

**SOCIETY**

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ful as his competitors is worth exactly twice as much and no more.

When there is no substitute for that last iota of talent (or box-office drawing power), competition is intense. Sorting out the legions of U.S. high school and college basketball players produces only 250 National Basketball Association pros (average NBA salary: \$250,000). Then, the superstars are culled from the stars. On the men's pro golf tour, Rosen notes, the top five money winners "have annual stroke averages that are less than five percent lower than the 50th or 60th ranking players, yet they earn four or five times as much money."

This disparity may not be "fair," writes Rosen, but from an economic standpoint it is inevitable. Television and other mass media magnify superstars' drawing power many times over. Why should viewers settle for mere stars when a superstar is just a turn of the dial away?

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**PRESS & TELEVISION**

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*In One Ear,  
Out the Other*

"What Do Readers Digest" by John Robinson and Mark Levy, in *The Washington Journalism Review* (Oct. 1983), 2233 Wisconsin Ave. N.W., Suite 442, Washington, D.C. 20007.

The national news media seem to have an annoying penchant for beating stories to death—for example, Nancy Reagan's china. But according to Robinson and Levy, researcher and journalism professor, respectively, at the University of Maryland, journalists should stick with some stories much longer than they do now.

Last May and June, the authors surveyed 1,070 adults—526 in "news savvy" Washington, D.C., and 544 nationwide—to learn how knowledgeable they were about the top news stories of the day. The researchers found much ignorance.

At a time when newspapers and TV newscasts were daily reporting on the Reagan administration's hostility toward Nicaragua's Sandinista regime and on U.S. support for the regime in neighboring El Salvador, fewer than one in six of the respondents could say which side the United States favored in both strife-torn countries. More than half of those who gave an answer thought that Washington was friendly or neutral toward the Sandinistas.

What those surveyed *did* tend to remember, the authors say, was "human interest" news. Nearly all of them knew that Sally Ride, America's first woman astronaut, was aboard the Space Shuttle orbiting the Earth in June. Four out of five knew that homosexuals were the likeliest victims of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). Yet even being a "name in the news" was no guarantee of recognition: Fewer than half of the respondents could identify Polish Solidarity leader Lech Walesa and even fewer knew who Yuri Andropov was.

"It is not the public's job to be on top of the news," Robinson and

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Levy contend. Ordinary folk have "licensed" journalists to decide what is important and to explain it clearly. But newsmen incorrectly assume that their easily distracted audience follows the news as intently as they do, and that readers and TV viewers become bored with a continuing story when editors do. Journalists should try to understand their audience better—friends and colleagues are bad gauges—and learn what people need or want to know and how to convey it.

Simply putting a story on page one for a few days, the authors say, is not all that the press can do to assure that the news gets through.

### *Congratulations For Nothing*

"Covering the EPA, or, Wake me up if anything happens" by R. Jeffrey Smith, in *The Columbia Journalism Review* (Sept.-Oct. 1983), 200 Alton Pl., Marion, Ohio 43302.

One morning last March, a *Washington Post* headline announced: EPA FIASCO: THE SYSTEM WORKS! The "system" was the check on bureaucratic malfeasance imposed by a vigilant press. But Smith, a *Science* magazine writer, doubts that such journalistic self-congratulations are in order.

Actually, he argues, reporters (especially those in Washington) ignored red flags at the Environmental Protection Agency for two years—signs of the questionable ties between its top officials and business and of lax enforcement of rules that ultimately led to wholesale firings and resignations. In 1981, for example, EPA administrator Anne Burford barred the agency's regional offices from citing manufacturers for violations of hazardous waste disposal regulations—a signal that she was trying to cut back on the number of citations. Not until February 1983 did reporters pay attention to Burford's October 1982 refusal to hand over documents to a House committee investigating EPA's performance in regulating disposal of hazardous materials in landfills.

About 20 Washington reporters cover the EPA more or less regularly, Smith notes, but their job is complex. No single reporter can grasp all the details in the fields—pesticides, air and water pollution—that the agency regulates. As a result, coverage has been superficial.

In October 1981, the CBS *Evening News* reported that Burford planned to cut EPA's budget, but it treated the news strictly as a political story, noting only that some congressmen feared the agency would be "gutted." Viewers never learned what regulations or research might be sacrificed. Reporters did no better once the Burford scandal surfaced last March, thanks to persistent congressional investigation. "Pack journalism" quickly set in, says Smith, as newsmen scrambled to record the charges and countercharges of EPA's congressional critics and the agency's top officials. Solid evidence, although available, was slow to appear.

"It takes energy and time," Smith concludes, "to reach deep into the federal bureaucracy and extract stories." In the EPA scandal, journalists did not try to reach very far.