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The Ethical Deficit in Journalism Today
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(A public lecture given at the Community College of Baltimore County, MD - April 10, 2008)

In its recently released annual report on 'The State of the American News Media', the Pew Foundation's Project for Excellence in Journalism concluded that in 2008, the media will be more troubled than it was a year ago.

The effects of the current economic recession and the unavoidable transitions and adaptations to the digital revolution are inflicting enormous pressures on the media industry, pressures that are re-shaping the contours of journalism and challenging the profession's ethical foundation.

Every day now we hear about corporate downsizing in the media business, employee layoffs, flat wages, stagnant share prices of publicly-traded media companies, mega-mergers, declining advertising revenues, re-direction of media advertising from "old" to "new media", falling circulation numbers - younger audiences moving away from newspapers and television to the Internet; plagiarism, sensationalism, misinformation, disinformation and numerous other ethical flaws.

We read the results of public opinion polls which indicate the media's sinking credibility in the eyes of the American public - approval ratings in the low 20s, lower even than our discredited Congress, whose ratings are themselves, pretty abysmal in the eyes of the American people.

As the media industry struggles economically, the ethical standards of the journalism profession become more and more compromised, to the point where our industry is today confronted with a profound ethical deficit and a serious moral crisis.

What do news people see as their basic challenge? Somehow they must reinvent their profession and their business model at the same time they are cutting back on their reporting and resources. To a degree, journalism's problems are oversupply - too many news organizations doing the same thing. The evidence is mounting that the news industry must become more aggressive about developing a new economic model for the digital era.

If one believes, however, that the economics of news are now broken, with further declines ahead, then it seems inevitable that the investment in newsrooms will continue to shrink and the quality of journalism in America will decline further. One thing seems clear, however: If news companies do not assert their own vision over those of their corporate owners and investors, including making a case and taking risks, their future will be defined by those less invested in and passionate about news and more concerned with the bottom line, with the quarterly financial report. Mass media is an institution with a social mission which at times conflicts with the business imperative of making a profit.

2007 became a year notable for the narrowness of the news agenda, defined almost as much by what wasn't covered as by what was. I believe that this narrow vision of what constitutes news that the general public needs and wants is a major ethical challenge for the profession of journalism moving forward.

In my opinion, news is not a corporate product. It was not invented in a laboratory or an R&D department. Neither is it a commodity to be bought and sold or an asset to be speculated on in the capital markets. News evolved out of popular sentiment, out of political movement and out of a human instinct for knowledge and awareness. And its greatest leaps forward came from risk-takers who were often discounted because their vision broke with convention, and because their tastes ran in sometimes contradictory directions, the likes of Ted Turner, or Joseph Pulitzer, or Adolph Ochs or Amy Goodman at *Democracy Now*.

The answers, we continue to suspect, will be in the journalism, too, not only in the business strategies that fund it. If the past tells us anything, it's that the two sides, business and editorial, cannot flourish unless they move together, unless they are able to balance their dual missions.

Studying the media coverage of the presidential campaign is itself a test case for where/how/when do the professional, moral and social responsibilities of journalists intersect?

Depending on your political perspective and personal preference you can variously describe the media's coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign to date - as fair, unfair, inaccurate, incomplete, pathetic, outlandish - what's "fair game" for one is foul play for another; is the media "in the tank" for this or that candidate; is Chelsea Clinton being treated to a different standard by the press who collectively agreed not to question her even though she is a smart and articulate 28-year-old campaign surrogate for her mother Hillary?

A week or so ago I caught Ted Turner's interview with Charlie Rose on PBS and I was struck at how Turner, the founder and creator of CNN, arguably the world's most famous name in television news, was bemoaning what the network that he started has morphed into 30 years later. He claimed it has become unrecognizable to him. He cited CNN's proclivity for putting pretty faces in front of the cameras to the detriment of seasoned journalists. He decried the shallow analysis, and surface coverage of major stories, the proliferation of noise that passes for commentary, thanks to the talking

heads from the chattering classes. Turner said that it pains him to see how much CNN has changed from his original vision of the network.

Writing recently in the New York Times Op-Ed page a former CNN employee said, "When I joined CNN in 1989, I was ecstatic. To be part of an organization that could spend 24 hours a day covering important issues around the world was a dream come true. While the vision didn't always comport with reality, it matched up much of the time. As time went by and competition emerged, we all know what happened. Ratings began to drive agendas and heat over light became the norm. In recent years, the lip gloss quotient (it works for both genders) has become more important than IQ. The definition of fair and balanced has nothing to do with truth and is satisfied if voices from the far left and right are encouraged to spew their dogma in angry debate. The anchors are there to simply fuel the fire with no duty to steer guests to substantive conversation, much less to insist on facts over fatuous rhetoric".

Unfortunately, most people still get their daily dose of political news from the cable networks like CNN, MSNBC, Fox and others. Watching their favored channels, they absorb material that usually comports with their established world-view. Opposing positions are presented as fodder for their gladiators to shoot down or lampoon by the force of personality alone, or, regardless of the content, as demonstrating equilibrium in the discussion.

Unquestionably, we are in one of the most critical presidential races in our lifetimes. The issues are monumental; a collapsing economy, the never-ending war in Iraq, global climate change. Yet we watch as the networks loop Rev. Wright sound bites (with not a single one offering up the easily accessed sermons in long form so viewers can form a reasoned opinion about the man and his agenda), or maybe they debate the phrase 'a typical white person' ad nauseam. I have no problem with folks who challenge Barack Obama on his association with the minister, but as with most stories, a few phrases from Wright's career do nothing to inform people about the man or his mission. It is the duty of the media to offer the big picture on this (and so many other stories) so viewers can make a reasoned decision, but unless I've missed it, no news organization has tried. The purveyors of news must bravely offer information that may challenge the audience despite the backlash from time to time.

The press knows how influential it is in shaping attitudes and opinions. However, the mind-numbing drivel most of us subject ourselves to serves only to polarize and solidify preconceived positions; so much so, that when actual facts slip into discussion, they are dismissed as mere partisan ammunition. There are exceptions to this rule, but that equation should be reversed.

In my personal view, the mainstream media's unbalanced and sensationalized coverage of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright episode was unethical and unprofessional - all but ignoring similar inflammatory remarks by right-wing preachers who have endorsed and are actively campaigning for John McCain.

On this issue, Fox News has certainly been the most egregious perpetrator of biased and one-sided coverage in this campaign so far.

Sensational or "yellow" journalism as it used to be called several years ago is alive and well in 2008, case in point, - the obsession with the cult of celebrity, the fixation on all things Paris Hilton, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, just to name a few. I would posit that this type of journalism is inherently unethical. But the sad irony of tabloid journalism (whether print or broadcast) is that while totally devoid of ethics it is the most profitable form of media today. So, unfortunately, it will persist for years to come. The

paparazzi are not going to fade away into the sunset.

The era of reporters operating in multimedia has finally arrived and I, for one, am ecstatic about its potential.

The top news Web sites have 30 times the traffic of the top political and public affairs Web sites. More people read the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* online than read the print editions of both newspapers.

To protect themselves, some of the best-known bloggers are already forming associations, with ethics codes, standards of conduct and more.

While journalists are becoming more serious about the Web, no clear models of how to do journalism online really exist yet, and some qualities are still only marginally explored. Our content study this year was a close examination of some three dozen Web sites from a range of media. Our goal was to assess the state of journalism online at the beginning of 2007. What we found was that the root media no longer strictly define a site's character. The Web sites of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, for instance, are more dissimilar than the papers are in print. The *Post*, by our count, was beginning to have more in common with some sites from other media. The field is still highly experimental, with an array of options, but it can be hard to discern what one site offers, in contrast to another. And some of the Web's potential abilities seem less developed than others. Sites have done more, for instance, to exploit immediacy, but they have done less to exploit the potential for depth, even though neither space nor number of available Web pages is a serious concern.

So, will multimedia journalism help or hinder the practice of ethics in our profession? The jury is still out on this question, but here, I'd like to express some optimism - the unlimited space of Web pages, the inherent democratic and interactive nature of Internet publishing, the ability to get news on demand, the power to report and interpret to the world one's own reality and the realities of one's community integrated with text, audio and video images - all provides a foundation for the building of new, more inclusive, diverse and ethical forms of journalism.

To be sure, the Internet has become a kind of wild west of publishing where professional rules and standards of excellence are often ignored; a place where truth and factual accuracy are gleefully sacrificed on the altar of sensationalism. But when compared with traditional media, the legal and economic barriers to entry are low for Internet publishers. While, undoubtedly, there's tons of mindless drivel on the Web, the Internet also makes it possible to produce and distribute high quality journalism at a low cost. This is especially advantageous to minority publishers and to producers of alternative and unconventional content, most of which will never see the light of day in mainstream media. In short, the Internet is a great free speech platform, a living testimony to the vigorous exercise of our first amendment rights.

As a member of the Society of Professional Journalists, I believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility.

- Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice.

- Seek Truth and Report It - journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.
- Minimize Harm - Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.
- Act independently - journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know. Far too many journalists today are in bed with the powerful political and corporate elites or are enamored with the cult of celebrity. Far too few hold the powerful accountable. comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable

In my old- fashioned view, journalists are ultimately accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and to each other to a greater degree than they should be accountable to their employers, their advertisers and to the power elites that rule our society.

To any journalists or aspiring journalists in the audience, my advice is to inform yourself continuously so you in turn can inform, engage, and educate the public in a clear and compelling way on significant issues.

- Be honest, fair, and courageous in gathering, reporting, and interpreting accurate information.
- Give voice to the voiceless.
- Treat sources, subjects, and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect, not merely as means to your journalistic ends.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort, but balance those negatives by choosing alternatives that maximize your goal of truth telling.

Journalists often face ethical dilemmas when covering humanitarian catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina's devastation of the Gulf Coast region in 2005 or the ongoing civil war in the Congo that has taken more lives than any war since World War 11, or the horrific genocide in Darfur.

On the one hand their editors expect them to cover these human tragedies with objectivity and professional detachment but on the other hand they can't avoid being overwhelmed by the enormity of the assignment. So they are challenged to conduct themselves as professional i.e. "impartial" reporters without being indifferent to the human suffering all around them.

Such situations can be life changing and career altering experiences for even the most celebrated reporters, case in point being Anderson Cooper of CNN who could not hide his human emotions when covering Hurricane Katrina. At times he cried for the suffering victims and at times he railed against the incompetence of the Federal government and the racial insensitivity of our national political leaders. Cooper even wrote a book about his Katrina experiences.

Most journalists, at least those with warm hearts and caring souls, are first and foremost flesh and blood human beings, not machines, not drive-by or fly-over observers immune from being emotionally affected by humanitarian disasters.

In fact, some of the finest journalism has been produced by reporters who became

embedded with their subjects, who crusaded for the exploited and the oppressed and who advocated for the poor and the powerless.

In a seminal speech last year at the National Conference for Media Reform, the great journalist Bill Moyers, host of a weekly PBS program and the former press secretary to President Lyndon Johnson said,

"Today, America is socially divided and politically benighted. Inequality and poverty grow steadily along with risk and debt. Too many working families cannot make ends meet with two people working, let alone if one stays home to care for children or aging parents. Young people without privilege and wealth struggle to get a footing. Seniors enjoy less security for a lifetime's work. We are racially segregated today in every meaningful sense, except for the letter of the law. And the survivors of segregation and immigration toil for pennies on the dollar, compared to those they serve.

What kind of economy do we seek, and what kind of nation do we wish to be? Do we want to be a country in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, or do we want a country committed to an economy that provides for the common good, offers upward mobility, supports a middle-class standard of living, and provides generous opportunities for all?

And today, two basic pillars of American society, shared economic prosperity and a public sector capable of serving the common good, are crumbling. The third pillar of American democracy, an independent press, is under sustained attack, and the channels of information are choked".

Moyers went on to say that a few huge corporations now dominate the media landscape in America. Almost all the networks carried by most cable systems are owned by one of the major media conglomerates. Two-thirds of today's newspapers are monopolies.

As ownership gets more and more concentrated, fewer and fewer independent sources of information have survived in the marketplace; and those few significant alternatives that do survive, such as PBS and NPR, are undergoing financial and political pressure to reduce critical news content and to shift their focus in a mainstream direction, which means being more attentive to establishment views than to the bleak realities of powerlessness that shape the lives of ordinary people.

What does today's media system mean for the notion of an informed public cherished by democratic theory? Quite literally, it means that virtually everything the average person sees or hears, outside of his or her own personal communications, is determined by the interests of private, unaccountable executives and investors whose primary goal is increasing profits and raising the share prices. More insidiously, this small group of elites determines what ordinary people do not see or hear. In-depth coverage of anything, let alone the problems real people face day-to-day, is as scarce as sex, violence and voyeurism are pervasive.

This is censorship of knowledge by monopolization of the means of information. In its current form, which Moyers describes as "oligopoly," media growth has one clear consequence. There is more information and easier access to it, but it's more narrow and homogenous in content and perspective.

Old media acquire new media and vice versa. Rupert Murdoch, forever savvy about the next key outlet that will attract eyeballs, purchased MySpace, spending nearly \$600 million, so he could, in the language of Wall Street, monetize those eyeballs. Goggle

became a partner in Time Warner, investing \$1 billion in its AOL online service. And now Goggle has bought YouTube, so it would have a better vehicle for delivering interactive ads for Madison Avenue. Viacom, Microsoft, large ad agencies, and others have been buying up key media properties, many of them the leading online sites.

It's what happens when an interlocking media system filters through commercial values or ideology, the information and moral viewpoints people consume in their daily lives. And by no stretch of the imagination can we say today that the dominant institutions of our media are guardians of democracy.

Despite the profusion of new information platforms on cable, on the Internet, on radio, blogs, podcasts, You Tube and MySpace, among others, the resources for solid, original journalistic work, both investigative and interpretative, are contracting, rather than expanding.

But while media organizations supply a lot of news and commentary, they tell us almost nothing about who really wags the system and how. The talking heads on television chatter on endlessly in self-absorbed narcissism, informing without educating.

As Moyers says, "We have reached the stage when the Poo-Bahs of punditry have only to declare that "the world is flat," for everyone to agree it is, without going to the edge and looking over themselves."

I think what's happened is not indifference or laziness or incompetence, but the fact that most journalists on the plantation have so internalized conventional wisdom that they simply accept that the system is working as it should.

Similarly, the question of whether or not our economic system is truly just is off the table for investigation and discussion, so that alternative ideas, alternative critiques, alternative visions never get a hearing. And these are but a few of the realities that are obscured. What about this growing inequality? What about the re-segregation of our public schools? What about the devastating onward march of environmental deregulation? All of these are examples of what happens when independent sources of knowledge and analysis are so few and far between on the plantation.

So if we need to know what is happening, and Big Media won't tell us; if we need to know why it matters, and Big Media won't tell us; if we need to know what to do about it, and Big Media won't tell us, it's clear what we have to do. We have to tell the story ourselves.

The greatest challenge to the plantation mentality of the media giants is the innovation and expression made possible by the digital revolution. As a former newspaper editor, I may still prefer the newspaper for its investigative journalism and in-depth analysis, but also as a former Web publisher I also recognize that we now have it in our means to tell a different story from Big Media, our story.

The Internet, cell phones and digital cameras that can transmit images over the Internet makes possible a nation of story tellers, every citizen a Tom Paine.

The media system we have been living under for a long time now was created behind closed doors where the power-brokers met to divvy up the spoils.

Powerful forces are at work now, determined to create our media future for the benefit of the modern plantation: investors, advertisers, corporate owners and the parasites that depend on their indulgence, including many in the governing class.

In a few years, virtually all media will be delivered by high speed broadband. And without equality of access, the Net can become just like cable television where the provider decides what you see and what you pay.

We will likely see more consolidation of ownership with newspapers, TV stations, and major online properties in fewer hands. So, we have to find other ways to ensure the public has access to diverse, independent, and credible sources of information.

It means bringing broadband service to those many millions of Americans too poor to participate so far in the digital revolution. It means ownership and participation for people of color and women. It means strengthening the ethnic media in this country.

We've got to get alternative content out there to people, or this country is going to die of too many lies.

Since the presidential race is on everyone's mind these days, I'd like to conclude by citing the views expressed recently in a New York Times op-ed piece written by author Neal Gabler on the media's relationship with John McCain. He argues that while the media has been sharply critical of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, they have, for the most part, given John McCain a free pass. I agree with Gabler.

"It is certainly no secret that Senator John McCain, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, is a darling of the news media," wrote Gabler. "Reporters routinely attach "maverick," "straight talker" and "patriot" to him like Homeric epithets. They downplay his frequent gaffes, give short shrift to his appalling ignorance of the political and social dynamics in Iraq and under-report his numerous flip flops on the issues.

Joan Didion, the well-known writer and public intellectual, once described a presidential campaign as a closed system staged by the candidates for the news media - one in which the media judged a candidate essentially by how well he or she manipulated them, and one in which the electorate were bystanders.

In exposing his two-way relationship with the press this way, McCain reveals the absurdity of the political process as a big game. He also reveals his own gleeful cynicism about it.

In covering McCain, the media is reacting to something deeper than politics. They are reacting to his vision of how the world operates and to his attitude about it, something it is easy to suspect he acquired while a prisoner of war. But being a Vietnam War hero and a prisoner of war some 40 years ago is not the same as having the experience, understanding and sensitivity of the multicultural world we live in and the leadership responsibilities of a US President in such a complex and dynamic world. McCain is still stuck in the mindset of the cold war and of an imperial era that has long exited the stage of history.

Though Mr. McCain can be the most self-deprecating of candidates (yet another reason the news media love him), his vision of the process also betrays an obvious superiority - one the mainstream political news media, a group of liberal cosmologists, have long shared. If in the past he flattered the press by posing as its friend, he is now flattering it by posing as its conspirator, a secret sharer of its cynicism. He is the guy who "gets it." He sees what the press sees. Michael Scherer, a blogger for *Time*, called him the "coolest kid in school."

Yet the reporters, so quick in general to jump on hypocrisy, seem to find his insincerity

a virtue. It also suggests that seducing the press with ironic detachment, the press's soft spot, may be the best political strategy of all- one that Mr. McCain may walk on water right into the White House on January 20, 2009.

Finally, all of its flaws and shortcomings notwithstanding, the journalism profession today remains critical to the health and vibrancy of American democracy and to the smooth functioning of an open, free, just, informed and transparent society. Those of us who love journalism and practice its craft have both a moral and a professional obligation to make it better. If the prognosticators have already concluded that 2008 will be a "troubled" year for media in America, let's work hard to prove them wrong in 2009 and beyond.


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