

## **EDITORIAL: The Press Earns its Freedom Everyday**

The events of the past two months, culminating in the decision against the “National Enquirer” and the Pulitzer Prize “hoax,” have focused national attention on the integrity and responsibility of reporters in particular, and the news media in general. What is proper journalistic practice? Should limits be placed on newsgatherers to avoid such results in the first instance? While editors and reporters have expressed various views on how to gather and present news opinion, responsible journalists agree that, if anything is a sin among reporters, it is a sin to lie or mislead.

But to deter such deceptions by an irresponsible few would require curbs that would chill truthful reporting and critical editorializing.

Our Founding Fathers recognized the importance of a free and unencumbered press to a representative democracy or to any nation. The news media not only checks abuses by government and other social institutions, but historically has done so most effectively. Short of libel considerations, society must minimize, if not eliminate, restraints on the press.

But so unrestrained, the press must act most responsibly. Anything less undermines media credibility. “Accuracy and credibility are the bottom line,” stated many a press executive.

Despite the transgressions of a tabloid such as the “National Enquirer” and the “overzealous” desire to break a story that consumed Janet Cooke and her editors at the “Washington Post,” the news media remains generally credible. If the integrity of the press pervaded other institutions, considerably more “good” news would result.

Perhaps, these transgressions – and there are many – are encouraged by the existence of a public market for sensational “news.” Editors and reporters must be sensitive to these dangers. Prejudices encourage such transgressions – despite their incredibility – because of a tendency among many groups and individuals to accept their own views, however unsubstantiated as the gospel truth. For those who believe celebrities excessively imbibe and for those who are “certain” that poor, disadvantaged minority youngsters are more susceptible to drug addiction than others, the less responsible among us – I hesitate to call them journalists – fabricate stories that impinge on the credibility of the entire news media.

The vast majority of the readers, listeners, and viewers who differentiate between “scandal and gossip” and objective news reporting, nevertheless enjoy reading the junk!.

Even Objective journalists differ among themselves in approaching this difficult issue. Cognizant of contrasting views, editors and reporters introspectively discuss the merits of differing approaches – a process of self-

evaluation.

The press, unlike other institutions, has nothing to gain by hiding its rotten apples. The responsible press, in fact, exposes less-than-credible reporting as this in itself is news. The news accounts and commentaries of both the Burnett-"Enquirer" case and the "hoax" evidence the news media's interest in protecting its integrity and weeding out the less responsible..

The importance of a free press to a free society is underscored by the call by the Soviet Union and others for a "new World Information Order" through the UNESCO-appointed International Commission for the Study of Communications Problems sanctioning state-controlled news-information dissemination. State-controlled news media, as they exist in most one-party and authoritarian regimes, enable government to monopolize the flow of information to the public. Government in these states remain totally unchecked.

Even traditional Western democracies lack United States-style media freedom. In France, for example, a "scandal" involving a gift of diamonds to President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing received little coverage. The comparatively free French press has no fundamental First Amendment grant of press independence. Consequently, the French press lacks the power of its American counterparts to influence events. Very often, the French papers are party organs – opinions are not sifted from fact in the manner practiced by American journalists. State-owned, French television and radio journalists, at best, reluctant to bite the hand that feeds them.

Reporters must carefully scrutinize the apparent facts and accept nothing on its face. Indeed, editors have a greater responsibility to ensure that reporters write fair and accurate news accounts: editors should question their reporters (just as reporters must skeptically deal with sources and unverified information) and validate the credibility of news sources, especially among the lesser experience.

The press polices itself rather well. Routinely, newspapers print, and television and radio broadcast letters to the editors and retractions. One television news executive related how errors are corrected during the news regularly scheduled broadcast of the program in which the error was made, to ensure reaching those who were misinformed. "The Washington Post," after all, immediately broke the story detailing their own shortcomings. Our free and responsible press guarantees the continued existence of our representative democracy. To take steps to avoid such deceptions would prevent future reporters from engaging in the investigative journalism that broke Watergate and other major news stories.

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