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.

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

*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*.

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."

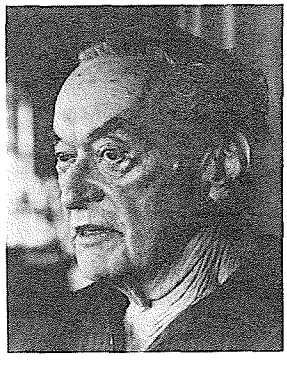
Farewell to the Colonel

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.

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.

*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.*

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

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 antiwar 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*

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

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.

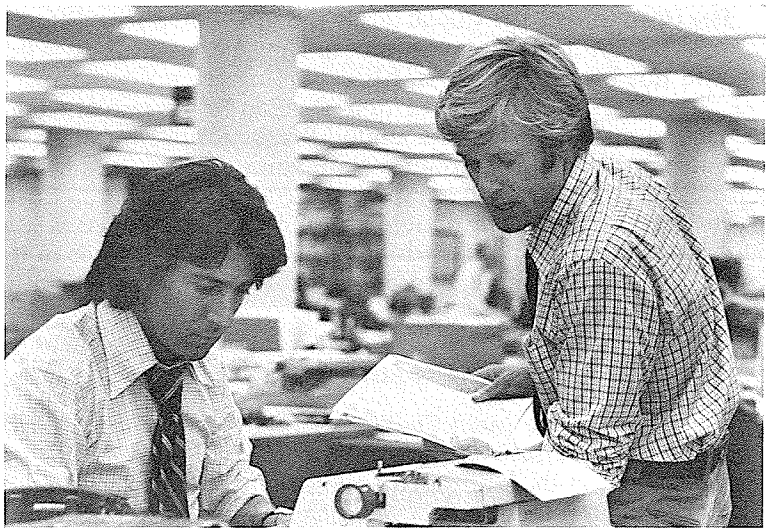
Under considerable criticism for a variety of sins, the media undertook during the Watergate era to overlay a veneer of public interest on their operations. In 1973, a coalition of foundations and media created the National News Council, a media-dominated, unofficial "ombudsman-at-large" for the national 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



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.

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.

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.