

Public Perception & Expectations of the News Media

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March 7, 1986

What's Up

The history of the news media has been colorful (frequently yellow). From the worst imaginable abuses of press power to the highest standards of public service, the media have played the full spectrum of hues and tones to catch the public's eyes and ears.

At the low end, during epidemic distortion of facts in the day's news stories, an 1887 article in *Writer* magazine explained that "faking" (as it was called then) was an "almost universal practice, and hardly a news dispatch is written which is not 'faked' in a greater or less degree."

Such is the parentage of modern-day media.

Then yellow shifted to gold, and superheroes of the press helped shape contemporary America: the *Washington Post* tapped the Watergate story which toppled a presidency. The *New York Times* published the Pentagon Papers, exposing the unseemly role of America in the Vietnam War. One television series - *Lou Grant* - soared to popularity by portraying hard-hitting, devoted-to-truth journalists performing their daily duty of protecting the public's interests. Through the seventies the press was the epitome of integrity and right, and students flocked to the nation's journalism schools.

But then the gold tarnished. In 1981, it was disclosed that a *Washington Post* Pulitzer Prize-winning article about an 8-year-old heroin addict had been fabricated. The *New York Daily News* discovered one of its writers could not substantiate parts of a column about violence in Northern Ireland. An associate editor of the Portland *Oregonian* admitted that he fabricated quotes attributed to then-Governor Dixy Lee Ray of Washington. Other examples of less-than-accurate reporting bubbled up from the bottom.

The public was losing its respect for the news media, and news media's credibility dropped pointedly. A 1983 poll taken by the National Opinion Research Center found that less than 14 percent of the American people had a "great deal of confidence" in the news media - less than half that of only seven years earlier.

Perhaps the most telling evidence of public displeasure with the news media: since 1976, according to a Stanford University study, nearly 85 percent of 106 major libel verdicts by juries have gone against the media. Mega-buck decisions have been handed to government officials and corporations, such as the more than \$2-million verdict in favor of Mobil Oil Corporation against the *Washington Post*. Said *Wall Street Journal* director Frederick Taylor, "It's a great commentary on our times when a jury finds for an oil company against a newspaper."

The last rending of remaining media prestige came when the Reagan Administration excluded reporters from covering the Grenada invasion. As the press roared with indignation, the public shrugged and even clucked with satisfaction. In 500 letters and phone calls to NBC, viewers supported the Grenada press ban five-to-one. ABC anchor Peter Jennings said "99%" of his mail from viewers supported Reagan. The trade publication *Editor And Publisher* found in an informal survey that letters to editors of selected daily papers were running three-to-one in favor of the exclusion. *New York Times* editorialist Max Frankel wrote, "The most astounding thing about the Grenada situation was the quick, facile assumption by some of the public that the press wanted to get in, not to witness the invasion on behalf of the people, but to sabotage it."

What had the news media done so wrong to incur such poor regard by the public?

Before examining some possible causes, it might be helpful to briefly profile the "news media."

A 1985 study commissioned by the American Society of Newspaper Editors surveyed a representative sample of 1,600 adults on attitudes toward news coverage by television, newspapers, radio, and magazines.

- The large majority of respondents, 72 percent, cited television as the one source they would choose for national and international news.
- A far second, newspapers received 17 percent of the selection as a primary source, while radio and magazines each received only 5 percent of the vote.
- In terms of credibility, 68 percent of the survey respondents picked television as the more reliable source.
- Newspapers garnered 19 percent of the vote, magazines 9 percent, and radio only 4 percent.

The ASNE study concerned itself with many areas of public perception of the media, as shall be discussed ahead.

So What's Wrong

The public's criticisms against the news media are many. The ASNE study says many aspects of the credibility problem with the media stem from the public perception that the news gatherers exploit people rather than serve as the public watchdog. Some of the fallout from this, says the study, is the opinion that the media are on different wavelengths than the public regarding news judgment and coverage of certain topics. Also, lack of credibility can explain why people's distrust encompasses so many aspects of the media, including people who gather news, select the news, and present the news. Many people have expressed distrust of opinions in the news media and suspect journalists of political favoritism; a majority question whether news media give fair coverage to other candidates after one candidate has been editorially endorsed. Some say too much opinion goes into story placement. Others respond that the media are biased, that they sensationalize, invade people's privacy, and report too much bad news.

The "media explosion" has also had an adverse impact on media credibility, as different media present different versions of the same story. Further, a Gallup Poll survey shows about one-third of

the public finds press reports inaccurate when stories deal with matters they personally know something about.

Many people question the news media's judgment in the selection of stories, and complain that too much of the news is over-dramatized. Veteran broadcaster Eric Severeid says more prevalent and more insidious than any ideological bias in journalism is the desire to make the story a hot one. "Most journalists tend to be dramatists at heart," Severeid says. "That's their nature."

Reporters and editors don't fare well in public opinion polls. A large group of people questions the honesty and ethical standards of newsmen, and feels that the personal biases of reporters show up in their news stories. Some critics say too many journalists approach a report with too many preconceived notions, regardless of the facts. Some people also say that they've found reporters to be rude and patronizing.

ASNE study respondents were asked to rate the honesty and integrity of people in ten different occupations. Newspaper editors and reporters ranked seventh and eighth respectively, behind clergy, doctors, police and teachers, and only ahead of advertising executives and used-car salesmen.

People interviewed in the ASNE study feel a distance stands between them and the news media. More than three-fourths said "most news reporters are just concerned about getting a good story, and don't care about hurting people." Nearly two-thirds said "the press often takes advantage of victims of circumstance who are ordinary people." While slightly more than half of those surveyed felt "the press looks out for ordinary people," almost as many responded "the press looks out mainly for rich and powerful people."

Further distancing the public from the press is the new perception of news media as a monolithic institution unto itself. Columnist Thomas Griffith recently wrote:

The news is that the press is at last beginning to shed its romantic image of itself as the lone public defender pure of heart, pursuing all those rascals. To the public, the press is not David among Goliaths; it has become one of the Goliaths, Big Media, a combination of powerful television networks, large magazine groups and newspaper chains that are near monopolies. It often seems as unreachable as the government or any big corporation.

And the media have in fact become "big business." Of 46 separate industry classifications in corporate America, broadcasting was the 14th most profitable for the last five years, and publishing ranked sixth.

An ombudsman for the Kansas City *Star and Times*, Donald D. Jones, says he is convinced that "readers don't trust us - newspapers, radio, television, magazines. They don't trust any of us." Jones cites eight complaints he hears most often from the public: inaccuracy, arrogance, unfairness, disregard of privacy, contempt for local areas, insensitivity, glorification of the criminal and bizarre, and bad writing and editing. Though Jones listens to a small, unrepresentative public, his list seems to echo previously mentioned and more widespread concerns.

What's Right

Some, perhaps much, of the criticism lobbed at the media may be unfair. For instance, public suspicion of the "media as an institution" may only reflect public suspicion of large institutions altogether.

Another suggestion is the "behead the messenger" syndrome, where the public dislikes the press only for the bad news it must convey. Says former CBS News president Richard Salant:

Of course we do not deliberately set out to make people mad and shake their fists at us while reflecting on our legitimacy, but it is our function to come to the truth as nearly as human fallibility permits - and since that is so, making people mad goes with the territory. ... If we stop to think, it is not a journalist's job to please most of the people most of the time, to give our customers what they want in the way they want it. It is, rather, our job to tell the truth as near as we can come to it. And it is true that, more often than not, the truth hurts and enrages. If we are to be faithful to what journalism really stands for, we cannot operate by what surveys tell us our customers want.

Some say unpopularity is a healthy sign that the press is performing its role. David Halberstam, who won a Pulitzer Prize for reporting in Vietnam: "The more we do our job of questioning accepted norms, the more we can expect to be questioned."

Charges of incredibility aside, columnist James Kilpatrick rises to the defense of the contemporary media:

American newspapers today are a thousand times better - better in every way - than newspapers of Jefferson's day or of Teddy Roosevelt's day. They are better written; they are less partisan in their news columns; in cities small and large they provide a generally thorough and accurate report on the communities they serve. ... Only some tiny fraction of the news we print may be skeptically received. The great bulk of our daily report involves such factual matter as market quotations, baseball box scores, court proceedings, election returns and the simple chronicles of birth and death. It is only when we let our news columns drift into opinionated "analysis" and "interpretation" that we lose the confidence of our readers.

A lengthy self-evaluation of the media in 1983 by *Time* magazine provides a shopping list of defenses and contributions:

1. To former Vice President Spiro Agnew's much repeated charge that journalists are elected by no one, editors have two valid responses. The first: some institutions have to be able to stand apart from the electoral process so that they can risk making unpopular decisions. The second: journalists are elected by their readers, viewers, and listeners every day. The wide variety of options for finding a news source provides plenty of opportunities for the public to cast a vote on preferred sources and styles of news. Of course, the advertising dollar follows the circulation and ratings statistics.
2. By standards of the late 19th and 20th century era of "yellow journalism," the American reporter today is a model of responsibility and restraint.

3. For readers of almost any ideological color, the perceived or actual bias of some publication can be offset by the availability of others.
4. Reporters and editors are better educated than their predecessors and are readier to take on difficult topics. In recent years, the press has learned to report about economics, education, medicine, science, and the computer revolution as fully and discerningly as it follows crime and politics.
5. The news media, as do people in general, shine best in the darkest times. When flooding rivers, earthquakes, or other disasters strike, radio and TV stations snap to attention and broadcast safety information. When blatant abuse of power is evident, the press will often allocate unrecoverable resources to serve the public interest in uncovering wrong-doing. Many instances can be cited where in-depth feature reporting has contributed immensely to social well-being.

Says an editor at the *Washington Post*, "It is strange that so much criticism is coming now, because I honestly believe that the quality of the American press is better than ever. When we set out to do something ambitious and relevant to a problem, we do a helluva job."

What's Next

So in light of all that's right with the news media, is there really a problem? Does it matter if the public loves the press, and if they did, would it mean the press wasn't doing its job correctly? One clear message of the ASNE study is the public does indeed perceive problems with the news media, and a perception, whether valid or not, is a reality which must be recognized and reckoned with. And, concludes the ASNE study, an adverse public perception of the press poses serious threats. Results of the study suggest that willingness to restrict freedom of the press increases as people's respect and trust in the media decreases. One example of this is demonstrated by an ABC News poll, which found that 62 percent of the public would favor a law to prevent TV reporters from questioning people who do not want to be interviewed. Ralph Langer, managing editor of the Dallas Morning News, worries that "if you put the First Amendment to a vote, it might lose, particularly if it were put in the context of placing restrictions on publication of material that people find repugnant."

Also, in the long run, some newspeople fear that criticism and libel suits will discourage aggressive reporting and spawn "soft" stories less likely to provoke attacks.

So, what's to be done? The ASNE study proposes changes on several fronts:

1. **PRACTICE GOOD JOURNALISM.** Be fair, unbiased, accurate, complete, factual, professional, aggressive, and compassionate.
2. **BE ACCESSIBLE.** Be perceived as accessible by promoting and demonstrating openness.
3. **RESPECT PEOPLE.** Treat people in the news with empathy, and that does not mean any less aggressive pursuit of the news.
4. **GAIN - OR REGAIN - YOUR FRANCHISE AS A PEOPLE'S ADVOCATE.** Demonstrate that news media are a watchdog for the people, not a remote, frightening institution.

5. BE AWARE OF SENSITIVE TOPICS AND REPORTING PRACTICES. Be more thoughtful about coverage of all sorts of people, particularly women, young people, senior citizens, people on welfare, minorities, political and religious conservatives.
6. PROTECT YOUR LOCAL NEWS FRANCHISE. Cover local news thoroughly and well so people have a source for news that's closest to home.
7. EDUCATE THE PUBLIC ABOUT PRESS RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES. Let people know that press rights are, in fact, the people's rights, and those rights exist because the press is on their side.

Moving closer to readers, the ASNE study concludes, does not mean any compromise of sound journalistic principles or integrity.

A large wedge between the public and the press - the perception that journalists are too arrogant - should be addressed and remedied, concludes a *Time* magazine analysis:

At the most basic level, dealing with this problem requires coming to terms with motivations, the forces that drive individuals to become journalists and the attitudes they take when pursuing a story. Reporters have sometimes lost sight of the fundamental truth that their job is to provide a service to the community rather than to seek the glamour and glory that now often seem to draw people into the craft.

Author George Leonard, in his book *The Transformation*, argues there is a massive shift taking place in the public's attitudes and consciousness that the media have yet to catch up with. He cites a Louis Harris poll which demonstrates that 72 percent of the people want to work in cooperative rather than competitive jobs; 61 percent feel modern technology has caused as many problems as benefits; 71 percent would rather live in an environment that's clean than an area with lots of jobs; 79 percent think it's more important to learn to live with basic essentials than achieve a higher standard of living. Yet, Leonard says, the media maintain a business-as-usual approach to news coverage. "In the next four or five years, it will be looked on as a national disgrace that the people at major news magazines, the television networks, and so forth, totally missed this enormous trend in the grass roots," Leonard said in a recent interview.

In a speech to the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the editor of the *New York Daily News*, Michael J. O'Neill said:

In the final analysis, what we need most of all in our profession is a generous spirit, infused with human warmth, as ready to see good as to suspect wrong, to find hope as well as cynicism, to have a clear but uncrabbed view of the world. We need to seek reconciliation, not just conflict, so that society has a chance to solve its problems, so that we as a nation can find again the trust and unity that we need to overcome the great challenges we face.

Amen.

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