

“Broadcast Journalism: What’s Missing?”

Joan Konner

Cosmopolitan Club

New York City

February 24, 1987

Thank you for inviting me.

I've attended these luncheons and I've seen your lineup of guests. They've been top caliber. I'm flattered to be among them.

I'm what you call a behind-the-scenes person in television. I like that. I have a lot to say about what's on the screen. Then the on-camera people have to take the rap for it. I don't mind giving away the credit as long as I don't have to take the blame...in public.

When I received the invitation to speak and was asked to think about what I'd like to talk about, I easily picked this subject. It's one of my favorites. Broadcast journalism: what's missing? I talk about it very easily, all the time. In fact, all of us in the business do. Broadcast journalism is everybody's favorite punching bag, especially broadcast journalists. Not only are we the most self-congratulatory business with all our industry awards, we're also the most self-flagellating. As if we're trying to beat others to the punch.

Broadcast journalism is an easy target. There it is out there everyday, telling us about ourselves, but as often as not, we don't recognize the picture: that's not our world, say the critics who review it. Not our world, say the public figures who appear on it in ninety second clips. Not our world, says the public who watches it. The news is supposed to capture a bit of reality and reflect it back to us.

But whose reality is it?

As I sat down to think the subject through, it squirmed around. Ideas about it were either too large or too small, too easy or too hard. I would've liked to show you clips, but if I could show you what's missing, it wouldn't be missing.

Let's start with what is too easy and what is too hard about the subject.

The easy part is to criticize it in its own terms. I'm assuming you watch the news and you know what's there: The White House, the Congress, the Kremlin...Crime, the Law etc...Even in those terms there's a lot missing. Not enough international news. Not enough

cultural news. Not enough minority news. Not enough good news. There's not enough context. We receive disconnected pieces of information with no framework for understanding. There is no sense of history, no timeline that gives us a sense of what went before or trends to indicate the future. In other words, we get the news but we don't really know what is happening to us.

That's the easy part.

The hard part is that when you ask what's missing, you have to examine the whole definition of news. There's a library on that question, and, by necessity or desire, I'd just as soon leave that to the philosophers of journalism, if there are such people.

I go more with the editor who said, "News is what I say it is." Or the slightly more thoughtful producer who said that news is what's dangerous to people. That does a fairly good job of explaining everything from police blotter news, to keeping an eye on the government, to the weather.

What I would like to do today is to narrow the focus and talk about just one area that news doesn't cover. I'd like to explore that realm of human activity that is not what people *do* but what they *think* as a legitimate concern of the news. Walter Lippmann said the function of news is to signalize the event. I'd like to talk today about *events of the mind*.

In preparation for this talk today, I paid particular attention this week to news and public affairs broadcasts. Of course, the big news of the week was ABC's series called *Amerika*. A flurry of attention was paid to this turnabout rendition of superpower relations, with invective language on both sides and super-promotion for what was basically a flop of a drama.

Here are some of the other stories that were in the broadcast headlines: Gorbachev and Reagan on arms control negotiations; Contra leadership; terrorism; human rights in Russia; more fighting in Lebanon; the role of Israel in our foreign policy; AIDS; Cuomo's

decision not to run for president; the Iran-Contra investigation; and Wall Street goes up, despite the Wall Street scandals.

The public affairs programs—*The Today Show*, *Nightline*, *David Brinkley's Journal*, *MacNeil/Lehrer*, and others—share a common agenda with the headline stories. They do the same stories in-depth or at-length, some would say. Often they do it well. But none of those programs question the hypothesis of the headline news, the hypothesis on which the stories are based.

What is the hypothesis?

Let's look for that answer with another question: How does journalism go about its business?

There's this whole world out there, the world of human experience and concerns: chaotic, bewildering, overwhelming. Picture it as it is: a whole forest, or jungle, some would say, of activities and events, people, places, cultures, identified only by geography or areas of common concern.

Things are happening everyday. Things that don't affect too many people, like this gathering. Things that could affect everyone, like the stockpiling of nuclear weapons.

In the news business, as a practical matter, traditionally we deal with that world by superimposing a structure upon it. By practice and tradition, the news world is divided in what is called "beats." Beats help us deal with the jungle of events and lay down roads through it. The beats are familiar: politics and government; business; justice and the law; culture and the arts; religion; family life; medicine; technology and science; sports; the weather... Basically they are the institutions of public life. The news is also formulated by geographical area: local, national, and international, but those, too, are covered in the same terms of the institutions of public life.

These beats are the cities and towns on the map of journalism, points around which there are constellations of activities. They are the turnpikes on which editors travel and claim to have seen the world.

I must confess that I have begun to see it another way. All the roads have started to run together to me, a vast grid laid over the whole of human experience. To me these beats cover a well-worn landscape and leave huge areas of human activity unexplored—more in broadcast journalism, to be sure, but to some degree in print as well.

More and more it appears to me that there is only *one* beat that is covered in broadcast journalism. In general—and I point out that this is a sweeping generality and sweeping generalities are always to be questioned. To be sure there are exceptions, but *in general*, there is one beat. That beat is power. As I watch the stories parade by the TV screen, all of them seem to have something to do with power: political power; economic power; cultural power; social power.

And further, what has begun to emerge, to me, is that that one beat is always covered in terms of conflict. Who is winning; who is losing? Who is up and who is down? If it's a government story, it's news of the powerful, and it's hard news. If it's a farmer losing his farm, it's news and it's human interest. Think of the list I gave you: Gorbachev and Reagan; the Contras; terrorism; fighting in Lebanon; testimony in the Iran affair; Wall Street. Even the mini-series *Amerika* fits the definition. All are powers in conflict. Even sports are powers in conflict.

Is this a reflection of the world? Yes, in part. Is this our reality today? Yes, in part. But a large part is missing. We are living with a map that some unknown editors long ago developed, a map that has served us well. But I would say that the practitioners of broadcast journalism today, even most of the good ones, unthinkingly accept this map, not as a way of organizing experience but as experience itself.

The categories of organization, the beats, have been absorbed into the language. They have become patterns not only of speech but patterns of thought. They determine not only what we see but *the way we see*. They have become the facts of our public life.

But something inside tells us something is wrong. We see the news and it is not a reflection of our experience.

Why did I overhear the woman in the locker room at the swim club last week mention, “The radio kept saying over and over it’s so cold outside. Stay warm inside by the fire. First of all, most people don’t have fires, but the main thing is it’s a gorgeous day. Why aren’t they telling people to get up and get out for once and do something?” She mistrusted the news.

Why is it that some people won’t have television in their homes?

Why did a cab driver say to me one day that he didn’t know what the news is talking about. He said, “They’re not talking about my world. In my world, most people are good.”

There has been a great loss of confidence in the news. Survey after survey shows that people don’t trust the news. Why? There are many reasons, but one of the important ones is that so much is missing.

The camera is pointed in only one direction: the direction of power. It does not reflect our sense of reality. It does not reflect our sense of values. It does not address our deepest concerns. We read a book, and it illuminates the world in a way that the news does not. Or we see a movie or a play. Or we hear the words to a song. Ninety thousand people attend one Bruce Springsteen concert. That’s news. Bruce Springsteen’s album was sold out the day it hit the stores. That was news. But what were the songs saying? Could that be news? Listen to this Springsteen lyric called “Badlands,” slightly edited for time:

Lights out tonight
trouble in the heartland
Got a head-on collision
smashin' in my guts, man
I'm caught in a cross fire
that I don't understand
But there's one thing I know for sure, girl
I don't give a damn
For the same old played out scenes
I don't give a damn
for just the in-betweens...

Badlands you gotta live it everyday
Let the broken heart stand
As the price you've gotta pay
We'll keep pushin' 'till it's understood
and these badlands start treating us good

Workin' in the fields
Till you get your back burned
Workin' 'neath the wheel
Till you get your facts learned
Baby, I got my facts
Learned real good right now,
You better get it straight, darling,

Poor man wanna be rich
Rich man wanna be king
And a king ain't satisfied
Till he rules everything...

For the ones who had a notion
A notion deep inside
That it ain't no sin to be glad you're alive
I wanna find one face that ain't looking through me
I wanna find one place
I wanna spit in the face of these badlands

Somehow those forms—a song, a book—have content that connects with the deeper reality of our lives. They tell us more about our world than what we see on the news. They tell us what people are *thinking*.

That's truth, you might say, not facts, and journalism is facts. But journalism is supposed to strive for the truth, and I think there can be a journalistic equivalent to that kind of truth.

How?

One way is to report the words to that song, a song more eloquent than one hundred political speeches. It tells us what people are thinking and what values they share. What kind of news is that? You might ask. It's an event of the mind. We like to call it, "News of the Mind."

Let's go back to that forest, that jungle of experience, all new again, not diagrammed, no grid of conventional beats, no roads, no maps. Imagine it un-landscaped before

newspapers, a hive of activities, people, places, cultures. Picture no roads and let's formulate a new way to cover it, a new map, made up of activities of the mind.

Think of ideas, events of the mind, as a beat.

Think about values as a beat, that sense which points the direction of our actions.

Think about beliefs, religious or otherwise spiritual, deeply held convictions that motivate our actions.

Think about memory, history: personal and collective.

About the imagination: hopes, dreams, and intentions for the future.

Think about the mind itself: psychology, how we think, what we feel, and how that determines relationships between things and the quality of life.

Think about beauty as a beat. Or humor.

There is news everyday on those beats that impacts our external world. They are areas of reporting that are missing in journalism—broadcast journalism, in particular. Sometimes they are ignored or overlooked. Sometimes they are implicit and unexpressed.

Here is a paraphrase of a grassroots flyer I received in my mail:

The values and beliefs we share are being challenged as never before. There is a new social and political climate in which there is a renewed moral sense and commitment to spiritual, personal, and human values.

In many places it's taking the form of orthodoxy. In other places it's taking the form of the search for alternative ways of thinking and acting.

We see this in reaction to unethical behavior in many centers of power: business, government, even education, medicine, and the law.

Broadcast journalism reports these facts without giving serious explanation and consideration to the values that underlie these actions. Little attention is paid to the

qualitative issues that lie behind the facts. Even less attention is paid to the power of ideas.

Unquote.

Think with me about values as a beat for a minute.

Take a recent story: the Iran-Contra affair. That story has values and beliefs written all over it. After we heard the breaking news, did values ever surface explicitly? The main points of the story were questions of values: the president and his respect for the Constitution; Colonel North and his involvement with the fundamentalist Christian movement; the gift to the Iranians of a Bible inscribed from the president.

We heard the story but we missed the point.

Recently Bill Moyers and I were at a press conference to announce the formation of our new production company and to announce our new projects: on the Constitution; on God and Politics; and on mythology. We said it was our aim to bring the best minds of our time to television, people who do not have a forum for the expression of their ideas on television. We said we work with a broader definition of public affairs, a definition that includes history, mythology, values. In his most eloquent fashion, Bill spoke about the dialogue of democracy and said how important it was to the fabric of society that the search for values and ideas find an outlet on the television screen. There were more than one hundred reporters there. Few picked up on those ideas that Bill felt so passionate about. What the reporters focused on and what they reported was why he left CBS, an old story. Their beat was power, and powers in conflict. That's not news. It's looking backward. Ideas are forward looking. That's news. And the broadcast journalism landscape is getting worse.

There used to be book programs, programs that explored the ideas of authors. Where are such programs today? Fifty thousand books published annually and we get an occasional four-minute piece on *The Today Show*, usually dealing with the more popular books or the

more visual ones. A program called *Apostrophes* is the most popular program in France—all about books and ideas.

And we're losing ground with documentaries, the place for the thoughtful exploration of important themes and trends. PBS is holding that line alone, the last outpost of a dying genre, a victim of the shrinking attention span, limited air time, and less than maximum audience.

Assuming you are with me so far, at least in part, you may have a question of why this is so, why “news of the mind” is missing from the news.

Some would say TV requires pictures and that kind of activity is hard to capture on television, that technology is the culprit. Nonsense, I say.

There is a disease in TV called “fear of talking heads.” I say it depends on who's talking. The talking head can be the most interesting television there is.

Moreover, that is contradicted all the time in both entertainment and news. We have celebrities as talking heads coming out of our eyes and ears on television—just another pretty face from *Live at 5* to *Johnny Carson*, usually with little to say. What we need is thinking heads.

Some would blame it on the bottom line. News has to make money. It costs enormous amounts to produce television and every program, including news programs, must strive for maximum audience. There is some truth to that, but news doesn't make money anyway most of the time. It spends a fortune on razzmatazz to get ratings, but it still doesn't pay for itself, as Larry Tisch, General Electric, and CapCities are finding out, and the news departments are getting the message. In fact, MacNeil/Lehrer does a much better job at a fraction of the cost.

I have a different explanation. It's kind of armchair psychoanalysis of the news business, but since this is my speech, I'm just going to say it, and you can tear it apart in the questioning. I think it has to do with the personal sense of values of most of the decision-

makers and leaders in the business. They see the world in terms of power and conflict because power is their goal and conflict is how they got there.

It's said that when a pickpocket goes into a crowd all he sees is pockets. When a power-seeker goes into the world all he sees is power. The leaders are projecting their own minds and lives onto the world and trying to tell us that that's the way the world is. I'm not saying that's *not* the way the world is, but that it's only that way in part and there's a lot left out.

I think that's one sense of values. Not everyone's. One sense of values is setting the agenda for broadcast journalism, and it's a very narrow agenda.

Can that be changed, assuming there is the desire and will to change it? That's a harder issue.

How do people with a different sensibility and a different sense of values get into decision-making positions? One way is to change the model of leadership: to pay attention to alternative models. To pay attention to moral leadership. To creative leadership. Leadership that challenges the prevailing wisdom. Leadership that does not just follow orders. Leadership that succeeds by the politics of accomplishment, not the politics of power. That is a role that the public can play. In fact, it's a role that some groups have played.

Remember the women's movement.

That was one of the purposes of the women's movement. That was a struggle for power, to be sure, for a voice and an opportunity for women. But underlying it was a struggle for another model, a different sense of values in the workings of the world: for fairness; for a social agenda that called for human priorities and human values; for a change in the structure of work and family so that responsibility and also opportunity could be shared. It was a values struggle as much as a power struggle, though it was rarely reported that way. Many women who have made it have given up on the values struggle and bought into the power

struggle. But I would say that the values struggle was the more important part and continues to be. And sadly, many of those younger women are learning the hard way that being forced to choose between career and a family is, after all, a values struggle.

Do those beats—ideas, values, beliefs, events of the mind—fit the definition of news, you might ask? Think of the producer who said, “News is what is dangerous to people.” Ideas can be dangerous, and even more dangerous *not* to know. Think of Hitler, Gandhi, Einstein, Martin Luther King, Jr., Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem. To change a mind is to change behavior, and God knows the world needs some new ideas.

I continue to believe—and hope—that this voice, a quieter voice, does get heard from time to time in broadcast journalism, that ideas and values do and will make it to the screen. Look at the success of the 700 Club, Pat Robertson’s extremely popular news magazine show on the Christian broadcasting network. That program is about values and beliefs. It may not be what some think of as American values—that is, the values that respect diversity—but that program is certainly successful in television’s own terms: a loyal audience of millions and money pouring in.

I must admit, I’ve been one of the luckier ones in this business, according to my own sense of values. With help, I’ve been able to make some ideas happen. I produced some values documentaries on NBC, like the *Search for Something Else*.

We—my colleagues and I—have reported on ideas. We launched a program on Channel 13 called *Currents*, reporting on social trends and changing values. People watch it and like it, and it has won many awards.

On *Bill Moyers Journal* we produced conversations with the historian William Irwin Thompson about the planetary future; with the poet Robert Bly about the Vietnam consciousness; with Myles Horton about social activism; with Mortimer Adler, the philosopher and teacher, about beauty and happiness and truth; and with Joseph Campbell,

the scholar of mythology, about the experience of being alive. In these programs we were reporting ideas. Take Joseph Campbell. Following that broadcast we received requests for fourteen thousand transcripts. That's almost three printings of a book. And we received a flood of the most thoughtful mail I had ever read. We had touched something important in the viewer. We had stimulated their appetite for news of the mind. Those programs spoke to their needs, to the deep concerns in their lives. They spoke to a quest for "the truth" and still it was journalism.

Bill Moyers likes to say, "I'm just a beachcomber on the shores of other people's experience. I pick up what ideas and insights I can find and tell people about them." That's as good a definition of a journalist as anyone's.

I will concede two real reasons why there are no alternative voices and sensibilities in television news: one is time, the other is money. In fact, time is money and both are in increasingly short supply. A crass truth is that money matters. An idea unfunded is a dead idea, and I have attended the funerals of more important ideas than I can bear to remember. We TV journalists are, after all, made possible by a grant from someone, either a commercial broadcaster or some generous underwriter who believes in what we're trying to do. Only then, if we are lucky, might we set out to catch butterflies of truth.

I'll close now with this one thought and then take questions.

We have to remember that where we point our cameras not only reports reality but also creates a new one. We point our cameras at power and in the process we make power more powerful. If we point our cameras at ideas, we can make ideas more powerful. And if we point our cameras at truth, we can make truth more powerful.

Thank you.