Journalism as a High Profession in

Journalism as a High Profession in Spite of Itself

The famous early newspaperman James Gordon Bennett, the editor of the *New York Herald* and one of the founders of that first popular medium the penny press, back in 1836 at the start of the age of mass communication, described the role of newspapers as he saw it:

> Books have had their day—the theaters have had their day—the temple of religion has had its day. A newspaper can be made to take the lead in all of the great movements of human thought and of human civilization. A newspaper can send more souls to Heaven, and save more from Hell, than all the churches or chapels in New York—besides making money at the same time.

I suggest that the practitioners in any institution so central and so powerful as to supplant churches, schools, books, and the theater, and to take the lead in all these great movements of human thought and civilization, are part of a high calling, a demanding profession—whether they know it or not, whether their institution admits it or not.

It is true that the journalist is a different sort of "professional" in a different sort of institution from the doctor or lawyer. In traditional theory, if not in much of current practice, doctors and lawyers are independent professionals, making moral choices of great importance on their own—holding in their hands, often literally, the life and well-being of another. Modern journalism, on the other hand, is a collective enterprise, with wire services, assignment desks, city editors, editorial conferences, make-up desks, advertisers, owners of chains, enormous pressures of time and space, and commercial breaks for words from our sponsor. The modern journalist is not an independent agent, although he may once long ago have been so, when he himself owned and printed and reported his own little *Bootstrap Bugle*. He or she is now a hired employee of a profit-seeking business: WISH-TV, *The Washington Post*, *The Bloomington Herald Telephone*, CBS News, *Time* Magazine,

tus, of that collectivity. Peter Arnett made many very important decisions about his reporting from Baghdad under Saddam Hussein's thumb during the Gulf War; but CNN in Atlanta made the fundamental decision to keep him there, to carry his reports, and to surround them with disclaimers.

And although the stream of publicity to which an individual reporter or editor makes his contribution can cause both harm and good to individuals—a recurrent issue in the journalism ethics texts—the larger issues about the effects of that publicity are more diffuse, remote, and collective. For a journalist the moral shape of the situation is collective on both sides: news organization/public instead of independent professional/client. The reader/viewer/citizen/member of the public for whom the newsperson's work is done is not the same as the patient/client for whom the doctor's or lawyer's work is done. Journalists do not have a special obligation—creating bond with a particular human being: this is my patient, this is my client. (This is my *source* is obviously a different relationship.) When a journalist says to himself, like Kierkegaard only differently, you are that One, my reader, he says it, having hoped for a larger circulation, in despair. In fact if a journalist has a client—the Governor, the local Daddy Warbucks, the Gas Company, or the Citizens Against Outer Space—then he has failed to meet a prime responsibility of his profession. First among those responsibilities is exactly to reject such antecedent and particularized obligations on his mind and his powers of observation and interpretation. His obligations, as he rightly says—although he often does not put it in terms of obligation—are exactly and almost uniquely to the whole public.

Lawyers and doctors have a formal and explicit obligation to Law or Medicine that transcends their own immediate material interests. So do the members of the classic professions which have, in varying mixtures, a more centrally communal purpose than those independent professions: the armed services, the civil service, the diplomatic corps, the university, the church. These professions, like the independent professions, all have some means of explicit self-definition, of exclusion and inclusion, by which that larger obligation is expressed. But there is no such profession-defining hurdle, or formally stated

in the wealthier news organizations: a handful of foreign correspondents, reporters on the Supreme Court, specialists of other kinds. But even among them advanced substantive knowledge is a rarity (Cannon quotes a journalist's description of a foreign correspondent as a general assignment reporter with dysentery). It is one of the legitimate criticisms of journalism in a very complicated modern world that this substantive competence has no formal institutional undergirding, is not very widespread, and is vulnerable to the industry's economic logic.

The news business developed, in place of distinct bodies of substantive knowledge, the concept of the "beat," an external idea, requiring exposure, and go-getting use of shoe leather, taxis, and the telephone, rather than books and study. Journalists in general would of course celebrate and defend that difference, sneering a bit at mere book-learning, at punditry.5 51 (ptry') 55 (s) 1,

of priest was right there in the beginning, and everywhere, too. The teacher and the scholar can trace their beginnings in the West to Athens at least, and find their counterparts in almost all societies, and particular schools and universities reach back into the medieval period. And all of those ancient professions had centuries for thinkers to ruminate upon and codify what it was that they were supposed to do.

In contrast to all this ubiquity and antiquity journalism did not emerge until very recently indeed. Just yesterday the modern means of communication did not exist. Young people in the television era think that just after God divided the light from darkness, and created the earth and water and every living thing that moveth upon the earth, He created the three American commercial television networks, each with its own anchor persons and prime time schedule. That is not correct, either as to the timing or as to the agency of their creation.

Speech has existed for 30,000 years, give or take a few millennia; writing for 6,000 years; print for 500 years; the telegraph for only 150 years—nothing by comparison. But with the telegraph, communication was separated from transportation, and the modern era of mass communication began. What hath God wrought indeed! Since the telegraph, the penny press, and the first wire service, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century new developments have tumbled over each other in that rapid and accelerating succession for which metaphors "explosion" and "revolution" are scarcely adequate. To select dates and media somewhat arbitrarily: the steam press 1834; the telegraph 1844; the rotary press 1868; photography 1873; the telephone 1876; the phonograph 1877; roll film 1884; patent on the radio 1891; the movies 1905; the newsreel 1910; photographic journalism 1919; radio broadcasting 1920; wire photos 1924; sound in the

true journalists, whatever their surface cynicism, do not in their hearts believe it. Crafts and trades and businesses are usually defined by some narrower human need or desire, often tangible and immediate—for a dishwasher that works, for the plumbing to be fixed, for a Lexus that is suitably impressive, for 57 varieties of ice cream on a summer evening, for term life insurance until the kids are grown. These goods and services—"commodities"—are provided for particular individuals and households—specific customers. Some "commodity" is provided that in theory in our capitalist culture is appropriately disciplined by the organization and morality of the marketplace. One finds out what kind of a mousetrap the market indicates the potential purchasers want, and beats one's competitors in supplying it.

It is true that journalism in some ways resembles that picture. The market cannot be ignored. Although fewer and fewer American newspapers face competition in their own city, the news organization the journalist works for does face some kind of competition, and is certainly a profit-seeking business, with an owner. In one of the revealing moments in the early history of television news even the avuncular eminence Walter Cronkite, momentarily bumped from the anchor's chair at CBS when NBC's Huntley/Brinkley passed CBS for ratings in coverage of the 1956 conventions, said in calm acquies-

says Jones, many publishers panicked, raising advertising and circulation rates and shrinking their editorial staffs. American newspapers have been "downsized" in recent years. With fewer readers, there are fewer advertising and circulation dollars. The fewer revenues, the greater the pressure to cut back in just about the only place in the business left to cut back—the newsroom. Since 1990, 3,100 newsroom jobs have been eliminated, a little more than 5% of the total daily newspaper labor force in this country.

The market may, in some instances, be a boon to reporting. In an earlier era, after World War II, *The New York Herald Tribune* kept its foreign correspondents in order to compete with the

a 30-second spot on the show. “Courage”? Although we might expect such blatant commercial opportunism on the entertainment side of television, it has also become widespread on the news side. The nightly news at 6:30 is filled with stories about medical findings (Should women in their 40s receive mammograms?), and interrupted by commercials extolling the virtues of various antacids, feminine hygiene products, and pain killers. Television “programming”—including the news—is not, in the end, what the activity is all about; the shows are merely the bait. The core of the operation is a gigantic bait-and-switch; while the magician directs our attention with his eyes and his voice and the fascinating action of his right hand, his true purpose is carried on under his coat by his left.

whether people accept them or not, and virtues held to be worthy,

Journalism is potentially or ideally a high profession in two ways: it serves high and also fundamental human goods, and its worthy performance makes severe demands upon the higher human powers. What great human good does journalism, by its nature, serve, or ought it to serve? Law and medicine can give great, clear, simple answers to

you tell her a story at bedtime, to hear a narrative:—to know what happened and then what happened next. In a similar way human beings want to participate in a community by knowing what's going on, and by talking about it. The fact is that many of us respond to an exciting running story not on its merits as part of the sober conversation of public life but exactly as a story, a narrative from real life full of interest and often of amusement (certain kinds of stories) and material for conversation. When Watergate was over and done and one had to pick up a paper with no new material in it, one felt let down, a little empty.

That raw human curiosity and commonality, one foundation of journalism, is by no means squelched in unfree societies—on the contrary, it is accentuated by being partially denied, and therefore is seen the more clearly to be of our nature. People subjected to such societies find ways to inform each other and learn what is happening, in spite of the efforts of their oppressors—by word-of-mouth, by jokes and Aesopian tales, by underground press, by clustering in secret around radios tuned to the BBC World Service. "News" of a kind seeps out and spreads despite Big Brother's efforts to suppress it. That tells us something worth underlining about a strong human need and desire. Thus a journalist as a teller of daily events is already a participant in a dignified and honorable human calling, just by serving that need for community, that *good* of communication, before you get to the overtly civic or political purpose. William Earnest Hocking, in one of the rare treatments by a philosopher of this topic, said in his volume in the Hutchins Commission series, that journalism is "The day's report of itself. . . ."

And again: "it is the permanent word of that day to all the other days." Though the journalist himself often lacks historical sense, he is inadvertently serving another binding communal need and desire, for a common memory. It is significant that the description of journalism by Philip Graham as the "first draft of history," is so often quoted. Clifton Daniel described *The New York Times* to a potential employee from the academic world as the newspaper of *record*. Even lesser papers than the *Times* provide a service that has vastly improved the collective memory in accuracy and scope. Academic historians who may be disdainful of the inadequacies of the *contemporary* press nev-

ertheless in their professional role rely heavily on its equivalents (usually inferior) in the *past*. We should all be grateful that the *Chicago Press and Tribune* decided in the autumn of 1858 to assign two twenty-four-year-olds who could manage shorthand to give verbatim reports of the debates that were a part of the Illinois Senatorial campaign of that year, and, also to its rival the *Chicago Times* for importing two more experimental reporters to do the same. (Lincoln pasted these

The important connection between the democracy and the press was evident from the beginnings of this country. After the federal constitution was written in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay produced, at breakneck speed, their eighty-five articles for *The New York Independent Journal* and *The Advertiser*, trying to persuade the citizenry of New York to persuade the delegates to the State's convention to ratify the Constitution. These articles, even before the series was complete, were bound and sent around to other colonies ("syndicated"); they then became a kind of handbook of argument that the Federalists could use, for example, in their speeches and debates against the Antifederalists in the ratification convention in Virginia.

The carrying on of public discussion in a modern continental republic is made possible by an expanded and vigorous press. In fact, to promote that conversation is the core obligation of journalism in a free society. As we said above, the prime moral claim upon journalism is not that of a particular client or patient (or customer) but almost uniquely, of the public as a whole. We may now add that journalism serves that "public" in a most essential way—a way that defines the public in a free society. It serves the whole people's deliberation about those things they share. The name our forefathers (and *their* forefathers) used for this kind of social order, before the more recent shift to the word "democracy," contained that concept within it—"republican" government, government by mutual deliberation about the *res publicae*, the common or public matters.

A policewoman, for a comparison, serves the "public," too, and is paid by the public to do so, as the journalist is not. The policewoman serves the public's safety, its life, limb, property. If she serves, to the disadvantage of the public safety, something less—her buddies, her racial stereotypes, or a private interest, not to mention the mob—then something is wrong. The journalist, for contrast and to put it a little grandly, serves the public's deliberating *mind*, the public's *conversation*—the materials of public understanding and argument. If he or she serves something less, once again something is wrong.

In this free society journalism serves a public that is not a static entity with a single lasting will—as a controlled press is forced to do, as French Revolutionaries following Rousseau seemed to posit, or,

still less and worse, as the Ein Volk with Ein Fuhrer of a totalitarian state, a manipulated mass goose-stepping to a single drummer. A mob

paper). And then whether that work of destruction will then destroy that—Westminster, mother of Parliaments, or the U. S. Capitol; that is, societies, governed by mutual persuasion, deliberation, the exchange of ideas.

The moral seriousness of journalism springs not only from the importance of the good to be served, but also from the magnified evil that stands there as a constant competing possibility. Those who stand at such a juncture of choice participate in a high profession indeed. "Communication" and the public conversation are very far from being unambiguous goods, as are Health, Justice, Knowledge.

Suppose when speech was invented that first human speaker tells Eve some lies? Uses the symbols on the wall of the cave to subdue her to his will, against her own good? Leaves a report of a buffalo hunt that never existed, and does not record the defeat in battle that did? Uses "communication" to falsify the community's memory of its life, and invade the consciousness of its members with corrupting symbols?

A central core of the tradition of moral philosophy in the West has of course dealt with the rights and wrongs, the goods and evils, of our speaking to each other. Perhaps it appears especially among the

address/essay on *Politics as Vocation* that journalism is both a more worthy and a more exacting line of work than they might think: producing the stuff, every day and on a deadline, with some cogency.

As newspapers and the other forms grew and developed, and became more central to the society, they acquired the duty to bring to the citizenry not only the "fact" in "the news" but, in the words of the Hutchins Commission, "the truth about the fact." That, too, is not easy. The great English poet John Milton in the *Areopagitica* makes use of the Egyptian myth of Osiris, whose body was chopped to

soldiers, especially generals; to ambassadors, diplomats, and foreign service officers. To be sure, many of these have lost altitude (and the media have played a role in causing the decline) but the journalist never had the altitude in the first place. Look at the picture of the journalist in Anthony Trollope's novels, or in Dorothy Sayers' mysteries. And now, in late twentieth century America, the sizzling hostility to the "media" is a major fact.

This popular hostility to "the media," a striking phenomenon of our time, means that journalists as such (at least until they become "celebrities" and effectively cease to be journalists) are not highly regarded by the broad populace; their troubles getting access to the war front are not our problems, and if they are shot or captured it does not move us in the same way as if that happened to a member of the armed services. What were they doing there anyway? When politicians use the "media" as a foil, or avoid or manipulate the press, the complaints from the press fall on deaf ears. As one observer of the press put it, "there is no downside" for ignoring, manipulating, restricting, or assailing the "media."

The popular indifference and hostility toward the press comes partly from the atrophying sense of public life in general over the decades of consumer culture since World War II. To some extent it spills back onto newsgathering, including newspapers, from the lumping together into one thing of all of what we have come to call the "media." Newspapers get some of the blame for the sins of that different medium, television. Partly it is partisan and ideological, manipulated to serve specific political ends. But partly—it is important to grant—it springs from genuine faults in the press—hidden cameras in Food Lion, swarms of reporters on the lawn, tabloid intrusions into private life, harm to individuals, shortcuts to get the story, insensitive questions, and all the other misconduct that we may rightly criticize, which become the more menacing as the perceived power of the media, taking over the culture through the engine of entertainment, becomes greater. Even though the printed press at the top is better on the whole than it once was, the combination with new means of communication makes the whole complex a more formidable power, and its faults more glaring and disturbing.

But together with some puffed up personal self-importance and rudeness there is more generally in the whole body of journalists a curious underestimation of the demands and significance of their role. I am one of two American academics ever to have taught a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar for practicing journalists; both the other teacher and I came to believe that journalists tended modestly to underestimate at least their social idealism and perhaps also the intellectual difficulty of their work. American journalism has such a heavy anti-intellectual heritage that it has a hard time articulating, perhaps even understanding, its own high demands. The general style, certainly in the *Front Page* past, and to some extent even yet, is, as A. J. Liebling once remarked, not to talk about anything more serious than the temperature of the beer. But what you are not willing to talk about in large abstract terms, and what your work nevertheless represents, may be very different.

Without withdrawing any of the criticisms of contemporary journalism that are scattered through this article, one must add this counterbalancing impression: the best parts of the news business have an ethos that is at least comparable to, perhaps superior to, professions

that would be especially true of a profession, like journalism, that is not without its strain of romanticism. But even back on the home front one can often find in reporters and editors, along with all the human frailties one can find everywhere, something more.

If "conscience" be the "generalized other," then the "other" whom a good journalist has generalized within himself or herself is not the all purpose member of the public, because the public now does not understand the press's role as well as it does other professions; in assessing the moral claims on the press the broad public and the journalist diverge more sharply than is the case with respect to professions like law, medicine, or soldiering. The "others" whom a journalist has internalized to form his or her conscience is more likely to include the

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“The Hutchins Commission - Fifty Years Later”
Everette Dennis, Ph.D., The Freedom Forum

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