

**“Is Journalism Losing Its Professional Standards?”**

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July 3, 1995

Hamburg, Germany

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Bertelsmann Conference

Ethics and Standards—New Rules for Journalism:

Assuring Quality Through Self Control and Leadership

It's a great honor to be here. And a daunting assignment—to speak as not only a representative of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism but the only representative of American journalism at this conference.

Of course, my first concern about speaking on the subject of standards for this particular audience was whether there would be common understanding of the word “standards.” But at a dinner last week in London, I was reassured by a story told to me by an English journalist.

He was a former editor of the *London Times* and the *Observer*, and he told me that he quit the newspaper business when one of the bean counters—that is, one of the business types—showed him an analysis that a news story from Africa cost 1 pound 60 a word, whereas a story from Europe cost only 70 cents a word. The manager then suggested to the editor that he, therefore, cover more stories from Europe and fewer from Africa.

I realized, then, that we are all probably dealing with similar problems: the balance between numbers and letters; cost and quality; money and truth.

That is my starting point—if not the central issue—for a discussion of “professional standards in journalism.” And there is no better textbook example than the current public debate in the United States concerning Time Warner and its distribution of violent and sexually degrading movies and gangsta rap music.

The company has been attacked and criticized by politicians, social critics, and other public leaders for putting profits ahead of more important social values, specifically community and family values. The critics charge that Time Warner is fanning the flames of violence and anger in the culture. Time Warner and its defenders see it the other way around: that society is contributing to the kind of music and entertainment artists reflect in their work. In the latest round of debate, the company's own leading news magazine, *Time*, came out of the corporate closet with a lead article asking on the cover page: "Are Music and Movies Killing America's Soul?"

Time Warner's inner tensions and outer conflicts with critics are emblematic of the multiple personalities that characterize the so-called media today. It's a struggle that describes most of mainstream journalism in the United States. Journalism has become a major battleground for a civil war of values that is raging throughout our country, affecting every institution—business, law, medicine, even education: economic responsibility versus social responsibility; corporate values versus community values; personal profits versus the public good.

Each of us here is aware that something is not right in our business—the journalism business. We are concerned about the deterioration of the public dialogue on civic and social issues and, with it, an increasing fragmentation and polarization of opinion. We are disturbed by the apparent loss of shared interests and ideals, even common decency and civility at times. We

understand that a free press plays an essential role in the public dialogue, and as journalists, we fear that a vulgarized and mercenary press is contributing to, and maybe creating, the problem.

“Is Journalism Losing Its Professional Standards?” That’s my charge to lead off this conference. I will focus on several points:

What is happening to the quality of journalism in the United States? Why the question of standards is an important one.

What standards are we losing?

What factors have produced this change? And, what can be done about it?

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Let’s set the context:

We live in a world of stunning change: changes in society; changes in technology; changes in the communications industry; changes in the definition of news. One of the most awesome changes of our time is the increase in the power and pervasiveness of the news media. Journalism yesterday compared to journalism today is like a bullet compared to an atom bomb, and every journalist has a finger on the red alert button. That’s why the question of standards is so important. Around the world there is growing public concern about the performance and behavior of the news media, with some saying to journalists: If you don’t do something to control yourselves, the government, or some other agency, will do it for you.

Here is the press as the public sees it, according to many articles and books. Increasing numbers of people believe the press is negative, cynical, sensational, excessive, biased, and unfair. Hostile descriptive epithets have replaced respect. “Attack journalism.” “Feeding frenzy.” “Merchants of sleaze.” Surveys report that journalists rank lowest on the ladder of public esteem, even lower than politicians. The bottom line is that the public no longer trusts us. And for journalism, that is critical. Trust is our most important product.

Are standards in journalism declining? There is ample evidence to support that view. In a highly competitive marketplace, much of journalism aims to satisfy ever-lower common denominators of public taste. Sensation and titillation from all news sources mirror the content of supermarket tabloids. Coverage of celebrities and sex scandals now appear routinely, not just on television and radio but in the high-collar mainstream print press.

But a vulgar, lowbrow press is not the only issue. Even the best of the press has adopted a new mean-spirited and cynical attitude, sometimes downright malicious. The most sobering and extreme judgment of press performance was rendered in the suicide note left by Clinton White House aide Vincent Foster. Foster wrote that he was not cut out for “the spotlight of public life in Washington. Here ruining people is considered sport.” In part, he was referring to attacks on him in the *Wall Street Journal*, considered one of the most responsible publications in the country. Can anyone claim that blood sport journalism serves any public interest?

As we move into the digital future, we speed by the simpler moral landscape of an earlier time. Old distinctions in journalism are disappearing, and definitions have become blurred: journalism with entertainment; business with editorial; opinion with fact; fact with fiction.

Even the languages of different media—print, radio, and television—are merging. Words, sound, and picture morph on the computer screen; and a new gene-spliced, “multilingual” journalist is being born. But who are the parents? For the most part, businesses that produce or possess the technology, but are often unwed to any journalistic tradition: phone companies; computer companies; data services. The news business today is confused.

But while sales of technology go up, some studies report declining readership, listeners, and viewers of news. In reaction, news organizations work harder to maximize audiences. The larger the circulation and the higher the ratings, the more the company can charge for advertising, the economic lifeblood of the journalism business.

Of course, news broadcasters, publishers, and editors defend their decisions saying, “that’s what the readers and viewers want.” There’s certainly truth in that. Ratings and readership spike for the sensational: Lorena Bobbitt and other bizarre crimes and outrageous sexual behavior; or news of celebrities—Michael Jackson, Hugh Grant, and others.

It seems that public interests do not match the public interest. Let's keep that in mind when we're looking to place blame. The public itself is part of the problem. (We might benefit from a new study called, "The Free and Responsible Community.")

Which brings us to the next question: If standards of journalism are declining, declining from what? Where are the points on journalism's moral compass?

Journalism is not a profession in the legal sense. Under the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, anyone can practice journalism and anyone usually does. However, by precedent and practice, organized groups of journalists have evolved standards and codes of ethics, which define professional journalism in our country. The first Code of Ethics, known as the Canons of Journalism, was put forward in 1923 by the American Society of Newspaper Editors. The Society of Professional Journalists borrowed its early Code of Ethics from the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1926, then wrote its own code in 1973, to include all journalists—print and broadcast. The Code of Ethics has been revised several times since.

In our country, most major news organizations have their own Codes of Ethics, literally hundreds set the guidelines of professional conduct. All these codes are high-minded but necessarily very general. For example, professional journalists are expected to report accurately, fairly, and responsibly. A journalist should be of high moral character. A professional journalist is expected to serve the public interest. Every code states that a journalist must pursue the truth.

If codes themselves were adequate, standards would not be our concern today. But in addition to codes, the industry has an ethos, accrued over time from history, law, and tradition.

Next year is the 50th anniversary of a report on American journalism that has become a defining expression of the ideals of a free press in a democracy. Titled, “A Free and Responsible Press,” the report gives an eloquent overview of the state of journalism in the United States in the 1940s. It has become popularly known as the Hutchins Commission Report, after its chairman, Robert Hutchins, who was then chancellor of the University of Chicago. In light of the vast changes in the communications industry in the last fifty years, it is surprising how current the report remains and the persistence of the problem of a free, and more often than not, unruly press. Hutchins lays out the mission of the report in his introduction:

“This report deals with the responsibilities of the owners and managers of the press to their consciences and the common good for the formation of public opinion.”

Take note of the object of their examination: owners and managers!

Many other factors are cited as central problems for journalism today, and put forward as reasons for declining standards: stiffer competition, especially from television; concentration of capital; economic structure; public ownership; government regulation or lack of government regulation; the arrogance of the media; the ignorance of reporters; the seduction and corruption



of journalists by fame, money, and power; the society itself, including the weakened family structure, irrelevant religious institutions, and declining standards of public education; and, finally, but not comprehensively, moral and cultural relativism.

With all those factors as “central” problems, we need not only a celestial map to navigate but more than two days’ time to do it. Rather, I’d like to hone in on the same navigational star as did the Hutchins Commission—to focus on the source where many of those problems meet: the owners and managers.

Journalists themselves can always be counted on for commitments to ideals, expressed in lofty language. But most journalists operate in organizations. And in practice, reporters try to satisfy their editors, who try to satisfy their publishers, broadcast executives, or owners.

It is the owners who not only have the responsibility but who possess the power to set the tone, state the rules, and define the boundaries of conduct. It is the owners who hire and fire. Journalists may write the lyrics to journalism’s idealistic anthems, but the owners call the tune.

If we look back in time, we find that it was a few early owners who deserve the credit for establishing the public interest standards of the trade, the ethos and culture of responsible journalism—journalism’s mythology, if you will—that underlies the industry’s noblest actions.

Some examples:

The founding statement by E. W. Scripps, who established the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain: “We shall tell no lies about persons or policies for love, malice, or money.”

C. L. Knight, founder of what today is the Knight Ridder chain, told his son, publisher and editor, John S. Knight: “Better you should set fire to your plant, and leave town by the light of it, than to remain a human cash-register editor.”

Henry Luce, the founder of *Time* magazine and Time Incorporated, committed all his publications to helping to bring about a great humane civilization.

And when Adolph Ochs took over ownership of the *New York Times* in 1896, he included these words in his statement of purpose: “It will be my earnest aim that the *New York Times* give the news, all the news, in concise and attractive form, in language that is parliamentary in good society...To give the news impartially, without fear or favor...”

A few years ago in the midst of the newspaper recession, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, known as “Punch,” chairman of the *New York Times* and chairman, also, of our school’s Board of Visitors, was asked by a student in the school how the *Times* was able to cut its budget and still maintain the quality of the newspaper. Punch replied that the *Times* was fortunately still a family-controlled business, and the family had long ago decided they were not out to make “the last nickel.”

Contrast that statement with journalism according to Rupert Murdoch, who said, “Newspapers don’t change tastes. They reflect taste.” (That’s the Time Warner view.)

Murdoch also said, “We don’t want to be full of aging columnists who suck pipes and pretend that they’re great prophets about everything.”

That’s as good a starting point as any for tracking cynicism and moral relativism in today’s press. Or consider so many other media moguls of our time who buy into journalism for reasons other than principle and public interest—too often for reasons of personal position and power.

What about television? you might ask. Rooted in the entertainment industry, television news never evolved its own journalistic traditions. But in radio and television, too, we find owners who built responsible news organizations that, at least in the early days, attempted to live up to print journalism standards.

For example, the founders of the two leading broadcasting networks of yesterday: David Sarnoff of NBC and William Paley of CBS. Both Paley and Sarnoff respected news and public affairs and viewed them as essential parts of the broadcasting mix, protected parts of it, with their networks able and willing to subsidize news with profits from entertainment.

In the 1980s, all three networks were sold to new owners, and a sea change occurred in the broadcasting business. New management at CBS and NBC no longer regarded news and

public affairs as their public responsibility, nor, for that matter, with any special respect. News and public affairs became just another product, and all news programs were evaluated on the basis of their profitability. In the mathematics of the new network operators, the equation became: profits equal truth.

The story at ABC News was somewhat different with new ownership by experienced news broadcasters. But today all television news executives—especially in local news—live by ratings and popularity polls, with a single guiding imperative—to maximize profits. In other words, to earn “the last nickel.”

The last nickel. There’s the culprit. The last nickel tipped the scale that had previously kept the business and editorial sides of journalism in some kind of balance.

What owner or manager in the American media today is publicly articulating the themes of high standards and high ideals? What owner is openly acknowledging that news is a highly profitable business with a legal franchise and protections that imply duties, obligations, and responsibilities? None that I can think of. Instead, broadcasters, cable operators, phone companies, and publishers have formed powerful trade associations to lobby for more freedom and less responsibility—and have won it.

Even the idealist Ted Turner, founder of CNN, a prime mover in global television news, speaks not so much to the ideals and ethos of public service journalism, but to the ideals and

ethos of a better world. Of course, that's important, maybe most important; but one way to get there is through quality journalism. And, as we see, even on CNN, news of O. J. Simpson and other sensational trials preempt the news.

The real bottom line when it comes to journalistic standards is the owners and managers who choose maximum profit over quality and service.

Which brings me to the last question: What can be done about it?

Some believe that as we, in democratic, capitalist nations have accepted restraints and restrictions to protect free enterprise, so also might a free press benefit from some external restraint. But before we rush in, like fools, we should consider the lessons of history.

The history of censorship is the history of bigotry and ignorance. When any government or would-be government moves toward totalitarianism and control, the sources of information are the first objects of assault. Today, especially, when coups or revolutions are attempted, the most likely point of attack is not the palace but the presses; or the radio and television stations.

Why? Because the free flow of information is the only antidote to tyranny. Freedom of speech is central to freedom and liberty. As the Hutchins Commission wrote: A democratic government's job should be to protect free speech, not to limit it.

Clearly, there are weaknesses in our system, as there are in every human enterprise. One major weakness is that the system does little to reward self-sacrifice, self-discipline, or self-

control. That is, financially reward—the only real currency of capitalism. Why is it that teachers are paid so little? And social workers? And all but a few top journalists? It says that our system does not care to provide adequately for a society that is healthy, educated, and informed.

But there are precious strengths in the system as well. We have the freedom to progress and improve and to try new ideas. And because of that, even with overwhelming evidence of declining standards, there are countervailing signs of promise in the industry:

First, quantity: This is an era of news and public affairs plenty. The Columbia Journalism School conducted a survey this year and found that just fifteen years ago, in television alone, the four networks, including the Public Broadcasting Service, produced three thousand hours of news and public affairs programming. Today those same four networks are producing twice that much—six thousand hours; and with cable services, there is more than fifteen times that. In 1994 alone, television offered more than fifty thousand hours of nonfiction programming. That is counting national programming only. And it doesn't include radio.

A second reason to feel good is quality. While it's accurate to say that more of news is commercial and sensational, so also is there more that is excellent. As dean of the school of journalism, I have a privileged perspective. The school administers the most prestigious and important awards in American journalism: the Pulitzer Prizes for newspaper journalism, the National Magazine Awards, the DuPont Columbia Awards for Radio and Television Journalism,

and others. As dean, I participate in each of those processes, and each year I see both quantity and quality growing. At judging time, the school building is inundated with entries, and the best journalists in the country spend days, sometimes more, in our building debating each other to determine the best that year. We never lack for difficult choices.

There are other positive signs for journalism: traditional organizations that are adapting to changing times with experiments in products, content, design, and delivery systems, but which continue to strive for quality. If we celebrated the advent of CNN and C-Span in the '80s, in the '90s we are calling up new home pages on the web and the Internet, and online news that you choose.

In sum, I believe that American journalism can take pride in the best of its products. And the world at large seems to ratify that feeling by giving ample evidence, by imitation and adoption, that the free American press continues to be our country's most important product for export.

Concerning recommendations for voluntary limits: we've tried many of those mechanisms, too, in our country. The experiment of a National News Council failed, not only for lack of support from the industry—so much for voluntary policing—but also because the News Council was a flawed concept from the start. (We will be discussing more about that later in the conference.)

Some news organizations have installed an ombudsman on their staff to deal publicly with complaints and errors. It's a useful but not widespread practice.

More thoughtful journalism criticism by the press itself would undoubtedly be helpful. Although our school encourages it, experience indicates that more criticism is highly unlikely, at least at this point. The journalism school has published the *Columbia Journalism Review* for almost thirty-five years. The magazine is widely regarded by journalists and the industry as the most reliable and respected publication of media criticism in the country, if not the world. It is also the most widely read. The *Review* has a paid circulation of thirty-one thousand, and an estimated readership for each issue of seventy-five thousand, mostly journalists. It boasts the highest renewal rate in the nation. But today, despite the growing need for press criticism, the *Columbia Journalism Review* is closer to extinction than ever. The cost of operation is growing, the annual deficit is increasing, and the journalism school operates in a less tolerant financial environment in Columbia, as in almost every university. There is some outside foundation and industry support, but not nearly enough. And so we may be forced to conclude that there are economic limits to journalism criticism just as there are to journalism.

The Hutchins Commission also recommended that an independent agency issue an annual report on the performance of the press. The school did that for many years, specifically covering television. It, too, went out of business for lack of sufficient financial support.



What, then, is an answer to what could be done to enforce higher standards in news? As you might expect, I believe that the most important force is education—specifically, journalism education. Frankly, in today’s media world, given the power of journalism, I do not see how any professional journalist can function knowledgeably and responsibly without some special training and orientation. Sitting as I do today as dean, on the other side of the desk or at the other end of the telephone from reporters and editors, I am often appalled by the ignorance and arrogance of some journalists.

I will admit that there are times I have become so angry as a citizen and ashamed as a professional that I entertain an unacceptable idea—coming out publicly for licensing all journalists who would call themselves professionals. I would require that every journalist pass a basic test for driving on the information highway. I have even imagined that the Columbia Journalism School would be empowered to administer the test and to issue the license, which journalists would then display as initials after their names—like electricians, interior decorators, cinematographers, and masseurs. Trades that have voluntarily taken steps to insure quality and credibility.

But who would empower the licensing agency? Ah, there’s the rub. The system would work only if empowered by the industry—the people who do the hiring. Employers would have

to respect and honor the credential, which would probably require that they themselves had passed the test and, therefore, appreciated its value.

As they say in England, “Not bloody likely!” Acceptance by the industry has been a core problem for all journalism education. Many of those doing the hiring often haven’t had one, and are, therefore, in their ignorance, inclined to disparage it. One gets an advanced degree in journalism not to get a better job, but to be able to do a better job.

And so here we are today meeting with deep concerns about our industry when, in fact, never were heaven and earth so visibly in close coincidence as in today’s media world. Never have the planets of good and evil in journalism, the best and the worst, been so closely in conjunction. Today, through twenty-four hour global news and public affairs communications, we see, literally, what spiritual leaders have told us down through the ages: We are all connected. The world is one, one human community. If connecting to one another is the highest purpose of social evolution, as the world’s great religions have always preached, we would be about to declare that the communications industry and journalism, far from failing us, have enabled us to reach our higher purpose and potential.

And yet today, as we stand at this peak surveying our creation—the material wealth of technology, the oceans of information, the energy of production and of civilizations, we remark, “What hath we wrought?” and, “How can we control it?”

In the end, there is only one road to responsibility, and that is the integrity of the individual, whether he or she be owner, manager, or journalist. There is only one form of true control, and that is self-control. There is only one effective form of discipline, and that is self-discipline. Indeed, our ability to control ourselves—to be free and to make choices—is what makes us human.

Journalism has always existed in two different realities—the reality of the economic marketplace and the reality of a special institution protected by law in order to serve the public interest. Today the traditional balance between those two realities has clearly become destabilized. Economic reality has taken over.

But I would argue that there is strong evidence that the two are not mutually exclusive. We have many examples of profitability and quality today: *The New York Times*; the *Washington Post*; the *Wall Street Journal*; and smaller papers, like the *Charlotte Observer*. There are hundreds of quality magazines—and let's not forget book publishers, like Doubleday. Some of the best journalism of our times is published in books. And still to be seen today, there is quality television news, some on CNN but also on the networks and cable.

If, at this stage of history, we are to accept the economic myth, the economic god, the journalistic or the religious myth, then we should understand that business does best when there are more winners. Every business could give more serious consideration to quality as a strategic

advantage and quality as a value, offering a competitive edge. As a matter of enlightened self-interest, the owners, including the public stockholders, should be encouraged to recognize the strategic wisdom of sometimes sacrificing the last nickel not only to cultivate dollars but to cultivate the public trust.

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