colorful past. Although occasionally caught up in the fevers of, say, a Sam Sheppard murder trial, most newspapers no longer consistently sensationalized the news. Most major newspapers did not let advertisers regularly control news content. Most publishers had learned to conceal their hostility to labor and provide balanced coverage of strikes. And most newspapers at least claimed to offer balanced political coverage. The figures most prominently associated with the legendary abuses of the past were fading from the scene. Hearst died in 1951, the *Chicago Tribune's* Colonel Robert R. McCormick in 1955.

Professionalism was the catchword reporters invoked to insulate themselves from their employers. Newsmen were not required, like doctors or lawyers, to master a certain body of knowledge. But by defining themselves as professionals, journalists could, like doctors or lawyers, claim special rights, notably a degree of individual autonomy in writing and reporting. By the 1960s, reporters commonly agreed that efforts by a publisher to censor or dictate the news that appeared in his paper were unethical. They also agreed that attempts, by editors as

## LIPPMANN AND RESTON



George Tames/The New York Times.



Photograph by The New York Times.

Walter Lippmann, the *New York Times*'s James Barrett Reston once wrote, gave younger newspapermen "a wider vision of our duty."

And so did Reston. Lippmann (1889–1974) was the analyst-intellectual, the sage whose column appeared in newspapers around the world. "Scotty" Reston was the premier Washington reporter, the energetic model for younger journalists during the 1950s and early 1960s—before the rise of TV news and its stars. *Time* put him on its cover. He reveled in *Times* "scoops" (and got two Pulitzer Prizes), but he also sought "thoughtful explanations" of events. He was skeptical about politicians but optimistic about America.

Born in Scotland (1909), raised in Ohio, he served the Associated Press as a sportswriter before joining the *Times* in London during the Blitz. He expected much of his craft, perhaps too-much. Journalists, he wrote in *The Artillery of the Press* (1966), should see "the wider perspectives . . . the causes as well as the effects."

As leader of the *Times* Washington Bureau (1953–64), Reston assembled some formidable talents—Anthony Lewis, Russell Baker, Tom Wicker, Max Frankel. He urged them to uncover U.S. policy-in-the-making, but to avoid error. "The *Times* is prime source material [for historians]," he once said. "We must never poison the stream of history." During the early 1970s, Reston's Calvinism became unfashionable. Some younger newsmen sneered at his earlier "pro-Establishment" reluctance to rush into print with CIA secrets (e.g., U-2 spy plane flights over Russia). They forgot that he urged the *Times* to publish the "Pentagon Papers" and stuck up for the young reporters in Vietnam.

Still writing about world affairs as a *Times* columnist, Reston is sometimes hopeful, sometimes exasperated—and a bit surprised to find himself now regarded as a kind of Elder Statesman.

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well as publishers, to shape the news to make it fit predetermined "policy" were wrong. Theoretically, wrote journalist-sociologist Warren Breed in 1955, the only controls should be "the nature of the event and the reporter's effective ability to describe it." In the newsroom, the actual result was a chronic, usually muted struggle between editors and reporters, between managerial direction and reportorial autonomy.

### A License to "Interpret"

In addition to the self-image of professional autonomy, the younger journalists inherited from their elders a long-standing antipathy to officialdom. Publishers during the 1930s had tried (unsuccessfully) to use the First Amendment to thwart New Deal legislation strengthening labor unions. In the years after World War II, the press's suspicions of government shifted to an editorial, and more subtle, level. Newspapers during the 1950s mounted a "freedom-of-information" campaign, implicitly suggesting that undisclosed records and closed meetings were a cloak for official misdeeds. Reporters who had submitted to the manipulations of Franklin D. Roosevelt now objected to those of Eisenhower and Kennedy. The term "news management" was coined by James Reston of the *New York Times* during the mid-1950s.

Pulitzer prizes, as always, went to exposers of instances of city hall corruption and Washington chicanery. But steady, continuous muckraking—unless embodied in an institutional "crusade" in the Hearst or Pulitzer tradition—was not yet the fashion; the press had not yet undertaken in its investigations—as Lippmann in his classic *Public Opinion* (1922) had stated it should *not* undertake—"the burden of accomplishing whatever representative government, industrial organization, and diplomacy have failed to accomplish."

News standards were also changing during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Increasingly, the old "objective" format for news was viewed as inadequate to the complexities of contemporary subject matter and to the reporter's desire to demonstrate expertise. The satisfaction of going beyond the facts, once reserved largely for Washington columnists, now came to ordinary reporters, given a new license to "interpret" the news.

One final element helped pave the way for the fourth generation: enhanced pay and popular prestige. Even after the Newspaper Guild helped to stabilize wages and working conditions, newspapers were justly accused of underpaying their employees. Polls taken during the late 1950s, moreover, ranked

journalism low—near the bottom in fact—in occupational prestige. By 1962 or 1963, however, all of that had begun to change. The combined appeal of gradually rising pay and gradually rising status became attractive enough to draw college graduates from other fields.\* Journalism school enrollments began to swell.

Newspapering became more secure. In 1965, Walter Lippmann pondered the overall metamorphosis of the American journalist since World War II—“the crude forms of corruption which belonged to the infancy of journalism tend to give way to the temptations of maturity and power. It is with these temptations that the modern journalist has to wrestle.” It was these temptations that confronted reporters as the 1960s unfolded.

As it happened, the growing autonomy and self-confidence of reporters, led by those in Washington and overseas, coincided with the onset of a decade of divisive social and political upheaval unmatched since the Civil War. “Vietnam and Watergate” became the media’s retrospective shorthand for this era, and, to a degree, the shorthand for journalists’ mythic notions of their own profession’s importance in these events.

### The Old versus the Young

Although it was not the first Cold War press-government confrontation over “national security,” Vietnam set a decade-long pattern of mutual antagonism that ultimately verged on mutual paranoia during the Nixon years. In reality, the *New York Times*’s David Halberstam and other early birds in Saigon were not, as later painted, “antiwar” activists in 1963. Rather they heard (from U.S. military field advisors), saw, and wrote, not inaccurately, that U.S. policy in Vietnam was *not working*, even as Washington claimed the opposite.

This conflict between press accounts and official assessments of Vietnam was not all-pervasive, or even constant. But it grew, fed by the inherent ambiguities and rhetorical contradictions of an increasingly costly “no-win, no-sellout” war policy. And under Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, the resulting “credibility gap” began to extend to other matters—to CIA and FBI activities, to diplomacy, to government generally.

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\* Journalists’ salaries vary considerably, even at the 147 Newspaper Guild-organized dailies. At the *New York Times*, a reporter with two years experience earns a minimum of \$721.92 a week; at the *Washington Post*, after four years, \$557; at the *Sacramento Bee*, \$540.72 after six years; at the *Terre Haute (Indiana) Tribune* (circulation: 24,242), after five years experience, \$302. The average top reporter minimum for all Guild papers: \$465.64. At non-Guild papers (i.e., at most papers), the pay is usually lower.

And at the same time that he slowly committed America to Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson invited high expectations of government from newsmen and ordinary folk alike with his Great Society programs to “end poverty,” to “end inequality,” to “end hunger.” Few reporters then questioned the need for bigger government (they were, at heart, reformers too). But black riots in Watts in 1965, in Detroit in 1967, in Washington and a dozen other cities in 1968 seemed to show that government at home as in Vietnam was failing, even as universities seemed unable to cope with campus unrest, and churches and businesses and other institutions seemed unable or unwilling to respond to rising demands for, variously, more equity, more freedom, a cleaner environment, more truth in advertising, more autonomy. The 1968 Democratic convention, with its attendant Chicago “police riot” against antiwar demonstrators, seemed to show that the political party system couldn’t or wouldn’t respond either. Activists on behalf of Hispanics, feminists, homosexuals, the handicapped, the aged, followed blacks in claiming their due rights, not just in Washington, but in cities all over America.

The younger reporters who tried to keep up with all this were prepared to challenge authority, but they operated within the establishment. Unlike their “underground” contemporaries, they chose to work inside existing, and prospering, institutions,



*Evoking the reporter's self-image of the "Front Page" era, this MORE magazine poster was popular during the 1970s among young newsmen.*

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which alone could offer them the full material, moral, and status rewards of journalism, "status" meaning, above all, status in the eyes of other journalists. The impression given by complaining editors later that they had been overrun by activists hostile to newspaper traditions is largely false.

The claim to professionalization had two striking implications—first, that the press as an institution ought to be a kind of free-floating body in society, encumbered by neither governmental nor social controls; second, that the individual journalist ought to be free of institutional restraint as well. In working terms, this meant that reporters would try to shake free of editors; in social terms, it meant generational conflict even more intense than usual.

### Barriers to Truth

For the press as a whole, professionalization meant living more by one's own rules, living, in the words of communications specialist James W. Carey, "in a morally less ambiguous universe than the rest of us." This was the universe inhabited by many young newsmen as they covered the civil rights movement, urban decay, campus unrest, the peace movement, and the congressional debates over the Vietnam War. So many things were wrong. The issues seemed so simple. And so dramatic.

Some older newspapermen watched the new breed uneasily. One *Washington Post* veteran later remembered an "often mindless readiness to seek out conflict, to believe the worst of government or of authority in general, and on that basis to divide the actors in any issue into the 'good' and the 'bad.'" This readiness was heightened, perhaps, by the influence of television news and the "thematic" approach which flavored (and often flawed) its documentaries, e.g., *The Selling of the Pentagon* (1971).

The attitude was replicated in many newsrooms, big and small. The institutional structure of the press was looked on as a barrier to truth. Journalism would be purer and better if it were controlled by the reporters themselves. In the wake of the controversial coverage of the 1968 Chicago riots, young reporters throughout the country established new "journalism reviews"—sometimes in-house newsletters, sometimes magazines meant for a larger circulation. These usually attacked the residual power of publishers, the authority of editors, or the insufficient zeal of reporters in discomfiting politicians, business, and the military. The *Chicago Journalism Review* made its



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debut in late 1968, *MORE* magazine in New York in 1971.

These reviews were allied with a reform movement that advocated, at least implicitly, newsroom governance comparable to that of a Swiss canton; comparable to that of, for example, France's *Le Monde*, where newshands elect their own *rédacteur en chef*. "Reporter power" enjoyed a brief heyday, then expired, along with *MORE*. It never achieved formally in the area of newsroom control what the Newspaper Guild had wrought in terms of security. In part, this was because the battle had been won—newspaper editors had already become more "permissive," and objectivity, as a journalistic standard like the straightedge and compass of classical geometry, was widely accepted as, if not obsolete, then insufficient.

The antagonism between editors and reporters was minor compared with the continuing clash of press and government. Amid the strains of the Vietnam War and civil disorders at home, the Nixon administration in 1969, through Vice-President Agnew and others, had launched a public counter-attack on the "elitist" media and their "liberal" bias. Then, in 1971, came the first serious confrontation, over the "Pentagon Papers."

#### **"Fourth-branch" Rhetoric**

Hawk-turned-dove Daniel Ellsberg had tried for a year to make public the secret Pentagon study of the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. He had approached prominent anti-war politicians, among them Senators William Fulbright and George McGovern, but had not achieved his aim. Finally, Ellsberg called *New York Times* correspondent Neil Sheehan, a former Vietnam reporter who had recently begun writing in opposition to the war. Sheehan was interested in the study—and so was his newspaper. ("You have permission to proceed, young man," James Reston has been quoted as telling Sheehan.) In June 1971, the *Times* began publishing the Papers.

At first, there was no great stir—except at the rival *Washington Post* (where editor Benjamin Bradlee hastened to order a "catch-up"). But when the Nixon administration decided to suppress further publication on national security grounds, the confrontation was joined. The *Times's* and the *Post's* subsequent victory in the Supreme Court became a landmark in journalistic history. But had the Big League press gone too far in substituting its judgment for Washington's? Had it arrogated to itself a power unsanctioned either by law or by the public it claimed to represent? The debate over such questions continues.

In *Without Fear or Favor* (1980), a history of the *New York*

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*Times* centering on the Pentagon Papers case, Harrison Salisbury claims that the *Times* (and, one would like to think, the rest of the national press) "has quite literally become that Fourth Estate, that fourth coequal branch of government of which men like Thomas Carlyle spoke." The implications of such a claim are immense. "Fourth-branch" rhetoric has been around a long time, of course (Douglass Cater's *The Fourth Branch of Government* was published in 1959), but when Salisbury and others take the fourth-branch metaphor as literal truth, they imply that the press, like Congress, say, enjoys not only independence but also constitutional privileges and immunities. Time and again, this case, widely accepted among newsmen, has been made before the Supreme Court, but so far, at least, a majority of the Justices have refused to concur.

### Breeding Myths

Former *Times*man Salisbury puts forth another expansive claim in his book: that Watergate itself and hence the Watergate exposés (in which the *Post* took the lead) would not have happened except for the Pentagon Papers case (in which the *Times* took the lead). Given the security hysteria the case touched off in the Nixon White House, the proposition is supportable but unprovable, like much else about Watergate.

Watergate was a breeder of myths. The chief myth is that Joe and Frank Hardy (i.e., *Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein) solved the mystery and toppled a President. Actually, as political scientist Edward Jay Epstein noted back in 1973, the government itself cracked the case in its early stages. "What the press did between the break-in in June (1972) and the trial in January," Epstein wrote, "was to leak the case developed by the federal and Florida prosecutors to the public." Congress and Judge John Sirica carried the burden thereafter.

But it was difficult for the mere facts of a complicated story to compete with a glamorized version as compellingly presented in a popular movie, *All the President's Men* (1974). The "Woodstein" model was credited with filling the journalism schools (although, in fact, the influx of students had begun years earlier) and restoring to newspaper work much of its lost glamor.

Watergate also signaled the start of what some have seen as a period in which the press's confrontation with the federal government became excessive and unreasoning. Although some editors noted that the behavior of the government had been far from normal (necessitating, in their view, an abnormal response), others urged journalists to draw back. "The First

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Amendment is not just a hunting license," warned Associated Press general manager Wes Gallagher in 1975. "We must put before the public ways and means of strengthening the institutions that protect us all—not tear them down," he said.

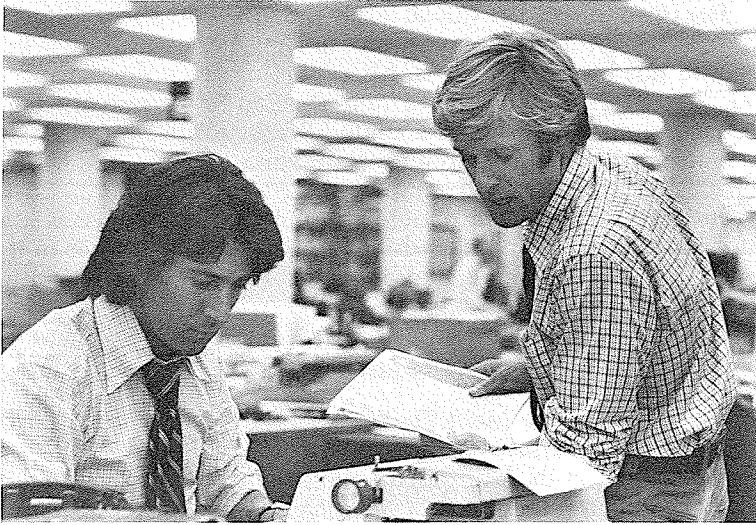
Under considerable criticism for a variety of sins, the media undertook during the Watergate era to overlay a veneer of public interest on their operations. In 1973, a coalition of foundations and media created the National News Council, a media-dominated, unofficial "ombudsman-at-large" for the national press. At the same time, many publications named their own in-house ombudsmen to handle readers' complaints, explain journalism to the public, and monitor the newspapers' performance. Reporters and editors often greeted these newcomers coolly; their presence seemed not only to promise the embarrassment that accompanies public discussion of newsroom frailties, but also to diminish professional autonomy. Newspapers also began running corrections regularly, sometimes in a reserved space, although victims of errors still complained that the corrections lacked substance and prominence.

### "Jimmy's World"

The temper of journalism after Watergate, as these reforms suggest, was not that of Agamemnon after Troy. To all outward appearances, the press was still acquiring new influence. Investigative, even accusatory, journalism had become more rather than less popular. Yet journalists were still uneasy. Chris Argyris, a Harvard management consultant who published in 1975 a thinly disguised study of the inner workings of the *New York Times*, observed (perhaps with some malice) that "the innards of the newspaper had many of the dynamics of the White House. I found the same kinds of interpersonal dynamics and internal politics; the same mistrust and win/lose competitiveness."

Although surveys showed that most journalists liked their work, despite its deadline pressures, many reporters seemed fueled by a sense of being under attack or of being in a race; indeed, the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain administered tests to job applicants to gauge just such desirable qualities. Was it surprising, then, that journalists, especially during the 1970s, tended to see government and politics in the same terms of aggression and competition?

For a decade, the key issue remained "control." "Young reporters have always wanted to change the world," wrote Charles B. Seib, then the *Washington Post's* ombudsman, in 1978. But, he went on, "in the old days, when a reporter let his opinions



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Actors Dustin Hoffman (left) and Robert Redford portrayed hard-working reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward in *All the President's Men* (1974). The film fed the myth that the press "cracked" the Watergate case.

show he was quickly brought to heel by an editor" and eventually was turned into "what we called an objective reporter—meaning a reporter who stuck strictly to the raw, unvarnished facts. Nowadays editors are inclined to be more permissive." Seib said he was glad "the days of trying for blind objectivity are over," but he warned: "Too often the new permissiveness is carried too far."

That newspapers indeed at times carried the "new permissiveness" too far became very clear to all in the spring of 1981, when a story by a *Washington Post* reporter was awarded a Pulitzer prize for feature-writing. It turned out, however, that reporter Janet Cooke had simply made up "Jimmy's World," her tale of a (non-existent) eight-year-old heroin addict. Despite certain clues, *Post* editors, including Bob Woodward of Watergate fame, had failed to discern the deception. Cooke resigned, and the *Post* returned her Pulitzer. The next day, the newspaper assured readers in an apologetic editorial that "more of the skepticism and heat that [we] traditionally bring to bear on the outside world will now be trained on our own interior workings.

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One of these episodes is one too many.”

The uproar over the Cooke affair did not soon abate. Shortly afterwards, a *Daily News* columnist in New York was fired when he could not back up some of his reporting from northern Ireland. Reporters in Minnesota and Oregon were punished for inventing quotations. The Associated Press admitted that an account it had distributed about a California joy ride had been a “composite” story. In February 1982, the *New York Times* admitted on page one that an article written by a freelance writer about his trip to Cambodia, which appeared in December in the *New York Times Magazine*, had been a fabrication. The writer, in fact, had not left Spain.

### A Romantic Haze?

As a result of the Janet Cooke affair and the ensuing “crime wave” of newly-disclosed hoaxes, fakes, and frauds, editors began reasserting their authority over reporters. A survey of 312 editors conducted for the American Society of Newspaper Editors’ Ethics Committee found 30 percent of them had changed their policies because of the Cooke scandal. More than a third said they were keeping a closer eye on reporters and the accuracy of their stories. Fewer than two percent of the editors said they would allow reporters to keep identifications of sources from editors; 55 per cent said identification had to be provided on request, and 41 percent said it must always be provided.

To outsiders, the press now seemed a little on the defensive. The first “hot” newspaper movie since *All the President’s Men* appeared toward the end of 1981; *Absence of Malice*—whose script was written by former *Detroit Free Press* editor Kurt Luedtke—portrayed a venal press cloaking its mischief in the First Amendment.

As the pendulum swung back, journalists began asking tougher questions about their own performance. The *Wall Street Journal* in 1982 attacked other newspapers’ coverage of El Salvador as cut from the same cloth as the journalism of John Reed in Russia, Herbert Matthews in Cuba, and David Halberstam in Vietnam. (Halberstam defended himself ably.) In the March 1982 *Washington Journalism Review*, Shirley Christian, a Pulitzer-prize winning correspondent for the *Miami Herald*, suggested that too many American reporters covering the civil war in Nicaragua during 1978–79 had seen the leftist Sandinista National Liberation Front through a “romantic haze.” *New York Times* reporter Alan Riding and *Washington Post* foreign editor Karen DeYoung offered rebuttals.

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Such intramural debates, however acrimonious, may be a healthy sign that a dilemma, underlined by publication of the classified Pentagon Papers, is at last being brought into the open. Journalists are committed to serving the truth, or at least the "facts." Yet they are unable to avoid wielding influence. Any big story may produce some damaging social or political effect. The public knows this instinctively, but journalists have usually said, "Damn the consequences!" Now, it seems, they are being put on notice that they can be called to account. As AP's Wes Gallagher had warned seven years earlier: "The press cannot remain free without the proper functioning of the government, the judicial branch and private institutions in a democracy. The press also is an institution. All rise and fall together."

Journalism's responses so far have been imperfect. One of the most publicized was that of the *New York Daily News's* Michael J. O'Neill, in a May 1982 farewell address as president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. He seemed to be accepting, almost point by point, the critique advanced since 1970 by neoconservative intellectuals. Journalists, he said, should "make peace with government," should cure themselves of their "adversarial mindset." Editors, he said, should exercise stricter control; they need to be "ruthless in ferreting out the subtle biases—cultural, visceral, and ideological—that still slip into copy." He brushed off "investigative" journalism as a series of chases after corrupt officials, to the neglect of more important, more complex stories.

Thus, the most recent generation of journalists, the one that grew up in the Vietnam and Watergate years, is now receiving the message from its elders that the heyday of autonomy has ended.

If they misinterpret that message, it will simply mean that journalism will become less courageous. But the real message is different: Journalists, however bright or idealistic, can no longer pretend to live outside society and to live by their own rules. Society wants and needs their services, but not if the price seems too high. In the long run, American society will determine what kind of journalism it wants; only to a far lesser degree will journalists determine what kind of society America will be.

## THE PRESS IN COURT

*by A. E. Dick Howard*

The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States consists of a single sentence:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

When that sentence became law in 1791, the clause pertaining to the press rendered Congress powerless to enact any law restraining the press in advance from printing whatever it wanted. That, many people thought at the time, did not mean that the press should escape criminal penalty if it published “seditious libels,” “licentious opinions,” or “malicious falsehoods.” Indeed, in 1798, during the Presidency of John Adams, Congress enacted the Federalist-sponsored Sedition Act. It prescribed a fine and imprisonment for persons convicted of publishing “any false, scandalous, and malicious writing” bringing into disrepute the U.S. government, Congress, or the President.

Was the act, under which 25 persons were eventually prosecuted, constitutional? The Jeffersonian Republicans, at whose publicists it was aimed, thought not. Some of them—including James Madison, the “father” of the Bill of Rights—took an expansive view of freedom of the press. “It would seem a mockery,” wrote Madison, “to say that no laws shall be passed preventing publications from being made, but that laws might be passed for punishing them in case they should be made.”

Thomas Jefferson himself harbored a more complex view. On the one hand, he thought the Sedition Act unconstitutional—and, when he became President, pardoned the 10 Republican editors and printers who had been convicted under the law. On the other hand, as he explained in 1804 to Adams’s wife, Abigail, the law’s unconstitutionality did not mean that “the overwhelming torrent of slander” in the country was to go unrestrained. “While we deny that Congress have a right to control the freedom of the press,” he wrote, “we have ever asserted the right of the States, and their exclusive right, to do so.”

A year earlier, New York State had, in fact, indicted a Federalist editor for “seditious libel” against President Jefferson. On the editor’s behalf, Alexander Hamilton, though a sup-

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porter of the Sedition Act, eloquently reasserted the principles enunciated in 1735 in the John Peter Zenger case.\* Hamilton championed the right of the jury (rather than the court) to determine if there had been libel, argued truth as a defense against libel, and defended the right of the press "to publish, with impunity, truth, with good motives, for justifiable ends, though reflecting on government, magistracy, or individuals." In 1805, New York passed a libel law embodying the Hamiltonian view. Other states soon followed suit. Ultimately, Hamilton's position came to prevail throughout the republic. Because the U.S. Supreme Court under John Marshall and his successors offered no guidance, there matters stood.

### The Court as Oracle

Indeed, not until the 20th century did the Supreme Court begin actively interpreting the First Amendment's press clause. Even then most of its decisions had to await the 1960s when, amid the divisive tensions of war and rapid social change, Americans acquired a taste for litigation, and the press became more assertive in its coverage of local and national governments. The Supreme Court soon had its hands full.

The Court's freedom-of-the-press cases may be arranged into three principal categories:

¶ Cases in which citizens, of various degrees of renown, seek damages for alleged libels against them by the press.

¶ Cases in which the government seeks to keep the press from publishing what it wants to publish.

¶ Cases in which the press claims special legal privileges, such as the right to refuse to reveal a news source's identity to a grand jury, or the right to be given access to government institutions or proceedings.

A \$9.2 million libel judgment in 1980 against the *Alton Telegraph* forced the 38,000-circulation Illinois daily to file for bankruptcy to avoid having to sell its assets. Although a settlement was reached this year and the paper remains in business, the case—which involved a never-published memorandum by two reporters—pointed up a lesson that few in the news business have to learn twice: A successful libel action, painful even to a wealthy defendant, can be fatal to a small one. However, thanks to the First Amendment and the Supreme Court, the press has

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\*Zenger, a New York printer, was accused of seditious libel. His lawyer, Andrew Hamilton, argued that the press should be free to print truthful criticism of a "bad" governor (meaning the unpopular Governor William Cosby). Hamilton urged the jury to decide the law as well as the facts. The jury did so—and acquitted Zenger.



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gained certain protective immunities.

The Supreme Court, under Chief Justice Earl Warren, handed down its most important libel decision in 1964 in *New York Times v. Sullivan*, a case involving supporters of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1960, they had placed an advertisement in the *Times* criticizing, with some inaccuracies, officials' handling of civil rights demonstrations in Montgomery, Alabama, and elsewhere in the South. L. B. Sullivan, Montgomery's police commissioner, sued the newspaper and the ad's sponsors (though he himself had not been mentioned in the ad). An Alabama jury awarded Sullivan \$500,000. But the Supreme Court, harking back to Alexander Hamilton, ruled that a "public official" seeking damages for a defamatory falsehood relating to his official conduct must prove that the statement had been made with "actual malice"—i.e., with knowledge that the statement was false, or with "reckless disregard" of whether it was or not. Otherwise, the Court contended, would-be critics might not speak out, for fear the truth could not be proven in court, at least not without great expense.

### Changing Course

Newspapermen were delighted by this decision—which, said *Times* publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, "makes freedom of the press more secure than ever before"—and their satisfaction grew with each subsequent ruling by the Supreme Court. In 1967, the Court (*Curtis Publishing Co. v. Butts*) extended the *Sullivan* principle to cover "public figures" (not just officials), such as Wally Butts, a former University of Georgia athletic director. Butts had sued Curtis over a *Saturday Evening Post* report that he had given football plays to Alabama rival Bear Bryant. Four years later, in *Rosenbloom v. Metromedia*, the Court (by a plurality) extended the *Sullivan* principle still further—to include private individuals involved in matters of "public or general interest."

But then the Supreme Court, under Justice Warren

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Mike Peters/Dayton Daily News.

As this 1979 cartoon makes plain, a succession of “adverse” Supreme Court decisions in recent First Amendment cases aroused the press’s ire.

Burger, began to change course. Despite its 1971 decision, the Court in 1974 ruled (*Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc.*) that prominent Chicago attorney Elmer Gertz, who had defended a client in a widely publicized case, was neither a public official nor a public figure—and hence did not need to prove he had been libeled with “malice.” Two years later the Court (*Time Inc. v. Firestone*) decided that Palm Beach socialite Mary Alice Firestone, who had been party to a highly publicized divorce proceeding, was also not a public figure. Still more sobering for the press was *Hutchinson v. Proxmire* (1979), wherein the Court excluded from the “public-figure” realm a Michigan state mental hospital’s research director who had received more than \$500,000 in federal grants for research into monkey behavior. U.S. Senator William Proxmire had ridiculed Dr. Ronald Hutchinson’s research, and Hutchinson had sued the Senator for libel.

Some prominent members of the press, however, were more upset in 1979 by the Court’s ruling in *Herbert v. Lando* that the First Amendment did not protect CBS News correspondent Mike Wallace and *60 Minutes* producer Barry Lando from having to

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answer pretrial discovery questions about their editorial process. The case involved a program questioning the veracity of Anthony Herbert, a former Army lieutenant colonel who had accused the Army of covering up reports of atrocities against civilians in Vietnam. To win his libel case, Herbert, as an acknowledged "public figure," had to prove malice, hence had to probe CBS's decision-making. William A. Leonard, then president of CBS News, said the decision denied "constitutional protection to the journalist's most precious possession—his mind, his thoughts, and his editorial judgment." How a public figure was supposed to prove "actual malice" without inquiring into the journalist's state of mind went unexplained. Eventually, most editors seemed to realize that the *Herbert* decision was a natural corollary of *Sullivan*. It had just taken a while in coming.

### Properly 'Chilled'

While the pendulum has swung back toward safeguarding the rights of individuals, nothing the Supreme Court has done of late compares in significance with the 1964 *Sullivan* case. That decision represented an immense shift in favor of the press—one so great that even some newspapermen regret it. Kurt Luedtke, former executive editor of the *Detroit Free Press*, argued before the American Newspaper Publishers Association last spring that, prior to *Sullivan*, "the burden on the press was not at all excessive; the 'chilling effect' which the threat of libel action posed chilled exactly what it was supposed to."

Most newspaper publishers, and their lawyers, accountants, and editors, think otherwise. They want not only to feel free to publish critical articles, but also to be assured that newspapers need not pay vast sums to persons deemed by juries victims of libel. While research by a Stanford law professor, Marc Franklin, has shown that between 1977 and 1980, media defendants won more than 90 percent of libel cases, "winning" is not everything, especially for small papers. Said John K. Zollinger, publisher of the *Gallup Independent*, a 10,795-circulation daily in New Mexico, "We're spending almost 2 percent of our net profit on 'legal.' It's no joke any more. . . . You win and still pay."

If libel is the press's most publicized problem, one even closer to the heart of the First Amendment is "prior restraint"—the chief issue in another cluster of Supreme Court cases.

For centuries, authors and journalists have inveighed against censorship or "gagging" of the press by government. "And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth," advised John Milton in 1644, "so Truth be in

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the field, we do injuriously by licencing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength." Yet the principle—and the First Amendment embodying it—underwent a severe test in 1971. In June of that year, the *New York Times* began publishing extracts from the "Pentagon Papers," (a classified Defense Department history of U.S. Vietnam involvement), and the Nixon Administration went to court to stop further publication. The Supreme Court, however, by a 6 to 3 vote (*New York Times v. United States*) ruled in favor of the *Times*—a landmark decision.

### Newsmen in Jail

In subsequent years, journalists savored further gains, even as lawyers and some judges complained of the new "arrogance" of the media. Thus, in 1976 the Supreme Court (*Nebraska Press Association v. Stuart*) unanimously ruled invalid a Nebraska judge's "gag order" preventing the press from reporting salient details of a murder trial. And the Court, again unanimously (*Landmark Communications v. Virginia*), in 1978 overturned a verdict against Norfolk's *Virginian-Pilot* for publishing, despite state law, an (accurate) account of proceedings before a state judicial review commission. All in all, the press has largely had its way in specific gag order cases, even though the Supreme Court has not ruled gag orders per se unconstitutional.\*

A third group of cases tackled by the Supreme Court—dealing with questions of journalistic privilege—has perhaps been the murkiest.

In 1958, Marie Torre, a *New York Herald Tribune* television columnist, refused to divulge the identity of a CBS executive whom she had quoted as saying that singer Judy Garland had "an inferiority complex" and was "terribly fat." As a result, Torre was cited by the judge for contempt of court (Garland, in those pre-*Sullivan* days, had sued CBS) and eventually served a brief jail term. During the tumultuous 1970s, perhaps a dozen newsmen went to jail rather than reveal in court their sources for stories. The newsmen included William T. Farr of the *Los Angeles Times*, Peter J. Bridge of the *Newark Evening News*, and Myron J. Farber of the *New York Times*. Farber, at the murder trial of a New Jersey doctor, refused to turn over his reportorial

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\*In a related category of cases, government seeks to force the press to publish what it does not wish to publish. Here, the Supreme Court has sharply distinguished between the electronic and print media. In *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC* (1969), the Court upheld FCC regulations requiring radio and TV stations to give reply time to individuals criticized on the air. But in *Miami Herald v. Tornillo* (1974), the Court ruled that Florida's "right of reply" statute requiring newspapers to print a political candidate's reply to editorial criticism violated the First Amendment.

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notes to a judge (although, it emerged, the reporter had signed contracts to write a book on the case). Farber's newspaper articles had been instrumental in the doctor's indictment. The jury found the doctor not guilty.

Journalists have argued that to gather news, they need to be able to preserve the anonymity of their sources. The First Amendment, they assert, puts them in a different category from other citizens. The Supreme Court, however, in a 5 to 4 decision (*Branzburg v. Hayes*, 1972) ruled that even a newspaper reporter (in that case, for the Louisville *Courier-Journal*) must respond to a grand jury subpoena and answer questions relevant to a criminal investigation. The *Branzburg* ruling did not prevent state legislatures from enacting so-called shield laws of varying strengths, designed to protect reporters from being forced to reveal their sources. After *Branzburg*, 11 states amended existing shield laws or created new ones; 15 others retained shield laws already on the books.

### Searching Newsrooms

Privilege of another sort was the issue in 1978 when the Supreme Court, in a 5 to 3 decision, ruled that the First Amendment does not bar police, if they have a warrant, from searching newspaper offices for evidence of crime. (The case, *Zurcher v. Stanford Daily*, involved the Stanford University student newspaper, and the evidence sought was photographs of a clash between demonstrators and police.) *Los Angeles Times* editor Bill Thomas said at the time that Justice Byron White's written opinion showed he "neither cares much nor knows much about the problems of the press." Critics—notably the American Newspaper Publishers Association and the American Society of Newspaper Editors—appealed to Congress, which in 1980 passed a law requiring police, in most situations, to get a subpoena before searching newspaper offices for criminal evidence.

Perhaps the most ambitious First Amendment claim advanced by the press has been that it has a "right" to gather news—a right, that is, to have access to government agencies, documents, and deliberations.

The Burger Court has not embraced this notion eagerly. The Court has ruled that journalists have no constitutional right to interview prison inmates (*Pell v. Procunier*, 1974) or to inspect local jails (*Houchins v. KQED*, 1978). Most disturbing, from the press's point of view, was the Court's 5 to 4 decision in 1979 to uphold the closing, to both public and press, of a pretrial suppression-of-evidence hearing in a murder case. Justice Potter

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Stewart's majority opinion in *Gannett Co. v. DePasquale* actually revolved around the Sixth Amendment (with its guarantee of a public trial) rather than the First. (The Court said a trial was "public" for the benefit of the accused rather than the public.) But David F. Stolberg, a Scripps-Howard executive, said the decision was "so violative of our whole Anglo-American tradition of open government that the minority position must eventually prevail. In the meantime, it is not just a press fight—it is a freedom fight."

Newspapermen are prone to enshrine freedom-of-the-press as an absolute—and to become apoplectic when judges do not display a similarly single-minded zeal in *their* defense of the First Amendment. In fact, however, there are other freedoms, notably those in the other amendments in the Bill of Rights. When various rights conflict, courts must seek a resolution. In any event, the Supreme Court in 1980 (*Richmond Newspapers v. Virginia*) assuaged some of the fears inspired by *Gannett* with a decision assuring press and public of access to criminal trials, unless there be an "overriding interest" for closure.

When it comes to the First Amendment, the men and women of the press are—as is natural and no doubt useful—the first to take alarm when their prerogatives are even marginally encroached upon. But the Supreme Court over the past two decades has hardly been bent on gutting the press clause of the First Amendment.

The Court, to be sure, has manifestly rejected the notion that the press should enjoy any "preferred status" under the First Amendment (and so has insisted that journalists can be called to testify before grand juries). And in balancing a person's stake in his good name against the press's right to publish, the Court has unmistakably tended to limit the 1964 *Sullivan* ruling, in favor of individuals and their reputations.

However, when—as in the Pentagon Papers and later cases—government has tried to restrain the press from, or punish it for, publishing information already in its possession, the Court has strongly defended the press and its freedom. As Floyd Abrams, a media attorney and frequent critic of the Supreme Court, concluded in 1980: "The American press has never been more free, never been more uninhibited, and—most important—never been better protected by law."

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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### THE NEWS MEDIA

"News and truth are not the same things, and must be clearly distinguished." So, in 1922, wrote Walter Lippmann in **Public Opinion** (Macmillan, 4th ed., 1965, cloth & paper). "The press is no substitute for [other] institutions. . . . Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episodes, incidents, and eruptions."

Such lofty talk was long in coming to American journalism. In **American Journalism—A History: 1690–1960** (Macmillan, 3rd ed., 1962), the University of Missouri's Frank Luther Mott notes that the first continuous U.S. newspaper was the *Boston News-Letter*, founded in 1704 by Boston's postmaster, John Campbell. The weekly did not thrive: 15 years later, Campbell complained that he could not "vend 300 copies at an impression."

Circulation remained small because Campbell and other early editors catered to a tiny mercantile elite, printing mostly shipping news and advertisements.

That all changed during the 1830s. Jacksonian Democracy, with its egalitarian politics and free-market philosophy, not only encouraged entrepreneurs to start newspapers, but helped to create an audience for them.

The new papers—the first was the *New York Sun*—cost 1¢, a sixth of the then-usual cost, and so were labeled "the penny press." They covered "not just commerce or politics but social life . . . the activities of an increasingly varied, urban, and middle-class society" writes Uni-

versity of Chicago sociologist Michael Schudson in **Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers** (Basic, 1978). In 1830, Schudson estimates, the combined circulation of all U.S. dailies was 78,000; within 10 years, the total shot up to about 300,000.

In the years after the Civil War, a muckraking manic-depressive Hungarian immigrant named Joseph Pulitzer further expanded the newspaper audience. Biographer W. A. Swanberg tells how Pulitzer (Scribner's, 1967), wedding reform to sensationalism, developed the newspaper crusade as a way of hooking America's giant new working-class immigrant population on the daily newspaper habit.

Expelled from Harvard in his junior year, William Randolph Hearst went to work at Pulitzer's *New York World*. That served as an apprenticeship. In 1885, he took over the San Francisco *Examiner*, bought by his father with part of the proceeds from the Comstock Lode. Like Pulitzer, Swanberg writes, **Citizen Hearst** (Bantam, 2nd ed., 1963) was excruciatingly shy in person but explosive in print. Hearst took a lower road to success, following a "crime and underwear" recipe. He sent his reporters to hunt grizzly bears, or to fall overboard from ferryboats, or to escort Sarah Bernhardt to a San Francisco opium den.

By 1923, two young men fresh out of Yale, Henry R. Luce and Britton Hadden, decided news was so abundant that it needed to be organized, condensed, and (because dry facts

did not suffice) interpreted. Thus was born a new branch of journalism, the news magazine. With *Time* came a new style, notable for its Homeric epithets ("bumper-jawed," "long-whiskered") and odd linguistic shrinkages ("in time's nick"). Former *Time* editor Robert Elson tells the story in the company-sponsored **Time Inc: The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise, 1923-1941** (Atheneum, 1968).

As the mid-20th century wore on, technology brought entirely new media, radio and television. Broadcast journalists faced a unique problem: People did not buy radios or TV sets primarily to get the news. "You've got to get them into the tent!" CBS evening news producer (and now *60 Minutes* producer) Don Hewitt used to shout at his crews during the 1950s.

One of the first to get folks "into the tent" was Edward R. Murrow, a man who, in his own words, had not been "contaminated by the conventions of print." Murrow's great feat, notes former CBS writer Gary Paul Gates in his chatty **Air Time: The Inside History of CBS News** (Harper, 1978, cloth; Berkley, 1979, paper), was to shift radio news from the studio to the scene of the event—in his case, London during World War II. And Murrow succeeded, Gates argues, because he "mastered the art of *playing* himself."

Media critic Edward Jay Epstein's more scholarly **News From Nowhere** (Random, 1974, cloth & paper) concentrates on NBC-TV News but finds a similar philosophy of news as entertainment.

*New Yorker* critic Michael Arlen suggests in **The View From Highway One** (Farrar, 1976, cloth; Ballantine, 1977, paper) that broadcast journalists should not be condemned for

failing to provide the facts as well as do their print counterparts. Television news, he contends, seeks to convey not information pertaining to an event but the "feel" of it. Television critic Ron Powers concurs. Looking at local TV news in **The Newscasters** (St. Martin's, 1977), he concludes that during the 1970s it succumbed to the underlying "entertainment bias" of the medium.

Yet the harried gentlemen of the print media are also susceptible to manipulation. So says Edwin R. Bayley, who covered the erratic anti-Red crusades of Sen. Joseph McCarthy (R-Wis.) as a reporter for the *Milwaukee Journal*. In **Joe McCarthy and the Press** (Univ. of Wis., 1981), Bayley, now journalism dean at the University of California at Berkeley, argues that it was television, not newspapers, that did McCarthy in, when, in 1954, the televised Army-McCarthy hearings brought the ugliness of the senator's attacks into America's living rooms.

A little more than a decade later, the manipulators of the media came from the Left. "The media and the movement needed each other"—one for melodrama, the other for exposure, asserts radical-turned-sociologist Todd Gitlin in **The Whole World is Watching** (Univ. of Calif., 1980).

But the price the Left paid for exploiting the media was losing some of its leaders (e.g., Tom Hayden) to the delights of celebrity and having other "pseudo-leaders" (e.g., Jerry Rubin) foisted upon it. And when, after the Tet offensive shocked America in 1968, the press and TV turned against the Vietnam War, they ignored the radical Left and shifted to a sympathetic focus on the more moderate "Clean for Gene" (McCarthy) antiwar crowd.



Why and how the Communists' Tet offensive overwhelmed the American media is explained by *WQ* editor (and former *Washington Post* Saigon bureau chief) Peter Braestrup in **Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet in 1968 in Vietnam and Washington**, 2 vols. (Westview, 1977; Yale, rev. ed., forthcoming). Braestrup argues that journalists hastily interpreted the drama of Tet as a U.S. military "disaster" when it was not, and thereby aggravated the political crisis in Lyndon Johnson's Washington.

Vietnam jarred notions of journalistic "neutrality," as when, in October 1969, 500 Time Inc. employees used company facilities for antiwar protests and 150 *New York Times* employees staged an antiwar vigil in front of the newspaper's offices.

Within weeks, the new administration had turned on the press. University of Michigan journalism professor William E. Porter tells, in **Assault on the Media: The Nixon Years** (Univ. of Mich., 1976, cloth & paper), how the Nixon White House distinguished itself from earlier administrations by setting out "to damage the credibility not of a single journalist but of whole classes of them."

But such clashes were not unprecedented in America. Historian Leonard Levy documents the early days in **Freedom of the Press from Zenger to Jefferson** (Bobbs-Merrill, 1966). The great Nixon-era confrontation, the "Pentagon Papers" case, is well-illuminated in **The Papers and the Papers** by Sanford J. Ungar (Dutton, 1972).

Post-mortems on the media's coverage of the 1972 presidential campaign indicate that Nixon got a fair shake not because of, but in spite

of, his attacks. So contends former *National Observer* columnist James M. Perry in **Us and Them: How the Press Covered the 1972 Election** (Crown, 1973). Timothy Crouse suggests in **The Boys on the Bus** (Random, 1973, cloth; Ballantine, 1976, paper) that political writers are guided less by ideology than by a nose for blood.

Watergate soon followed. The best-known memoir on the subject is **All the President's Men** (Simon & Schuster, 1974, cloth; Warner, 1976, paper) by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, then reporters for the *Washington Post*. Today that book is interesting for what it suggests between the lines, e.g., how late senior *Post* executives were in taking control of the story. By mid-September 1972, when *Post* executive editor Benjamin Bradlee took an active interest, the newspaper had already consigned its prestige and credibility to two worried young reporters.

Edward Jay Epstein takes a skeptic's view of this press saga and others in **Between Fact and Fiction: The Problem of Journalism** (Vintage, 1975). And Kurt and Gladys Lang re-examine Watergate media coverage, politicians' behavior, and poll results in **The Battle for Public Opinion** (Columbia, forthcoming).

Watergate was an exception for the press as well as the Presidency. In **Reporting: An Inside View** (Sacramento: California Journal Press, 1977, cloth & paper), longtime newsman Lou Cannon presents a sober view of the profession in normal times, significantly devoting entire chapters to the biases, limitations, and frustrations of the craft. Cannon approvingly quotes columnist Russell Baker: "The print journalist has a lot in common with Willy Loman [of *Death of a Salesman*]

... living a rather dreary life with the reality of it romanticized by good booze."

Over the last two decades, increasingly sophisticated romanticizations have appeared. Before David Halberstam mythologized CBS, *Time*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Post* in **The Powers That Be** (Knopf, 1979, cloth; Dell, 1980, paper), another former *New York Times* man, Gay Talese, produced a melodrama, **The Kingdom and the Power** (Calder & Boyars, 1971, cloth; Dell, 1981, paper), which portrays executive struggles at the *Times* during the 1960s as personality clashes rather than conflicts caused by differing ideas about the paper's direction.

A 1971 survey of 1,300 media folk across the nation yielded an unromantic but useful portrait, **The News People: A Sociological Portrait of American Journalists and Their Work** (Univ. of Ill., 1976) by John W. C. Johnstone and others.

One major task of newspaper editors and sub-editors is selecting what "news" to print out of the information pouring into the newsroom from wire services and staff reporters. In **The Information Machines: Their Impact on Men and the Media** (Harper, 1971, cloth & paper), former *Washington Post* ombudsman Ben Bagdikian reports that during an ordinary seven-hour shift, the news editor of a small suburban paper makes rapid decisions on stories totaling "about 110,000 words, or the

equivalent of a book."

But editors often fail to insist that staffers do their homework. Brookings Institution Senior Fellow Stephen Hess surveyed **The Washington Reporters** (Brookings, 1981, cloth & paper) and found that they read one another's prose, and not much else. For example, only one quarter of the reporters covering law read law journals, and economics reporters follow only the popular business magazines, such as *Forbes*.

**Who Owns The Media?** (Knowledge Industries Publications, rev. ed., 1982) asks Benjamin Compaine; he provides details on newspaper chains (e.g., Gannett, Newhouse), multimedia conglomerates, and TV networks. Chain ownership may or may not improve a local monopoly paper's news coverage. Some big chains, e.g., Thomson, are more highly regarded for their cash flow than for their journalism. For all major media, Compaine predicts, slower growth but "substantial profits" lie ahead.

Whatever the '80s bring, old newshands will no doubt continue to quote the definition of news provided by novelist Evelyn Waugh in **Scoop** (Little, Brown, 1938; 1977, cloth & paper), the hilarious satire that foreign correspondents recommend to neophytes for the inside story: "News," Waugh writes, "is what a chap who doesn't care much about anything wants to read."

—Tom Ricks

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Tom Ricks is a contributing editor of the *Washington Journalism Review*. This essay is based on suggestions by George Washington University's Christopher Sterling. See also *WQ Background Books* essays on *Television in America* (Winter 1981), and *TV News and Politics* (Spring 1977).